

Getting Student Spaces Right

Focus on campus changes that make the biggest impact to student experience

August 2023



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The Campus Experience Index

The Campus Experience Index has been measuring student experience on campus since just before the pandemic, and what a tumultuous time these years have been for universities! While online learning has matured significantly during this period, pandemic lockdowns and reopenings have provided some peaks and troughs in our data that illuminate the value of the physical campus in the student experience.

The Campus Experience Index is a survey we run for universities wanting to gain insight into how students use and perceive campus facilities. We've worked with universities in Australia, the UK and Europe to find what makes their campuses tick and helped them identify design interventions that can and have made meaningful differences to their students. Do you know whether the changes you make on campus are delivering the desired results? Why do students like some spaces and not others? What distracts students from their learning, and what makes them feel a part of the campus community?

12,725
STUDENTS

75,990
COMMENTS ANALYSED

1,705
STUDENT PHOTOGRAPHS

Campus Experience Index



What we've learned

These are the types of questions we seek to answer when we survey students about a range of elements on campus: teaching spaces, libraries, informal study space, IT, food and catering, green space, social space, wayfinding, sense of belonging and safety on campus.

We ask students to consider how well facilities on campus support them on a scale. From their responses we generate an overall satisfaction score for the relevant categories in the Campus Experience Index. We then compare campuses to similar institutions (e.g. Group of 8 or Russell Group, urban or rural etc.) and can measure how the students' sentiment changes over time on a single campus.

We supplement quantitative satisfaction scores with qualitative data, which provides the depth and detail to explain the scores and find clues about how to fix persistent campus issues. We have processed tens of thousands of individual comments from students about their campuses, giving us a detailed insight into what creates a great campus experience.

Some of what we see in the data is intuitive but useful to validate – of course good lighting helps students learn. But other things are not so obvious – how many universities prioritise multi-functional outdoor spaces? Or provide furniture choices to suit a range of body sizes? Are there enough spaces for students to STOP studying for a moment and relax? This paper explores the hot topics for students and identifies some of the micro-frustrations that erode both student experience and investments being made on campuses.

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1. **It's good – really good – to be back on campus**
 2. **Back to basics: Space, light and furniture are critical to learning**
 3. **Library or coworking? There's no such thing as too much study space**
 4. **Nature is nurture: universities can do more to capitalise on outdoor and green spaces**
 5. **Inclusive design: universities recruit for diversity, but fall short on creating a campus for everyone**
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1. It's good – really good – to be back on campus

Campuses have life again! Belonging is rebounding after pandemic lockdowns, illustrating the value of place-based university experiences.

Online learning offered convenience and flexibility in a time of great need, but unlike hybrid office work for staff, the benefits of digital classes did not outweigh the pitfalls for undergraduate students. Students' sense of belonging to their institution plummeted during 2020-2021 as they struggled to connect with their teachers and peers, both socially and academically. There are some outliers that need to be considered; the move to online learning has benefited those with disabilities, full-time jobs, families and other caring duties, and the coming challenge is how to create hybrid experiences that still enable meaningful connections.

Campuses with higher belonging scores have very strong cohort connections, which is why this score is often higher for smaller campuses. Once students develop strong connections they feel comfortable widening their networks. Students with higher belonging scores showed a preference for face-to-face classes.

Establishing as many avenues as possible to help students develop their networks will help with belonging. This includes investing into spaces for clubs and societies as well as social spaces on campus. The development of such spaces and activities needs to consider the demographics of the student base. Many urban institutions will feel the impact of cost of living as students have to move further out of city areas and will find it increasingly difficult to participate in activities.

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What helps my belonging is the ability to access campus easily (no lockdown, no impeding construction works), accessing student clubs, effective and productive classes supported by high-quality learning spaces and safe spaces for different groups of people (people of colour, women, LGBTI+).

