

Blended Working in the Higher Education Sector

A review of the post-pandemic university workplace
August, 2021



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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALICE CLANCY

Introduction

The collective experience of working off campus through the COVID-19 pandemic has changed attitudes, perceptions and habits in higher education across the world.

COVID-19 has made us all realise that “Work is what you do, not where you do it”. This is a powerful proposition, that is changing how many HEI’s see their workplace working for them in the future.

And with that comes an opportunity to re-iterate the purpose of the campus – to bring people and ideas together and to re-imagine how the estates may operate in terms of size, shape and model in the future.

The question really is – how might HEI’s translate these concepts into a blended workplace that is a practical and actionable vision that is ‘fit for purpose’?

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What we did

With the global pandemic forcing most households into lock-down, there has never been a better time to address the qualities and functions of the workplace environment in higher education and reimagine how the estates may operate in terms of size and shape in the future.

Hassell was engaged to facilitate discussions between space management professionals in the Higher Education sector over the future of blended-working.

We invited members from both the strategically-focussed AUDE Space Management Special Interest Group (AUDE SM SIG), as well as members of the operationally-focussed Higher Education Space Management Group (HESMG), to participate in a survey, to better understand how institutions are planning for the future of blended working.

The survey was structured to help understand the level of change estates and the workplace have gone through since the onset of Covid-19. It also indicates how much change the HE workplace may undergo in planning the post-Covid future.

Out of the 185 institutions invited to respond to the survey, 54 completed all mandatory questions.

Members were invited to participate in an online workshop to explore the initial findings, before drilling-down into the various topics and themes.

This report details how institutions fared during the pandemic and provides a clear overview of the extent to which the sector is planning to deliver blended-working and what they hope for in the post-pandemic higher education workplace. The structure was in part guided by HESMG and the AUDE special interest group to ensure the output was relevant to the sector.

Figure 1. Survey structure

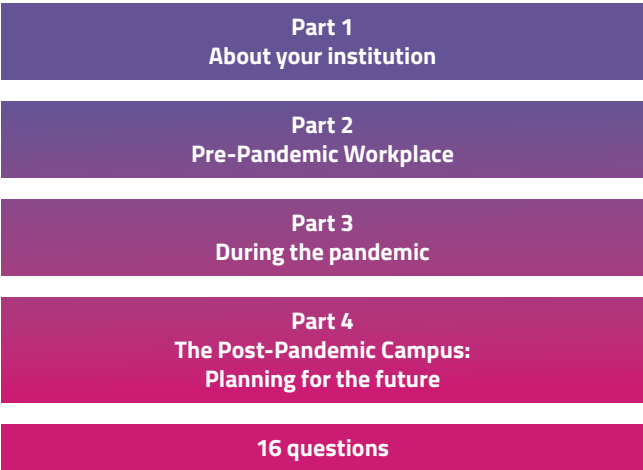
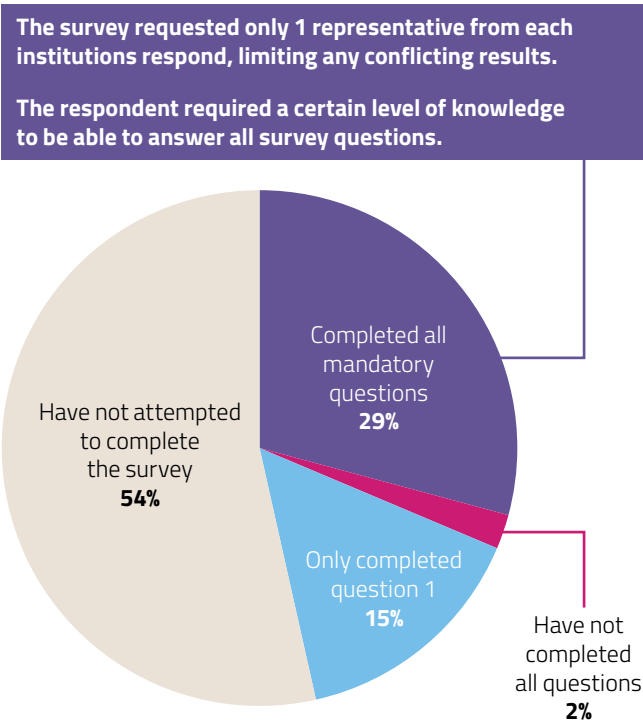


