

Future Student Experience Project

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**Future student experience: exploring the idea of a
Community Embedded University**

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Future Student Experience

Community Embedded University

1 Scenario: Community Embedded University

1.1 Vision

There is no ‘one size fits all’ university. For every student who dreams of a global, interconnected university, there is a counterpart, a student yearning for a local, community-engaged model they feel represents their identity, values and local context. The challenge for universities in the coming years is to understand how they can balance their commitment to global knowledge and diversity with a strong connection to place and local missions and, by doing so, jointly support both international and local engagement.

This project explores the idea of a Community Embedded University (CEU). As informed by our participants (n=21) and a desktop review, a CEU is defined as:

“an ecosystem that builds and maintains strong relationships between local communities and industries to collaborate and engage in joint decision-making towards innovative solutions and a shared purpose.”

Central to the idea of a CEU are five key principles, or ways of working. These include:

- 1 Sharing resources and knowledge(s) across local communities and universities.
- 2 Leveraging local knowledges, including Indigenous Knowledges, as a vehicle to enrich the curriculum and research.
- 3 Situating education as actionable for local issues and trends.
- 4 Creating healthy relationships and environments through honesty, open communication and authenticity.
- 5 Flexible and seamless digital design to enable access across geo-dispersed communities for lifelong learning.

1.2 Value proposition

The value proposition of a CEU extends to various stakeholders and is outlined as:

- + **The learner:** students are exposed to local issues and trends through their discipline-based curriculum, including case studies, emerging innovations and expert local teachers, sourced from communities and industry. Students perceive the university to be deeply connected to local communities and earnestly collaborates with communities to co-create learning experiences, share resources and engage in joint decision-making on all matters relating to university business. The university experience is fully flexible and welcomes members of the community across various campuses and/or locations, allowing students’ learning journeys to transition seamlessly across regional, metropolitan and online spaces and places. Students further benefit from meaningful university-community partnerships, including graduate job pipelines, that compound strong links between the university and community.

- + **The academic:** academics design curriculum which embed practical and authentic knowledge(s), including Indigenous Knowledges, from local communities, creating an enriching learning experience for students and staff. Pedagogy embraces blended modes and seeks to foster meaningful relationships between students and communities. Ongoing research by academic staff is done in collaboration with communities, subject matter expertise propagates new knowledge, and research is readily translated through generating tangible solutions to issues or matters impacting the community.
- + **The university:** universities are perceived by local communities to represent their identities and values, and students from local areas are strongly recommended by their communities to attend. The university builds a strong track record of partnerships and research collaborations, resulting in innovative research, including commercialisation opportunities, and attracting national and international funding. Universities bring together different communities, serving as a gateway, connector and place of exchange for diverse communities through physical and digital means.
- + **Local community:** communities feel valued and respected by universities and perceive relationships to be mutually beneficial. Local community leaders and experts are routinely invited to engage in joint decision-making in matters relating to the university and ensure a positive narrative about life and work in local communities is translated to university students and staff. Research arising from universities is practical, fit-for-purpose, leverages local expertise and builds on the strengths of local communities. The university empowers local communities to take advantage of digital disruption through providing opportunity for the development of digital fluency that enables adaptation to shifting contexts.

2 Approach

2.1 Research methods

2.1.1 Data sources

A desktop review was conducted to explore what trends or topics would influence a CEU in the future. The review was structured using the PESTLE framework, that is the political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental factors that could influence the CEU. Four factors emerged that were strongly relevant to local Australian communities: economic, social, technological and environmental.¹ Three relevant topics from each of the areas (eg climate change) were selected and adopted into our workshop protocol with participants.