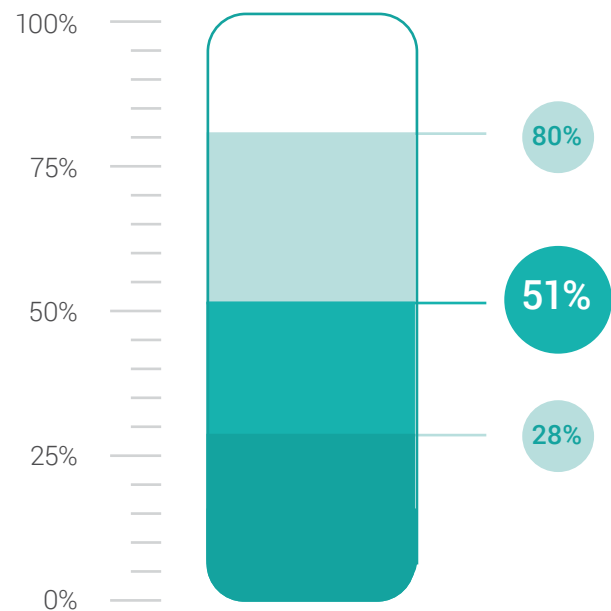
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What our stats say

- Belonging scores within our Index range from a high of 80% to a low of 28%, with an average of 51%.
- Large universities and faculties with large intakes typically perform more poorly in belonging scores. Students don't want to be 'just a number'.
- Students particularly affected by pandemic lockdowns had the lowest belonging scores in our database. They felt disadvantaged compared to their peers and rue the loss of the networks and memories they thought they would be creating at university. This has taught us a lot about the value of connection and place. They feel online learning diminished the potential for relationships with both peers and teachers.
- The pandemic changed how people socialise and students find it even harder than before to make friends and maintain connections. This influences their time on campus, engagement and overall experience.
- Students feel campuses with active, inclusive and varied clubs, societies and associations help them belong. In fact, any campus where clubs are not mentioned by students frequently has a low belonging score.
- The students' desire for peer-to-peer learning has accelerated, and project-based work is influencing space demand.

Belonging



2. Back to basics: space, light and furniture are critical for learning

Most estates have some innovative, flexible teaching spaces that enable interactive styles of teaching, and students love these.

But inevitably across any estate there are also sub-optimal spaces: rooms where students can't see the instructor, the furniture is wobbly, there are no windows, it's a bit stuffy... these are all factors working against students' ability to take in what is being taught. Investment in teaching quality is not fully realised without a focus on teaching space. Conditional and functional audits conducted by a third party may miss some elements that impact how students learn in a space, directing capital to less effective areas.

Small changes, like fixing broken charging points or adjusting screen heights can make a big difference, and will flow through to improvements in course ratings and teaching quality scores such as NSS in the UK and QILT indicators in Australia.

“ *Spacious. Perfect for seminars due to layout. It is easy to follow the tutor, but also perfectly laid out to promote team tasks.* ”

“ *Little to no natural light which has an effect on my mood...I am a lot less motivated and in a more negative mindset in a very dark and closed off space.* ”

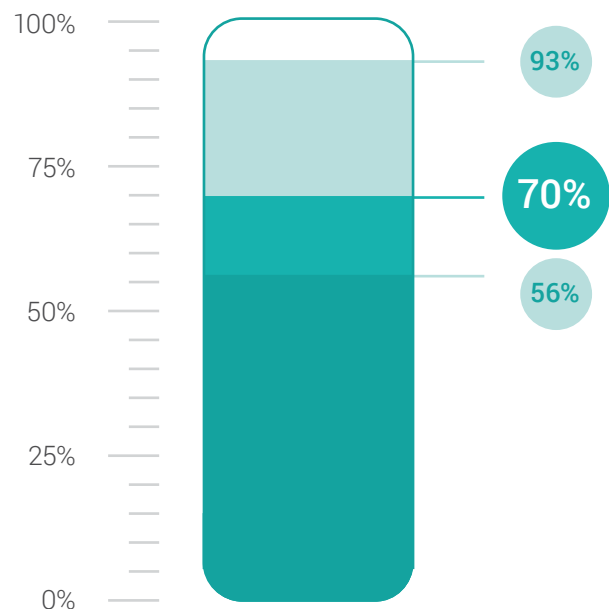
“ *I prefer rooms with less people crammed in, the smaller the class size, the bigger the academic growth.* ”



What our stats say

- Teaching space scores within our Index range from a high of 93% to a low of 56%, with an average of 70%.
- Smaller campuses with specialised teaching spaces score particularly well.
- The top three micro-frustrations for students in teaching spaces are inappropriate furniture, cramped spaces and a lack of daylight. Cramped spaces is not necessarily about too many people in the room but a combination of factors.
- Particularly disliked are flip out/tablet desks as they are easily broken, and do not accommodate laptops well.
- Students describe spaces they can learn in more easily as “spacious”.
- Students take inspiration from teaching spaces and those that have been here before them. They don’t want to feel like they are in an office environment.
- Demand for small to medium size interactive teaching spaces is increasing.
- Beware of technology waves, which can lead to multiple AV systems across teaching spaces, and prove difficult for staff to manage. Students tell us lecturers have trouble using the systems, while staff tell us the systems are far from easy to operate. We are yet to see a campus with seamless AV technology.