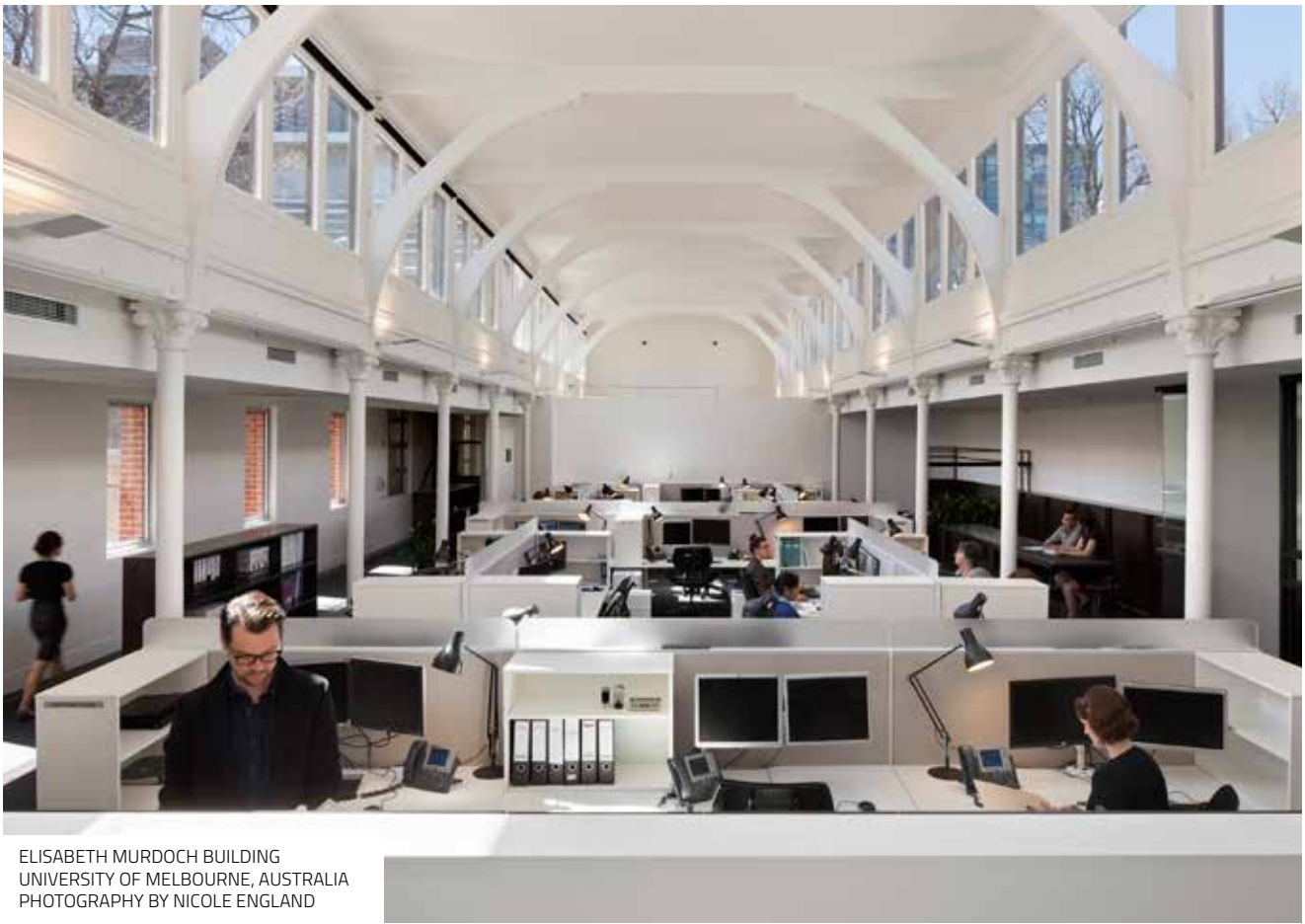
Figure 2. Survey response rate



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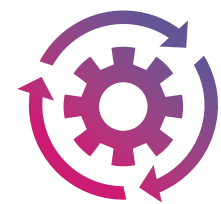


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ELISABETH MURDOCH BUILDING
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What we found



CHANGE IS HAPPENING

Demand for offices and lecture theatres is expected to decrease when compared to pre-pandemic.



FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE

There will be space dividend from adopting a blended/agile work style, but not in the immediate term.



CHANGE IS SLOW

Progress in implementing blended/agile working varies widely between institutions.



TEACHING BELONGS ON CAMPUS

It is anticipated that the future delivery mode of teaching will be mostly face-to-face with large lectures remaining online.



CAMPUS REMAINS VITAL

Space dividend will mostly be used for teaching & learning, social and collaboration.



WHAT WORKPLACE MODEL IS BEST

Changes to workstyle are mostly targeted towards non-academic staff.

