EDUCOLOGY TRENDS REPORT 2022: Part 2
The Case for Reducing the Campus Footprint

Dr Jo Dane, June 2022

Every tertiary institution should be planning to reduce its footprint. This is the implicit message underlying several articles speculating on changes set to impact the post-pandemic campus.

In Part 1 I shared my interest in reviewing publications forecasting change to the tertiary education sector, culminating in three contentious predictions that stand to have a significant impact on the future strategic planning of tertiary education campuses in Australia:

1. Demise of the four-year degree
2. Changing learning and teaching models
3. Campus workspace: access not ownership

This post outlines some of the changing learning and teaching models set to emerge in the coming years, including the impact on future campus planning.

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CHANGING TEACHING MODELS

The COVID19 pandemic led to an emergency transition to online learning for all tertiary education institutions. As life has begun to normalise, with staff and students being encouraged back to campus, tertiary institutions are questioning how much delivery should or could remain online and how much can only be delivered on campus?

While many universities are committed to abandoning campus-based lectures[1] there are predictions of dramatically different learning modalities in future.

The Horizon Report forecasts that synchronous on-campus and online classes will become the norm[2]. While many universities may be attempting this already, current examples of dual-mode classrooms do not support both online and in-class experiences (largely due to technologies and students in-class being fixed in position in order to communicate with students online).

This will result in rethinking classroom design and technology to ensure an equitable experience for both forms of delivery, without compromising either. SCUP support this trend and singled out the challenge of professional development of teachers to manage the dual modalities .

KPMG, Deloitte and EY[3] predict increasing asynchronous learning modes, coupled with the earlier contention of unbundled or subscription-based learning. Many blended learning examples already provide for asynchronous access (for example, recorded lectures), but the increased choice and flexibility being predicted for students, will likely increase demand for off-campus learning.

Since their emergence in the late 90s/early 2000s, educational technologies have been accepted as a support to on-campus learning. But what if the reverse was to occur, as predicted by KPMG[4]? What if the on-campus learning was conceptualised to support digital learning?

“One thing is clear. The university that expects students to battle with traffic, find a parking place, go to a lecture, write examinations by hand, get a seat in a crowded library and then go home again will be riding its luck”

Professor Stephen Parker, AO[7]

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I have been uncomfortable with promoting online learning for the main reason that past research has indicated students learn more effectively when they are socially connected, in-person with their peers[5]. I think there will always be a place for face-to-face, on-campus learning, although accept that digital and augmented learning experiences are becoming more sophisticated and engaging.

With the predicted – and many are arguing necessary – disruption to the higher education sector, the notion of face-to-face, online, synchronous and asynchronous learning will all need to co-exist, tending greater flexibility for students.

In this sense, distance between home and university is made obsolete, meaning that universities will not have to prioritise attracting students in their local region: universities will be able to compete globally for students, who can undertake their studies from their home base, wherever that may be in the world. Students will then have the choice of being on campus or studying online, either synchronously or asynchronously.

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WHAT IMPACT WILL THIS HAVE ON CAMPUS PLANNING?

Perhaps the campus should be prioritised for staff and students who benefit from being there? (I will discuss working from home in Part 3.)

Rather than planning infrastructure based upon historical utilisation rates and EFTSL forecasts, perhaps the campus should be prioritised for interactions, collaborations and activities that are not as effective online. As KPMG speculated, first and second-year students could be prioritised on campus, to provide the transition support from secondary school. More experienced students may choose to increasingly engage online, to fit with work commitments, family arrangements or to mitigate travel distance.

It seems increasingly likely that universities will continue lectures online[6], leaving vast areas of space available for repurposing. One sandstone university has approximately 16,000m2 of lecture theatre infrastructure, representing 20% of the existing formal teaching space. That is a significant quantity of space requiring alternative use strategies.

Scenario planning will need to be simulated and tested to ensure the right balance of infrastructure for the anticipated reduced number of campus occupants, which will likely lead to a dramatically reduced campus footprint.

A vibrant, highly activated campus will still be expected, but with less people on campus, the vibrant density of occupants will need to be applied to a smaller campus area. This concept has the potential for universities to vacate surplus buildings, making them available for sublease (to industry) or repurposing. Reducing the asset portfolio has the advantage of saving money (less maintenance) and supporting sustainability initiatives.

In Part 3 I will discuss the third significant prediction set to impact the future strategic planning of tertiary education campuses in education: campus workspace. Historically, campus workspace has been predicated upon an ownership model, where full-time staff are allocated a permanent workpoint. With expectations of achieving sustainability targets, increasing utilisation of space on campus and a workforce embracing working from home, the sector is ripe for major disruption on this front.

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Endnotes

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