Teaching spaces



University of Melbourne, Clinical Skills Labs

The University of Melbourne's Veterinary campus at Werribee contains clinical skills labs for teaching and use out of hours. Rarely do we see such positive feedback from students about one particular teaching room, but these rooms are much loved for a few reasons:

- They are open 24/7 and available between scheduled classes and on weekends
- They have practical equipment that allows students to supplement their learning and not fall behind
- Unlike makerspaces, these labs specifically designed and set-up for Vet students. Equipment and models are laid out so students can access and practice specific skills they want to develop
- They are well designed rooms, spacious with ample daylight
- Students know the rules, they feel welcome and don't need to seek permission or special entry



A very useful lab to have to practice suturing, gowning, slide preparation and etc. Gives us more confidence and makes us feel more prepared before doing clinical placements. Is great that we can come in to practice as and when we feel like it.



Students even travel to use these rooms on days they have no classes, showing the potential "pull" to campus of well-considered teaching spaces.



3. Library or coworking? There's no such thing as too much study space

Libraries are the heart of the campus and informal study spaces are the support system. A well-established network of informal study spaces allows for expanding and contracting student numbers, much more rapidly than major library projects.

They can also cater well to different preferences for study. We have seen an explosion of high-quality informal study spaces with a mix of furniture to match. As cost of living increases, students have more work and family commitments outside of hours. Downtime on campus is increasingly spent studying (in groups or alone) rather than socialising, although the two often mix. And the spaces that students enjoy doing these activities in are beginning to resemble co-working spaces, rather than bookish libraries.

'Finding a seat to study', which is sometimes a student's biggest challenge on campus, is not just about finding an empty place, but finding an ideal environment for the task at hand. This might be group work, taking a class on zoom, or working quietly alone. The way students learn is changing, and spaces must do the same. If students are unaware of informal study spaces available they will gravitate to the library for all of their tasks. When student numbers grow, finding study space becomes especially challenging and this is one of the main issues that contributes to low library scores in the Index. Students largely expect the library to be silent, which makes the provision of faculty-based informal learning spaces around the campus more important as enrolments grow. Don't get stuck with a surge in student numbers and nowhere for them to go.

“

I like the study zone - lots of space, nearby cafe, toilets, charging facilities, good atmosphere (people talking but not too loud).

”

“

The Library is always so busy and it is stressful to try and find a place to sit. The chairs are also uncomfortable to sit in for long periods.

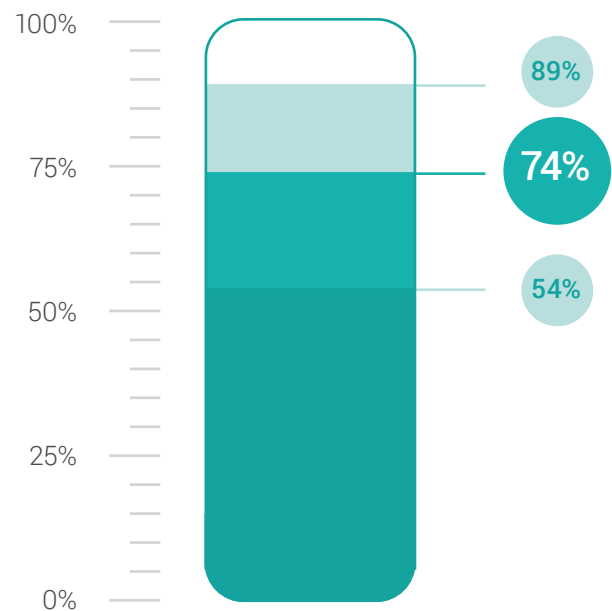
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What our stats say