“Financial pressures will now carry more weight to drive space efficiencies.”

1

staff and student health and wellbeing was selected as the number 1 ranked driver of change.



58

Institution survey participants

“Workspaces are pivoting towards social interaction. With quiet, focused work pivoting towards being more of a home based task.”

“Staff surveys issued in all departments, new ways of working project team established and work started on four “test and learn” spaces to try new workplace designs.”

79%

of respondents expect to gain a potential space dividend after adopting a blended/agile work style.

Pre-Covid

The challenge for many HEI's is the traditional way they have delivered office environments. In order to understand the degree of change, we need to assess the workplace prior to COVID-19.

WORKING SPACES PRE- COVID-19

Prior to the pandemic, the most common working environment for academic staff was the individual office; while an assigned desk in open plan space was the most common working environment for non-academic staff.

33% of survey respondents indicated that pre-COVID-19 up to 20% of academic staff worked from an individual office, with an additional 34% of respondents indicating that 60-100% of their academic staff worked from individual offices.

74% of respondents also indicated up to 20% of their non-academic staff worked from an individual office. A majority of respondents (57%) indicated that 40-100% of their non-academic staff worked from an assigned desk in open plan pre- COVID-19.

Figure 3. Working spaces - academic staff

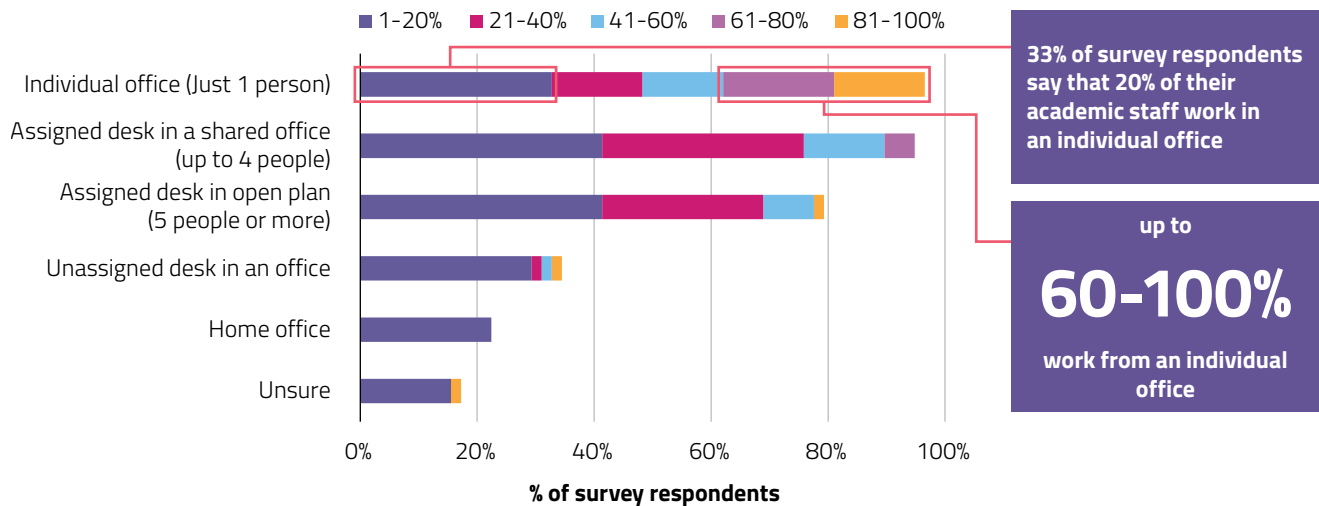
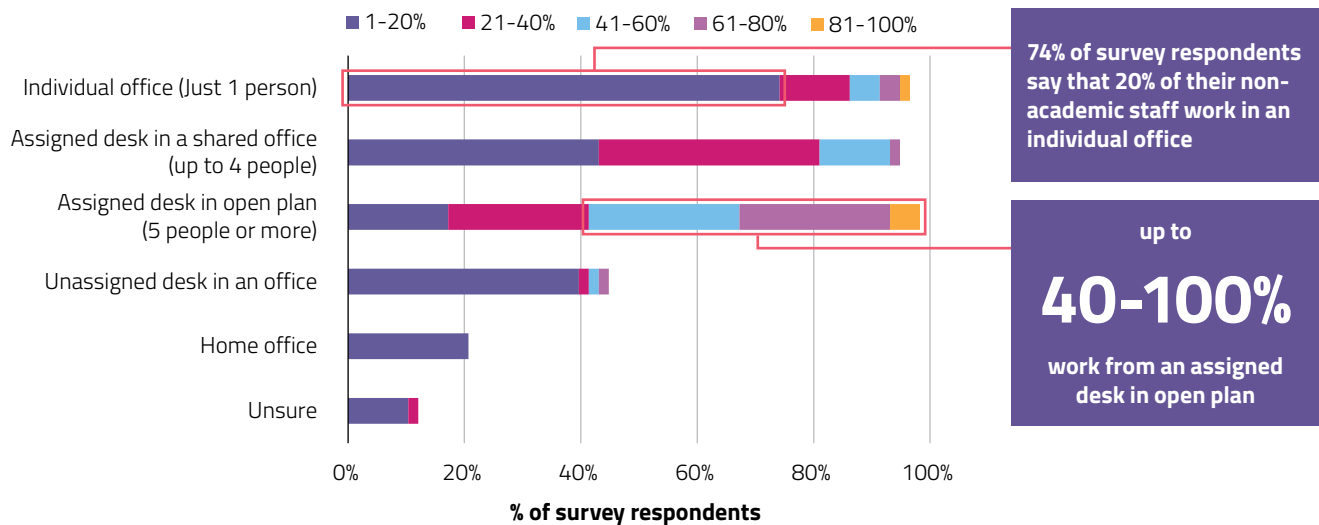