After obtaining human ethics approval,² three participatory co-design workshops (known as CoLabs, see Dollinger and Vanderlelie, 2021) were conducted with students and staff, comprising 15 students and six staff (n=21). Students were recruited via Deakin University student blog (Deakin Student Life) and Deakin Student Partnerships Program, with a specific emphasis on attracting students from regional areas (n=6/15). Staff were invited to participate through their Associate Deans of Teaching and Learning. Workshops were 90 minutes in duration and hosted online on Zoom in conjunction with a collaborative platform called Miroboard.

The workshop activities included:

+ Activity 1. Defining a Community Embedded University

Participants were asked to brainstorm what values or words underpin 'community' and 'university' and were then asked to compare similarities and differences across the two. Participants were then asked to discuss how they would define a CEU. Participants could like, dislike or 'heart' other responses (note: all responses were anonymous).

+ Activity 2. Fast forward to 2035

In this activity, three trends from our PESTLE analysis across economic, technological and environmental areas were presented to participants who were invited to consider how these may impact their community in the future. Participants could provide ideas relating to the suggested topics or submit their own topics. Provided topics included:

- economic: increased part-time or casual work, tourism and changing skills growth
- technological: higher education, emergency response and healthcare
- environmental: weather's impact on farming, renewable energy, and understanding climate change.

1 The research team did not focus explicitly on political or legal factors due to the nature of the project. Participants were allowed to submit ideas on these trends in the workshops, with no major trends in these factors emerging.

2 Ethics approval: HEA-22-014

+ Activity 3. What does a CEU of the future look like?

In the third activity, participants were asked to merge their ideas of a CEU in Activity 1 with trends from Activity 2 to imagine how a CEU would address these topics. As prompting questions, participants were asked:

- How could a CEU address these various problems or trends?
- What activities could they do?
- What could a university do to be more connected to diverse and/or geographically separated communities?

+ Activity 4. Unpacking scenarios: benefits and challenges

In the final activity, participants were asked to select several future scenarios for a CEU and brainstorm benefits and challenges in achieving this or creating a CEU. Finally, participants were asked to reflect on whether their definition of a CEU had evolved or changed during the workshop.

2.1.2 Data analysis

To complement the data collected via the Miroboard, the workshops were audio-recorded and transcribed. Following data collection, all data was analysed independently by each of the three researchers. Bazeley's (2009) three-step coding process (describe, compare, relate) and Microsoft Excel were used to code data thematically in each activity. A worksheet was created to compare notes, key findings, top themes reflected through the data, and the selecting of key trends or issues as suggested by participants. Researchers further analysed participants' ideas on suggested activities for a CEU through a mapping exercise, organising suggestions by activities universities already do, may do, don't do (but could), or out of scope for universities.

The results informed this report, as well as the Advance HE PowerPoint slide deck.

3 PESTLE analysis

This section describes the drivers and disruptors of a CEU These have been informed by a desktop review and participants' ideas. Where relevant, these are linked to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015)

3.1 Economic

+ Increased job mobility

Changing work practices, including the gig economy and startups, are more common, with young people having approximately 18 jobs over six different careers in their lives (FYA, 2020) Given the mobile and dynamic state of the labour market, students expect their university course to offer multiple and varied work placement opportunities and help them grow their professional networks (SDG8).

Students also desire long-term relationships with their university, including an active alumni office that can keep them informed of networking opportunities.

+ Tourism

Tourism is an important part of the regional economy (Tourism Research Australia, 2021), with Australia listed as a top 10 global holiday destination. Digital technologies are being used by tourist operators at all stages of the travel journey (Department of Industry, Science and Resources, 2018). For example, 360-degree technologies provide real-life experiences of snorkelling and skydiving, with big data assisting travel operators to predict when and where travellers might want to go (Department of Industry, Science and Resources, 2018).

Indigenous tourism is also thriving, with local Indigenous leaders teaching domestic and international participants about their local cultures, cuisines and innovations. People have a greater awareness of ethical tourism that respects cultures and gives back to the local community (SDG11).