- Our Index shows the highest score at 89% for libraries, the lowest 54%, and an average of 74%
- Libraries that are well-loved form a natural heart to the campus. Such libraries always appear within the top five things that students love most about their campus. They are also usually noted by students as contributing to their sense of belonging.
- Having enough study space is essential to a high-quality student experience. Difficulty finding a seat and inadequate opening hours consistently lead to low scores in our database (and these also likely affect other student ratings such as QILT and NSS)
- High quality social study areas are becoming more popular than the campus tavern. Non-library informal study areas are now often paired with a café or lounge area to entice (noisy) group learning away from the library.
- High library scores in the first year often decrease as students progress, while the inverse is true for informal study space. This suggests that the longer students are at university, the more familiar they become with other areas they can use for study. Better utilisation of empty classrooms and faculty-based informal study areas can be encouraged by ensuring students know where they are allowed to go, and when.
- Should libraries also be the centre for student support? Not necessarily. Multiple factors (such as campus size, layout and density) need to be considered. What is clear is that study space is growing in need, so don't use up the library space that you might require in a couple of years.

Libraries



Senate House, University of Bristol

Senate House was refurbished in 2021. It was very well timed, given that spaces such as this are in growing demand following changes to how students study and spend time on campus since the pandemic.

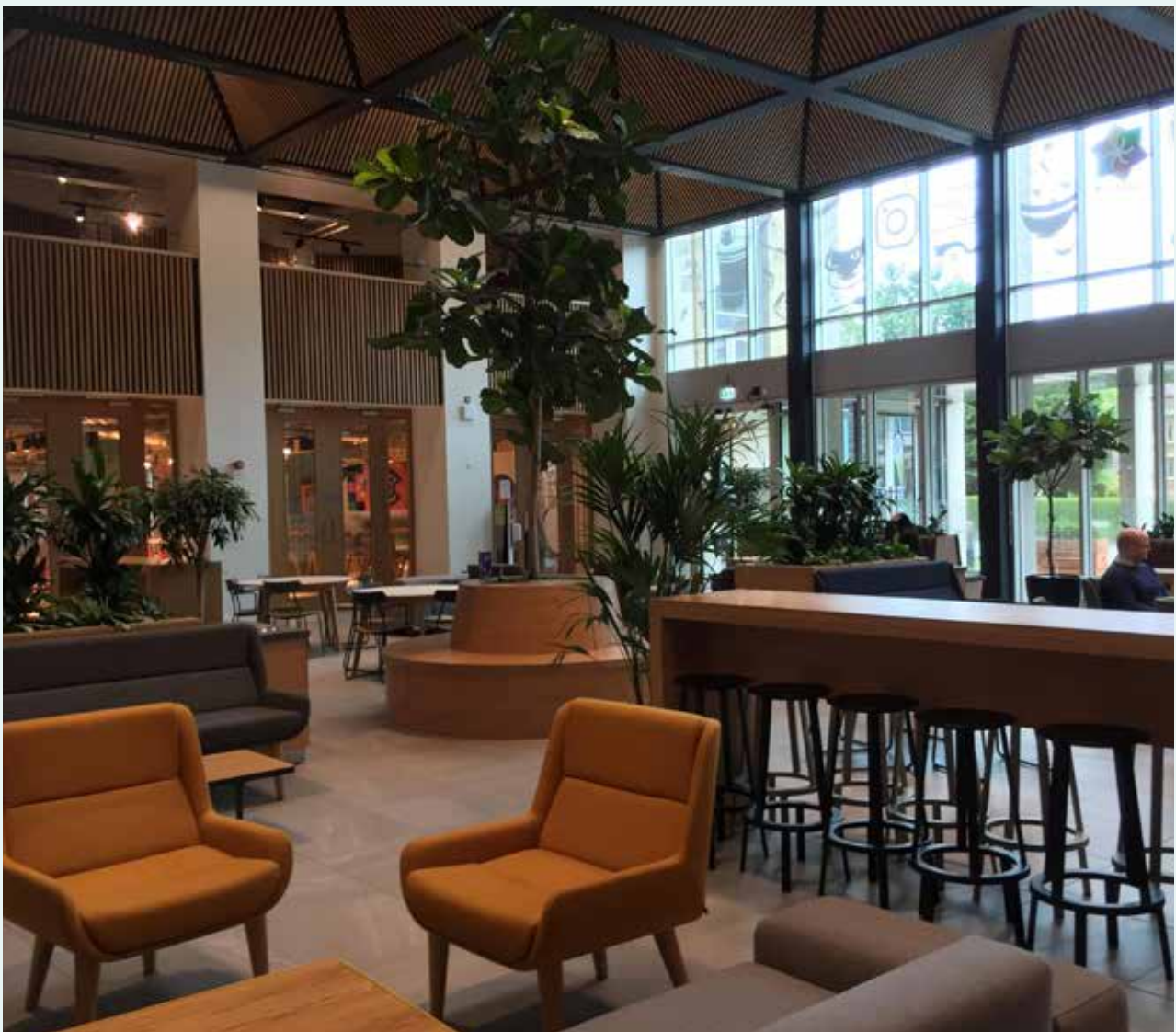
Undergraduates love the homely and welcoming environment. Spread across multiple floors, the various room layouts and furniture provide for opportunities to relax, eat, socialise, study together or study alone. It isn't within a faculty, so is neutral and all students can easily access and use the building.