Figure 4. Working spaces - non-academic staff



SPACES UNDER PRESSURE PRE- COVID-19

The academic workplace is changing, and the issues associated with that change are experienced by HEI staff.

In order to understand the impacts on the workplace post-COVID-19, we need to understand where HEI's felt the most pressure on space before the pandemic.

The top three space types with the biggest pressures were study space, social space and storage space.

Combined social and study spaces

Interestingly the requirement for more social learning and combined social and study spaces for students (excluding formal libraries), featured heavily in the commentary.

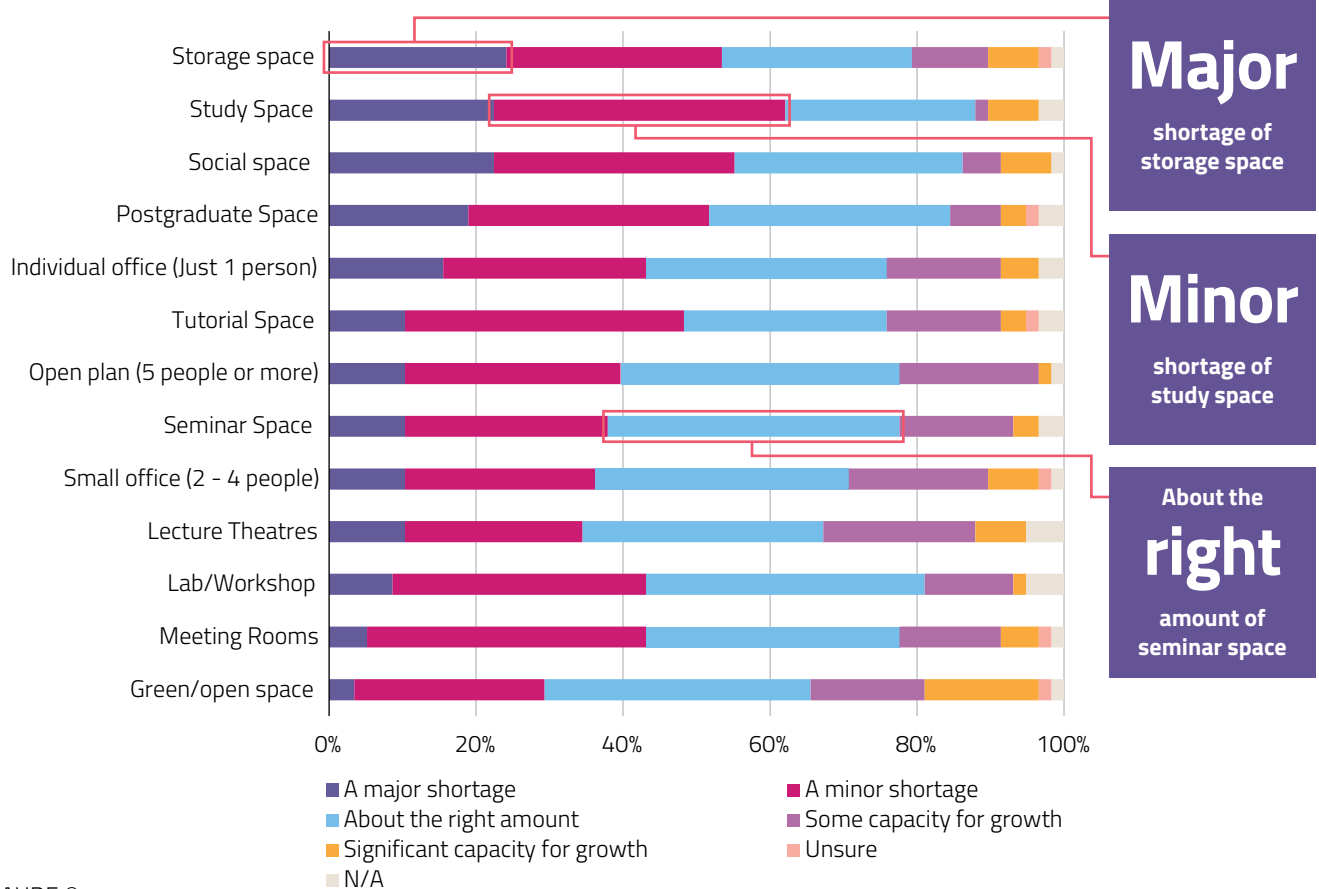
Academic office space

The issue of perceived needs against metrics in assessing shortages of space was raised in the commentary as well. Although not a primary estate concern, commentary from some HEI's suggested that if academic staff were queried on space requirements pre-COVID-19, they would believe there was a shortage of individual offices.

"This assessment is not based so much on an objective assessment but on our ongoing discussions with all of the constituent areas of the University and our ongoing understanding of the type and volume of different space types we currently have on our campus and across all of our buildings."

Figure 5. Pressure on spaces pre-COVID-19

*Results have been sorted based on majors shortages of space



