

# EDUCOLOGY TRENDS REPORT 2022: Part 3

## 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 Parts 1 and 2 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

Part 3 outlines the pressures on campus workspace and the necessity to disrupt this space typology once and for all.



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### CAMPUS WORKSPACE: ACCESS NOT OWNERSHIP

One size does not fit all. This is truer now than ever before. Universities should throw away their space planning guidelines in relation to workspace and focus on addressing the needs of each organisational group.

A major culture change is looming. As campus life opens up, significant numbers of staff are opting to continue working in a hybrid mix of home and on campus, reflecting the shift in commercial workplaces both nationally and globally.

Nous interviewed over 70 university COOs from Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK, reporting that they *“must think carefully about how flexible options for staff, which improve staff experience and help attract talent, will impact providing a great student experience on the campus of tomorrow.”*<sup>1</sup>

The Horizon Report predicts *“institutions that embrace flexible work arrangements may gain an advantage in attracting and retaining talent over those institutions insisting on a full return to on-campus operations, though higher education in general risks losing swaths of its workforce to other industries that are more fully embracing remote modes of working.”*<sup>2</sup>

The foreboding tone in these quotations demonstrates the delicacy in getting workplace culture right: enough flexibility to attract talent and provide a great place to work.

The physical environment does not generate the workplace culture – that is up to the people – but it can go a long way to enabling people to connect with colleagues, learn from others (informal mentoring) and achieve innovative solutions to problems.

On the assumption that less staff will be on campus at any one time, the question every institution is asking is how to improve workspace efficiency, achieve sustainability targets and minimise waste, while at the same time providing a great place to work where staff can productively thrive and feel a sense of belonging to the organisation.

Academic workspace is a highly contested topic, with academics generally continuing to expect individual offices to ensure their productivity. This has been a bugbear for many universities, frustrated by 30% utilisation rates of academic office space<sup>3</sup>.

If a staff member wishes to work from home for - let's say three days per week – should they expect to have a permanent work point allocated for them on campus? Is it acceptable to have acres of workspace sitting empty – wasting energy, resources and money?

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The answer to these questions is obviously 'no'. The solution lies in the conceptual model of 'access' to workspace rather than 'ownership' of workspace, a model which has been liberally adopted by commercial businesses in the last ten years. The access model seeks to increase utilisation by providing a range of purposeful work settings to suit the maximum number of staff present at any one time.

This doesn't mean that staff will be denied the spaces they need on campus. Staff who need a private office on campus can have one. But if they are only on campus for one or two days per week, they will need to book the office for the days they are present. Similarly, workstations would be available for booking when staff need them. Staff working on campus full time may continue to be permanently allocated an office or workstation.

The key to workplace efficiency will be analysing and responding to workforce needs and patterns of use. The Horizon Report and SCUP Trends are both forecasting significant disruption to campus workspace, predicting an increase in 'hotelling' or 'coworking' spaces<sup>4</sup>.

The major challenge will be retaining a sense of belonging, collegiality and positive workplace culture, ensuring innovation, research, creativity and mentoring can thrive.

Commercial workplaces, facing the same challenge, are providing incentives for staff to work from the office, such as gym memberships, in-house baristas and free food. Universities might consider similar incentives for staff on campus.

Untangling the optimum workplace solution will take some effort on the part of organisational leaders and facility managers and considerable change management to bring everyone along on the journey.



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### WHAT IMPACT WILL THIS HAVE ON CAMPUS PLANNING?

The good news is that disruption to workspace planning and design on campus may result in more collegiate and collaborative environments, which people will actually enjoy occupying. No more double loaded corridors of soulless offices. No more hierarchical differentiation between academic and professional staff. Workspaces will be designed with a variety of space typologies to meet a wide range of functions, including ideation spaces, cafés and lounges.

The big takeaway is that the workspace area on campus is likely to be greatly reduced through long-term hybrid work culture. For many universities, workspace takes up between 20 - 30% of the total campus space. If only 60% of staff are on campus at any one time, you can calculate the potential space and cost savings. For example, 100,000m<sup>2</sup> of current workspace may be reduced by up to 40,000m<sup>2</sup>.

The challenges will be: a) How to facilitate the transition? And b) How to fund it? Facilitation will require consultation and analysis of each organisational workforce – one size does not fit all. Funding of these changes may require more creativity, including reusing furniture and rearranging workspace rather than completely redesigning.

Through some savvy workspace strategy, universities will be able to prioritise the location of work hubs and identify surplus buildings that may be subleased, repurposed or disposed.

This brings me to my final point. A key higher education trend over the last 5 – 10 years has been the imperative for universities and industry to create closer alliances, whether it be through the commercialisation of research or innovation hubs<sup>5</sup>. There appears to have been a resistance by major industry partners to locate themselves on campus (small exceptions aside).

Developments such as Melbourne Connect are leading the way but are expensive to build and come with complex operational models. What if the surplus workspace on campus could be offered to industry partners to lease, to be closely aligned with research and development opportunities? What if a community of start-ups could pop up in spare workspace on campus? It would essentially solve two problems at the same time: 1) How to integrate university and industry on campus? And 2) What to do with surplus campus space as a result of the hybrid workforce?

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### CONCLUSION

Disruption is coming: a series of major forces are expected to impact the operations and space requirements of tertiary institutions in Australia, as a result of:

1. New customer-centric models of education and skills delivery, moving away from the traditional four-year degree and moving towards stacked microcredentials that result in curated degree qualifications;
2. New modes of delivery, with campus-based learning focusing on collaborative and interactive activities, while content delivery is provided online both synchronously and asynchronously; and
3. Disruption to institutional workplace culture, accommodating a hybrid workforce at home and/or on campus.

These changes herald some major consequences for campus space:

- a) there will be less students on campus at any one time;
- b) there will be less staff on campus at any one time; and
- c) there will be more industry partners on campus.

The reality is that the tertiary campus footprint may need to drastically reduce in size, to accommodate less people at any one time, but ensure a bustling dynamic campus vibe that comes with critical mass of people in medium to high density occupancy. Without the reduction in size, campuses will be in danger of becoming bleak, empty places, as people are too spread out and difficult to find. Pressures of climate change and sustainability targets will also give weight to the case for reducing the campus footprint, but I will defer that argument to the sustainability experts.

Competition for students, researchers and industry partners will be predicated by how well tertiary institutions adapt to the customer-centric model of education and the differing needs of a new generation of campus dwellers.

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## Endnotes

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