This was a space for which we received a lot of positive feedback. One student said this building is the reason she comes to campus.

“

My favourite thing about Senate House is that you are allowed to speak whilst working. Libraries and other spots require full silence, and sometimes I like discussing ideas with the people I'm working with. Also, they have microwaves and sell food, so it's easier to spend the whole day there.

”



The University of Melbourne, New Student Precinct

The University of Melbourne recently invested in a New Student Precinct. The project includes a relocated library space, numerous informal study areas, food, retail, and extensive outdoor spaces. The site accommodates special events as well as the everyday activities of a range of student cohorts from across the university.

It has made an immediate impact, with students giving generous feedback about the new facilities and the positive contribution the Precinct has made to their campus experience.

“

There are so many events around amphitheatre and the surrounding student precinct this semester! I enjoy attending the events with my friends or alone. Decent space for mingling and making new friends.

”



Brynmor Jones Library, University of Hull

One question in our Campus Experience Index survey asks students what the best and worst features of their campus are. When we see library as one of the best, we know it is functioning well. And this was certainly the case for the Brynmor Jones Library. The University of Hull has stable students numbers, therefore the library and study spaces are not under stress. This means that students can find a seat easily, contributing to a high library rating. In addition, the library design maximises daylight and nature connection, and various spaces for students to use based on whatever type of activity they are undertaking. It forms a natural and welcoming heart to the campus.

“

Brynmor Jones Library is where I spend my hours studying around lectures. My group books a study room most days and then we use the facilities to help with revision and lab write ups. Definitely a pinnacle spot on the university!

”



4. Nature is nurture: universities can do more to capitalise on outdoor and green spaces

Another critical pandemic lesson for universities is the value of interaction with nature. Students crave views of nature and time outdoors for study and socialising. They also recognised the value of fresh air for their physical and mental wellbeing.

While many universities have beautiful, well-kept grounds, there has been, until now, underinvestment and lack of innovation across the board in sheltered outdoor space for study, eating and socialising. Both outdoor furniture and weather protected spaces can be relatively low cost and provide a multi-dimensional opportunity to encourage students to spend more time outside, reap the well-being benefits of biophilia and take pressure off high-use study spaces (contingent on external charging points being made available).

Larger landscaped campuses score higher in this category than urban campuses generally, but even small pocket-parks or trees can make a big difference to perceptions of greenery on campus.

Functional outdoor spaces are more challenging in the northern hemisphere where academic calendars align with the coldest months, but there are still opportunities for more creative adoption of biophilic design.

The lawns are always nice and fresh, though more tables could be around those areas as they get really nice sun. Not just long bench seats, but places to set up a computer and work properly outside.

“

Outdoor areas are beautiful but not optimised. A lot of spaces could be used to work if only there were a few tables. Working outside is good for mental health but there are not enough spaces to do so.

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I appreciate the green spaces - they offer a peaceful environment for relaxation, meditation and socialising.