“During lock-down the University engaged with staff principally in the area of wellbeing surveys, there have also been a series of engagement sessions for each area of the University with the Principal. Each department has also engaged with their own staff on wellbeing and the practical reality of working at home. Planning for future working patterns has also commenced, although we have delayed this so as to try and not have staff thinking mainly about lock-down conditions, but to the future changes that we will be implementing in the area of Agile Working, Home and Hybrid Working.”

Survey participant

During the pandemic

During the pandemic, many HEI's closed all but essential research and instructed that most, if not all, students and staff worked from home for varying periods of time.

As working from home became, for many, the new norm, there has been keen interest in understanding if this would form part of blended working in the future.

It was (and continues to be) viewed as a transformative moment in the workplace and perhaps there has never been a better time to address the qualities and functions of the workplace environment in higher education.

CHECKING IN

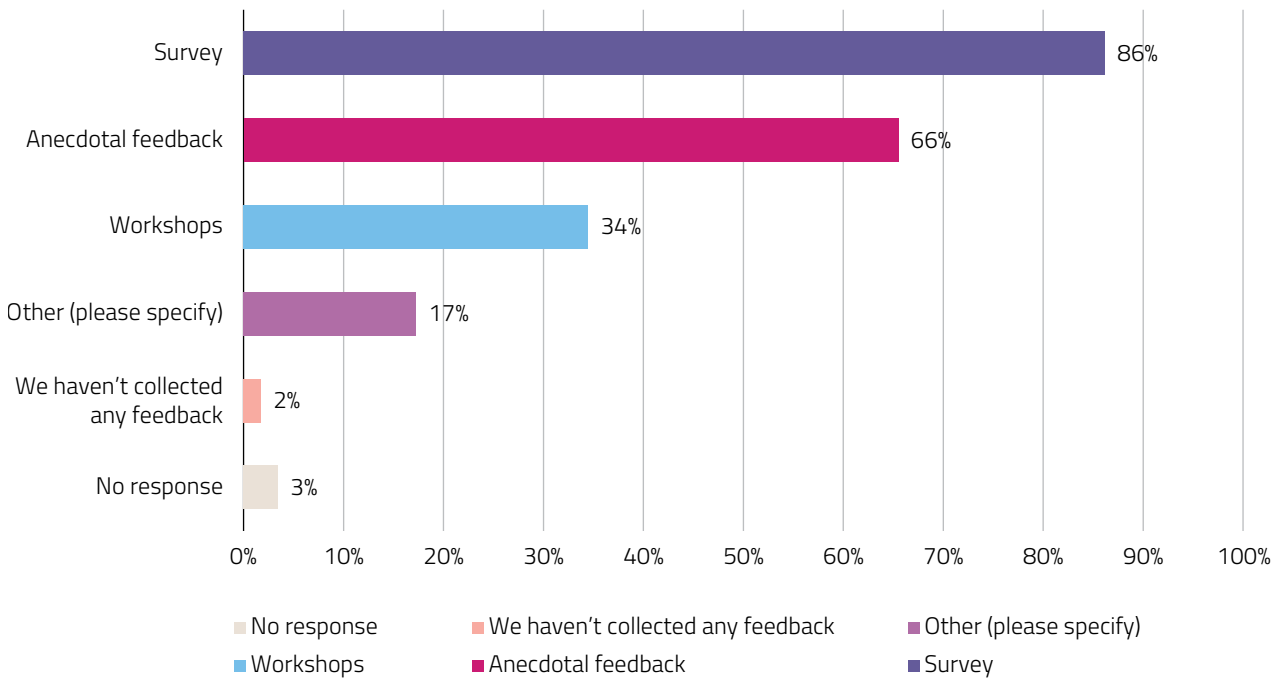
During the lock-down, a majority (86%) of the staff engagement happened through surveys. Interestingly, a total of 67% of respondents engaged in two (43%) or three (24%) types of staff engagement, i.e. of the 86% of respondents that completed a survey of their staff, a proportion also undertook workshops and feedback sessions.