+ Focus on continuous (re)skilling

Job growth is predominantly occurring in four areas: healthcare and social assistance; professional, scientific and technical services; education and training; and accommodation and food services, with skills needed in the 4Cs (care, computing, cognitive ability and community) (Bureau of Meteorology and CSIRO, 2020). Workers are embracing flexible forms of work and harnessing emerging technologies to host meetings with geographically separated colleagues and clients and improve communication (SDG9).

Many workplaces support lifelong learning through microcredentials, which ensure that people thrive in rapidly changing fields. The shift to technology also means that a greater number of people work across cultures and have an increased need to learn about how to respectfully engage with diverse people.

3.2 Social

+ Emphasis on ethical business practices

In the advanced information age, consumers are increasingly interested in understanding how businesses and organisations operate to align their purchasing choices with their personal values (Arreza, 2020) (SDG12). In the university sector this plays out through a student and staff desire for universities to have strong mission statements and philanthropic goals. Students expect courses, ranging from business, medicine and humanities, to teach and actively discuss ethical issues that are relevant for work in these industries.

+ Recognition of diversity

Australia is one of the most multicultural and diverse countries in the world, ranked ninth internationally for the total number of migrants and having close to 30% of its population born overseas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022) (SDG11). Diversity is also a significant factor in many Australian classrooms from a young age, where peers of various cultural and linguistic background intermingle and learn from one another (OECD, 2019).

Universities are expected to similarly maintain diverse spaces for students and staff to collaborate. The culture of the university is expected to be a safe space for all community members and be a driving force for celebrating the benefits of diversity and advocacy for key social justice issues (eg Black Lives Matter).

+ Digital inclusion

Digital information and access to online services is a part of daily life and it is increasingly vital that all people can access online content and services. However, online spaces are not always designed for inclusion. Barriers exist for older people as well as people with a disability (Department of Industry, Science and Resources, 2018). The World Health Organisation estimates 15% of the population will experience disability, underscoring the need for mandated digital inclusion policies and practices (World Health Organisation, 2021) (SDG9).

3.3 Technological

+ Higher education

Universities allow greater access to education through open educational resources and access to anytime resources to support lifelong learning and flexibility (Education Council review panel, 2020) (SDG4). This means that learners can access education anytime, and often without the need to travel to major cities.

Students engage with higher education multiple times through their lifetime and in various modes, depending on their stage in life. For example, younger students may choose to study in person, full-time, while mature-age students may prefer stackable microcredentials where they gradually earn qualifications and can translate work experience into recognised university credits.

+ Healthcare

Technology is being used to improve health outcomes, increase access such as through telehealth, manage patient flows, using robots to improve surgery precision, and patients are being empowered to better manage their own health through personal devices (eg to monitor blood sugar levels and heart rate) (Australian Government, 2021) (SDG3). Much of this technology is informed by participatory design methods, where community members and researchers work collaboratively to generate ideas and solutions.

Universities are thriving places for emerging research, as healthcare students are supported to explore innovations and new technologies.

+ Emergency response

Digital technologies are improving emergency responses for communities, including bushfire prediction awareness and severe weather updates (Australian Government, Australia's Tech Future Report, 2018). Technologies are further adopted by local communities, such as fire brigades, who can help alert metropolitan areas to send additional resources and supplies.

University researchers also train and support local community members to learn and use technologies that can capture local data to inform trend analysis and improve forecasts, such as measuring local water or wind levels (SDG17).

3.4 Environmental

+ Changing environmental patterns' impact on farming

Changing environmental patterns have significant impact on farming, for example decreasing rainfall patterns and increasing year-on-year temperatures (Jarvis and Power, 2021). Farmers work closely with researchers to explore these impacts and co-design innovative farming techniques to maintain stable production (eg organic farming) (SDG2).

Increasingly, as farming becomes automated, there are also fewer farming jobs. Universities and local communities are working together to reskill workforces towards other key industries, including growing employment that is location-independent and allows people to stay in their local communities.