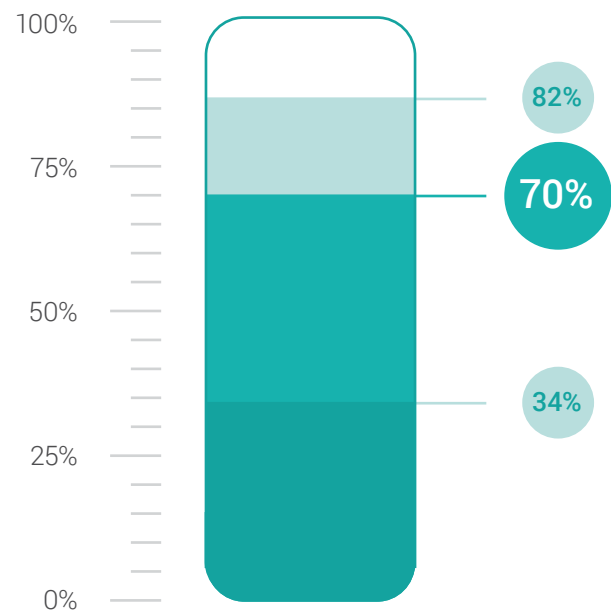
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What our stats say

- Our Index shows the highest score at 82% for green space on campus, the lowest 34%, and an average of 70%
- Students cannot get enough green spaces, including lawns, trees, manicured gardens and natural landscapes
- Students especially love secret gardens, hidden corners and lush spaces. They also love indoor spaces with views, daylight and colours that mimic nature
- Investment in green space is not being fully optimised. In every survey we capture significant amounts of feedback from students wanting to sit and be outside but not being able to, it might be as simple as muddy grass or bench seats where they can't sit with friends
- Expansive green spaces are highly valued, but lighting and security patrols must be provided to ensure perceptions of safety are managed effectively. We see lower safety scores on campuses with large landscaped areas (typically suburban campuses)

Green space



James Cook University

There has been a lack of innovation across campuses in functional outdoor spaces. This doesn't mean displacing nature with structures, but small tweaks that allow students to use outdoor spaces.

James Cook University has a number of multi-functional outdoor spaces that are used for events, classes, informal study, club activities and socialising. They also have covered walkways that help students traverse the campus while coping with the tropical heat.

As extreme weather conditions become more common due to climate change, campuses need to think about how to ensure students can continue to access and benefit from nature.

“

There are lovely outdoor study spaces. These are well equipped with microwaves, hot and cold water, sinks and vending machines.

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5. Inclusive design: universities recruit for diversity, but fall short on creating a campus for everyone

Universities promote diversity and inclusion of and for students from minority and under-represented groups to improve social equality.

However, the practical realities of managing the campus experience for people from different countries, ages, abilities, gender identities and social backgrounds is extremely challenging. Our belonging and safety scores show that not everyone feels safe and included.

We see needs of groups being met with initiatives such as greater accessibility, prayer rooms, food diversity and gender neutral toilets. Universities also offer health, wellbeing and support services. Some institutions approach this more effectively than others.

Providing a 'personalised student experience' to every student is going to be problematic with the growing pressure to further increase diversity. The built environment has to be able to 'flex' and align with recruitment changes and promises being made to incoming students.

As much as it's good to try food locally, there aren't too many options for food that international students can relate to.

“

It's too cold in the library and the lighting is very frustrating. I'm autistic and the lights are very disturbing.

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There is a lack of gender-neutral toilets on campus. I find myself having to trek across to find one I feel safe using.

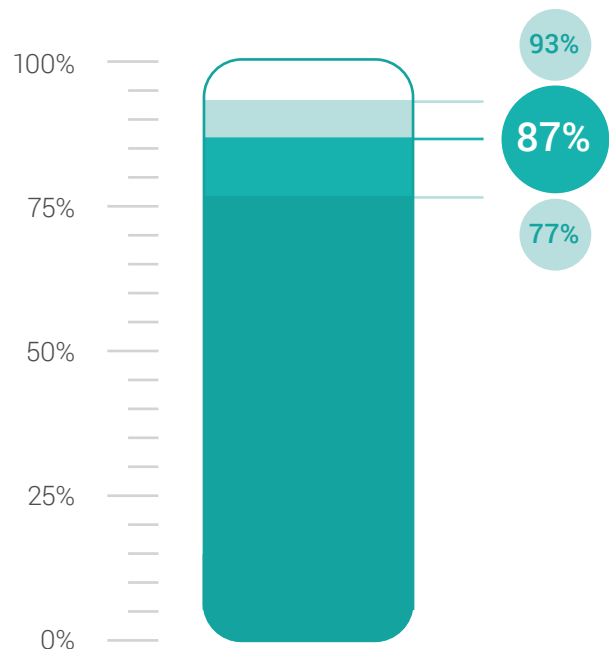
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What our stats say