The findings also revealed, that during lock-down many HEI's set up specific champion/focus groups tasked with getting formal feedback from staff. That was then directly fed back to leadership to develop relevant real-time responses and initiatives.

WORK FROM HOME

Many HEI's noted concerns in regards to equality of working spaces at home and undertook home work station assessments, providing support as required. Respondents were also concerned that the normalisation of blended working could penalise some staff - for example, junior staff working in shared accommodation or at the dining table.

Figure 6. Staff engagement about WFH experience and future work preferences



Drivers of change

The pandemic has highlighted the short-comings of HE estates in supporting the ways people now work and what they need.

The idea of the blended workplace has gained much traction in the last year. For many institutions, 2021 has been the year of experimentation. HEI's have been holding their breath, reacting in real-time to the COVID-19 pandemic, and are beginning to look ahead, assess and make changes.

Many institutions are starting to think strategically, test new approaches, and re-imagine how their workforce will operate after an extended period of disruption. A lot remains up in the air. Will people want to return to the office? Are the changes temporary or lasting? How will organisational culture and output adapt?

The pandemic has also highlighted the short-comings of HE estates in supporting the ways people now work and what they need to be able to complete their work.

The Blended Work concept is whereby employees split their time between home and office.

The blended workplace concept promises to understand how workplace tasks and the space required to perform them may have changed and assemble the best of all within a person's reach in the future.

In doing so, there is an opportunity to create a more resilient social, economic, and cultural fabric - to make the workplaces in HEI's, somewhere staff want to be - not have to be.

WHAT'S DRIVING CHANGE

Respondents were asked to select and then rank their top three drivers of change. Utilise space more effectively was the most commonly selected driver of change (71%). Among the respondents who chose it as a driver, 30% selected it as #1 driver, 30% selected it as #2 driver and 40% selected it as #3 driver."

Staff/student health and well-being was selected by most respondents as their #1 ranked driver. By looking at the results, we see less people selected it as a driver, but when selected it was considered as the top, most important driver.



