

ISSUE

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DESIGNING THE FUTURE
OF EDUCATION

Universities of the Future



The days of traditional education delivery are gone.

We live in a highly-connected world where students have ubiquitous access to quality content and myriad ways to explore, study, and interact online. Great universities are defined by the strength and expertise of their communities, and their ability to provide students with flexible and interesting ways to learn.

The education market is more competitive than ever but the drivers remain the same — how can tertiary institutions attract and retain students? How can they adapt to the latest models of teaching and learning? How can they use the assets they already have instead of building something new?



Inside the James Cook University (JCU) Student Services Precinct.



Active lecture theatre in JCU School of Education.

In a next generation campus, the environment adapts to how you want to teach. Active lecture theatres switch easily between individual, small group work and lecture modes, libraries are the most popular social learning hubs on campus, and cafes and grassy lawns host impromptu study sessions. Students have richer learning experiences in class and better access to support out of it.

It's a place where collaboration and discussion are as important as quiet study time alone. A place where teachers and students work, study and socialise side by side. A community of learners.

The campus is a vibrant place where students want to spend their time. They have everything they need to learn, study, relax and play. But most importantly, they feel they belong there. Underpinning it all is a strong sense of community based on the unique character of the university.

Designing a university that is flexible and community-focused requires a thorough understanding of how students and teachers interact with teaching and learning models, technology and the space around them.

In our first issue of e-bites we show you some examples of how to revitalise an aging campus, and strengthen the learning community.



Active learning classroom in JCU School of Education.

The university of the future has the needs of the student at its heart.

Strengthening the community through connected learning places.

What is the value of a university campus when the majority of courses can now be delivered online?

The answer is community.

Students want to feel connected to their peers, to their academics and teachers, and to the place where they learn. A strong community of learners needs a variety of spaces to encourage interaction and a sense of belonging. They need classrooms for learning facilitated by academics, study spaces for independent and peer-assisted study, and support communities to provide access to tools and services for student life.



Connected spaces are an integral part of the JCU Specialist Teaching and Student Services Precinct.



The design of JCU Student Services Precinct maximises opportunities for staff and students to interact.



CASE STUDY

JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY

Townsville Campus Education Central

James Cook University needed to upgrade its Townsville Campus to provide better services to its students, and support new ways of teaching and learning. It was also obvious that in doing so, it had the opportunity to create an environment that better reflected JCU's tropical identity, and to build a stronger sense of community among the staff and students. What was not clear, however, was how to do it.

The first step was a comprehensive research program including staff and student interviews, and area and use studies of the whole campus. The research covered all areas of the student experience including how they want to interact with each other, what kinds of learning support they prefer, what kinds of services they need and how they want to access them, right down to how they want to feel when they're on campus.

These insights became the basis of a plan to revitalise the campus with the Specialist Teaching and Student Services Precinct now known as Education Central at its heart.

Student Services Precinct

Education Central is the front door to the university. The student-led / staff-assisted service model was developed specifically for JCU. Based on the latest in retail service, students can choose from self-service to fully-assisted service points, and have access to interview rooms and pods, and flexible furniture. Staff move around the space providing help as needed. The building also contains large-scale active learning spaces, a coffee shop and social learning areas. These larger, flexible spaces, encourage peer-to-peer learning, which extend learning beyond the classroom environment.

A visual sense of connection

The design uses a double-height circulation hub at the centre of the building, and visual connections between all internal and external circulation routes to create a welcoming atmosphere. Continuous undercover connections link the buildings and join the student retail, student service, teaching and administrative functions in one harmonious environment. These new connections create opportunities for spontaneous interaction between students and staff, as well as prolonging the useful life of the buildings.

Enhancing the tropical identity

Outside, shaded areas provide opportunities for social learning, and formal and informal interaction between staff and students. Much of JCU's identity focuses on its expertise and interest in the tropics. This significant part of its character is reflected in the architecture through buildings that are sympathetic to their surroundings and pockets of tropical landscape across the campus.



The JCU Townsville Campus reflects the university's identity through buildings sympathetic to their surroundings.



The JCU Singapore Campus Masterplan maintains the strong community character of the university.

The key to the Singapore Campus Masterplan was the research into the whole-of-learning experience from the students' perspective.

The JCU Singapore Campus is known for its strong sense of community and easy access to staff and learning support. However, the university needed to grow — the existing spaces were no longer appropriate for the teaching and learning practices on offer. It also needed the flexibility to adapt to changes in course structure and student numbers as needed without prohibitive costs. How could they expand the campus without losing the strong community character of the university?

The key to the Singapore Campus Masterplan was the research into the whole-of-learning experience from the students' perspective. The research revealed that students wanted to be supported at the discipline and subject level as well as the campus level. They wanted indoor and outdoor places to study, easy access to their teachers, and places they could just relax. They emphasised that areas such as the pool and volley ball courts were not just essential for taking a break but important places for developing learning relationships.

All the space on campus was analysed for its education potential with a focus on reinforcing learning communities, and making connections between the classroom and independent study. The research also looked out how the campus engaged with the city.

CASE STUDY

JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY

Singapore Campus Masterplan

The new model builds on the various disciplines as neighbourhoods within a village. Discipline neighbourhoods are supported by flexible, peer-to-peer learning spaces to enhance the sense of being part of a learning community. The academics' offices are located next to the students' study areas so students are better supported and create better relationships with their teachers.

The Masterplan has created a new efficient model for a better connected campus, which will assist the university to negotiate with government for redevelopment assistance. The model also includes a plan to help the campus transition to its new form with minimal disturbance to the university.

Q&A

Hamilton Wilson, Managing Director, Wilson Architects, talks about the JCU Education Central project and Wilson's approach to education design.



How did Wilson Architects approach the JCU Education Central project?

We wanted to look at new ways to design for education. How do we build a community of learners? Universities have a generally high attrition rate, so how do we create an environment that gives students a more connected experience so they want to stay?

Our approach is student-centric. We design in a considered way that makes a difference for students. When we asked students what they want, there was one thing they kept saying — students want to feel part of a community. They felt disconnected and they couldn't identify with the places they were learning in. So, we looked at JCU's tropical identity and created places that connect students to it, and help them feel part of their community. For example, pockets of tropical garden centred around spaces where students can find others learning the same things.

How does technology impact on education design?

Despite new technologies students are feeling more and more disenfranchised. Technology should be an 'enabler' not a driver in education design. We looked at how to extend contact time on campus, using social learning spaces with embedded technology like LCD screens and wireless internet so students can study anywhere, anytime, and support each other. Our research also showed that campuses can be like silos where learning happens invisibly. We brought learning out into the open and technology plays a big role in that.

How is this approach different to the traditional model?

The focus is about engaging students, being flexible and responsive. At one end of the spectrum, there must be student-directed learning spaces such as coffee shops and libraries, and at the other end teacher-directed learning spaces, such as lecture theatres. We see all space as possible learning space. The problem with existing university models is that they don't strategically see places like courtyards and coffee shops as learning places, but in reality they are. They are often used by students by default but to make our approach work really well, however, you need to incorporate the simple things, such as acoustics, access to power points, and appropriate furniture into the design.

How do you work?

We are genuinely interested in what we are doing and because of that we listen and we are responsive. We research outcomes and collect empirical data which informs the designs. We try to deeply understand the discipline we are working in so we can design functionality, but first and foremost, we design for people.

Wilson Architects has been at the forefront of education architecture for over 100 years. Our ground-breaking research for the Australian Learning and Teaching Council has given us unique insight into next generation learning spaces.

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NEXT ISSUE

Social learning spaces