+ Renewable energy

Previous myths about renewable energy, such as that it's more expensive than coal and unreliable, have been debunked (AgriFutures et al, 2021). Now consumers want renewable energy sources to power their lives, including their car and homes (SDG7). University campuses are also expected to have net-zero emissions and adopt a mission towards green energy. Students in higher education are often leading the change in the adoption of renewable energy.

+ Understanding climate change trends

The Bureau of Meteorology and Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) data confirms the negative effects of climate change and predicts the average temperature across Australia will rise by 0.6-1.5 degrees Celsius by 2030 (Bureau of Meteorology and CSIRO, 2020). Rural towns in Australia experience high rates of heat stress compared to other areas, with an increase in extreme fire weather and length of fire season already occurring, especially in southern Australia (Bureau of Meteorology and CSIRO, 2020).

Concerted effort is made to ensure the safety of regional communities, including building safe spaces for communities to live and work, and stressing the impact of individual footprints on the environment (SDG13).

4 Student experience

To further illustrate the idea of a CEU, three student experience vignettes have been created based on themes identified by workshop participants and the PESTLE analysis.

Story 1: Robert

Robert (from the lands of Nyungar nation and the Kepa Kurl Wudjari people) loves his hometown of Esperance and plans on never leaving. However, due to a disruption in the local industry that has seen many in his community lose their jobs, Robert is seeking a change of career and would like to study towards a university degree to reskill as a social worker. He would also like to take this opportunity to engage with cultures outside of his community and, hopefully, study alongside international peers.

Robert is thrilled to engage with a CEU that offers online courses. He learns the courses are arranged by time zones, and his classmates will include peers from Japan, Thailand and Malaysia.

As an unexpected benefit, the CEU also provides him with free microcredentials in digital upskilling, which will ensure he has a great experience studying online. In fact, he even learns that the digital team offering the upskilling routinely travels to his hometown and offers in-person workshops to complement the online training. As the sessions are free, his wife is keen to attend as her employer is currently implementing new online shopping software that she would like to become an expert in – the more the merrier!

Story 2: Manisha

Manisha began her study on the lands of Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation Narm, in what is presently known as Melbourne. It was her dream to study for a Master of Business Administration (MBA). However, when she moved to the city with family, she realised that city life, with small apartments and expensive restaurants, was not suitable for her and her family.

After several informal conversations with her course director, Manisha learned that her course was flexible and could be completed either in-person or online. She decided then that she would move to a regional part of Australia (the lands of the Yorta Yorta), where she could rent a house with appropriate study space and have a garden for her children. After arriving in the town, she also learned that the university hosted a community co-working space, where university staff and students could work alongside community members and share resources such as specialist equipment. It was there that she met a local industry leader who asked Manisha if she would like to do a placement for her MBA at their business. Manisha accepted and, on graduation, found full-time work, allowing her family to stay in the community they were now so happy in.

Story 3: Alex

Alex lives on Kangaroo Island, known traditionally as Karta Pintingga, on the lands of the Kaurna people. His whole community was devastated by large bushfires a few years ago and the town has struggled to return to its once lively self. Alex, who was previously working in trades, has decided he would like to attend a CEU so he can learn about Indigenous Knowledges that teach controlled burning techniques, also known culturally as 'fire-stick' farming.

At first, Alex was unsure if a CEU would truly represent his values and be able to offer him the training he desired. However, he learned through the recruitment team that the CEU continuously updated its environmental science course with new curriculum topics relating to local communities and expert knowledge from local Indigenous peoples. Alex decided to enrol and is already enjoying his first few units that are co-taught by academics and local experts. He is also excited that his course offers a capstone unit, where he can devote his time to researching controlled burning.

Alex plans to return to his town after study and embed his new knowledge into the local community. He would even like to offer free seminars to local community members about controlled burning and other fire prevention techniques to safeguard his community.

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