Figure 7. Drivers of change

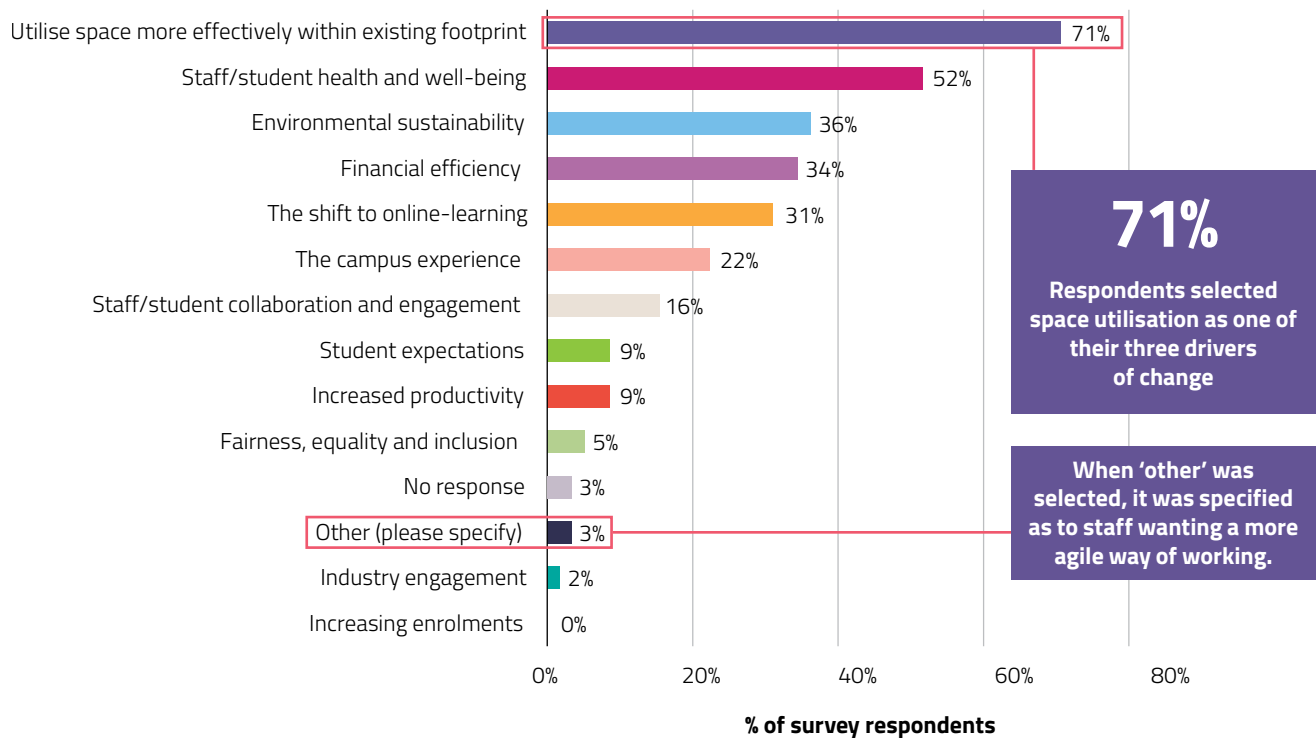
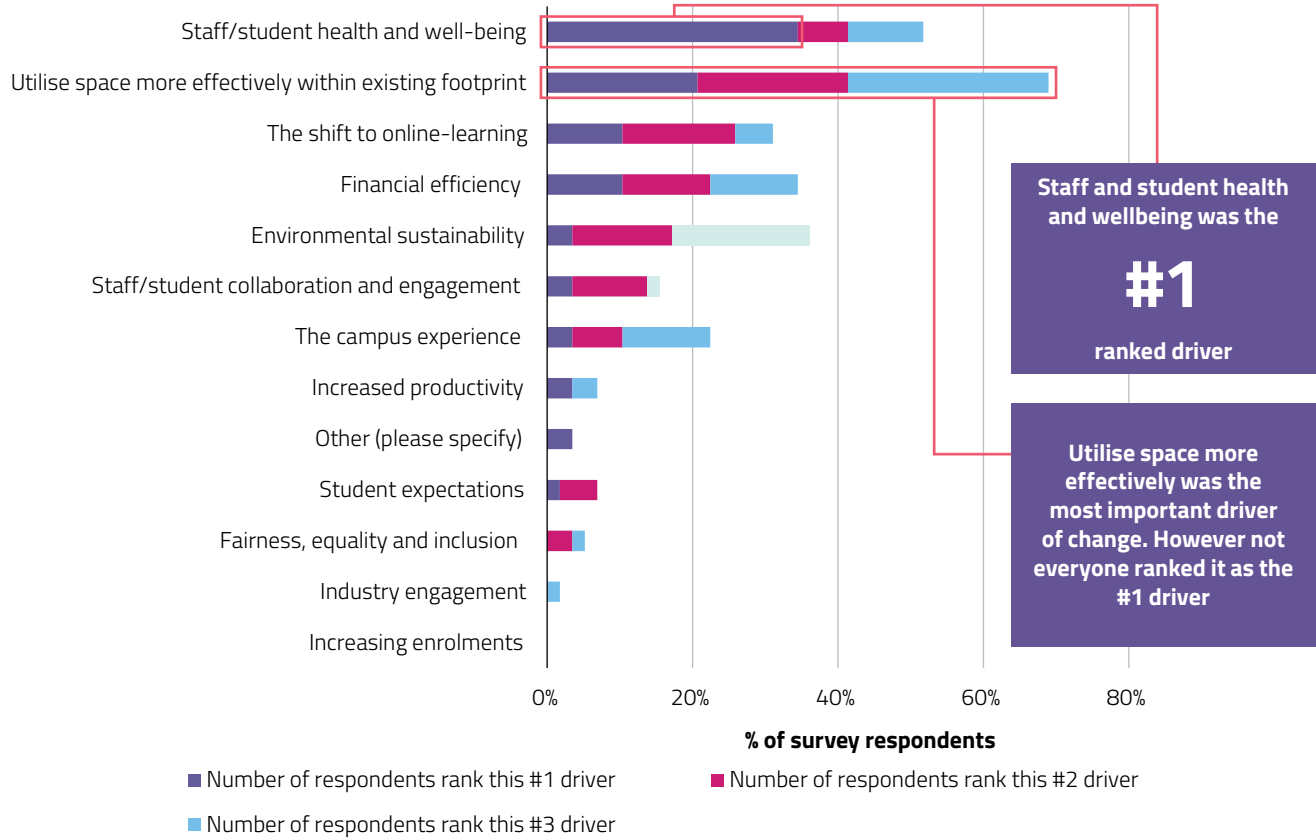