- There are hidden biases in how we design campuses that need to be better understood and addressed as universities further widen their recruitment and retention of equity groups
- There are gender biases. For example we see lower safety scores from women and non-binary genders. If people don't feel safe at night or travelling home, they will use the campus differently. We even see biases in some furniture selected. The growth of gender-neutral or all-gender toilets continues. Anyone should be able to easily access a toilet where they feel safe and comfortable
- Mature-age students rate their experiences more poorly across some Index categories compared to younger students. We consistently hear, "the university is made for younger people"
- Wheelchair and other mobility access limitations are affecting students' attendance at lectures, relegating them to online learning only (where available) and affecting social and learning opportunities more generally. Online learning opened participatory opportunities for these students, and there is a risk this will now be lost as face to face classes return. We frequently see lower scores across the board for students with disabilities
- Students with neurodivergent conditions are increasing in number and voice on campus, compelling universities to consider designing spaces for unseen disabilities

Safety



“*Need to be on campus for group work tonight but the campus is really intimidating at night. There is lighting but as a young woman it's not adequate to promoting a sense of safety.*”



About the Campus Experience Index

While there are many student experience surveys conducted, rarely do these drill into the detail on facilities.

Yet staff and students spend most of their day using and moving between buildings. We have sought to fill this void with the Campus Experience Index. It provides property and estates teams with a wealth of information about how students use and perceive different campus elements.

The universities that we have worked with have used their data and findings in a variety of ways to improve their student experience on campus, including:

- Giving estates and properties teams access to detailed student feedback about facilities that is not typically available
- Creation of projects and budgets that address micro-frustrations for immediate change
- Supporting or challenging existing assumptions being made about the portfolio and where to strategically focus investment and resources
- Building stronger, evidence-based business cases for projects
- Providing a holistic oversight of estates for executive staff to quickly understand the story of the campus
- Celebrating what is working and monitor how projects impact student experience

“

The report by Campus Intuition provided us with some fascinating insights into how our students and staff experienced our campus. Being able to compare the different experiences of the same areas, such as learning spaces, set the scene for gaining an even deeper understanding, which we have used to inform short-term initiatives alongside long-term plans with senior stakeholders and our teams so that everyone can draw a clear line from projects to the customer experience improvements they will deliver.

Andrew Male, Executive Director of Infrastructure Service,
University of Hull, UK

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The depth of student engagement we experienced from working with Dr Sam Hall is to be commended. The information gathered is high quality and very informative for JCU to plan and deliver more focused study spaces and bookable group areas for our return to campus life post-COVID. Her best-in-industry advice was well received and has given impetus to the Estate Development Planning resulting in a 3 year study hub programme based on her evidence

Hilary Kavanagh, Director Estate, James Cook University

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Dr Sam Hall's presentation at our AUDE event was excellent. Really thought provoking, and we received so many comments afterwards about the brilliant Campus Intuition work.

Charlotte Livingston-Lewis, Head of Strategic Programmes and Governance, The University of Warwick,

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FAQs about the Campus Experience Index and how it works

How long do projects take?

It generally takes 3-4 months from the time a survey is approved to when we deliver the report and presentation. There are set intake periods based on the country your institution is in and your academic calendar.

What if a university has multiple campuses?

We run the survey frequently for multi-campus institutions. We can deploy it at the same time across all campuses, and then compare them against each other and against our database of other institutions.

But wait, aren't students over-surveyed?

Yes, there are a lot of surveys running for students and we find some universities have a lot more communication to students than others. We work with you to find a space in the calendar when multiple surveys aren't running in order to maximise participation. We also work with each university to develop a strong print and digital marketing campaign.

How much does it cost?

Cost varies depending on the size of the institution, the complexity of the portfolio and the number of campuses. After we have an initial meeting we send you a proposal outlining the fee and timeline.

What campuses are we compared with?

We have a global database and will compare your campus against those with similar campus typology. As our database grows we are also adding in other comparative factors, like academic ranking.

What countries do you work in?

We have offices in Australia (Perth and Melbourne) and London. However, we work with universities around the world. The survey can be translated into different languages.

Who do you work with at universities?

Typically the Estates or Property team commission the survey. However we also have projects commissioned by COO, Vice-Chancellor or President. The best outcomes are achieved when stakeholders are involved from both estates/property and campus life/ student experience.

Contact us for a chat about your project to see how we can help. Send queries to our coordinator: megan@campusintuition.com