Figure 8. Rank of drivers



Planning for the future

The blended workplace needs to be supported by a space that can respond to the unique environment of HEI's. A workplace that hinders an individual's ability to get work done, isn't likely to attract a lot of engaged workers.

And similarly, a person that finds it hard to connect with their colleagues and students isn't going to feel socially integrated or effective.

One model will not fit all and it is crucial that each HEI within its own context, define its own unique tactics to build towards its own unique blended workplace vision.

The challenge for many HEIs is the traditional way they have delivered office environments.

With an increase in the number of staff who wish to work from home (and have demonstrated they are able to), how can institutions continue to foster an engaging working environment and maximise space efficiency?

Figure 9. Implementing blended or agile working in the future

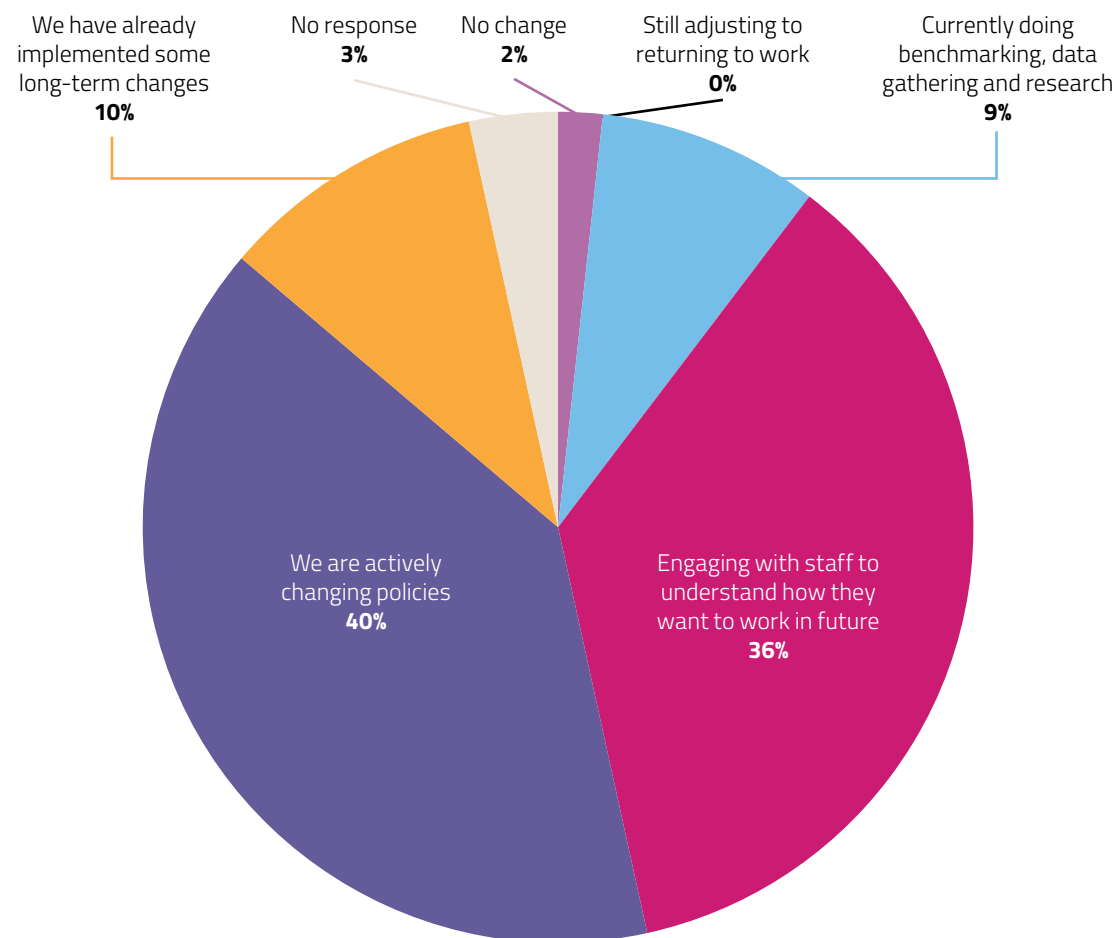
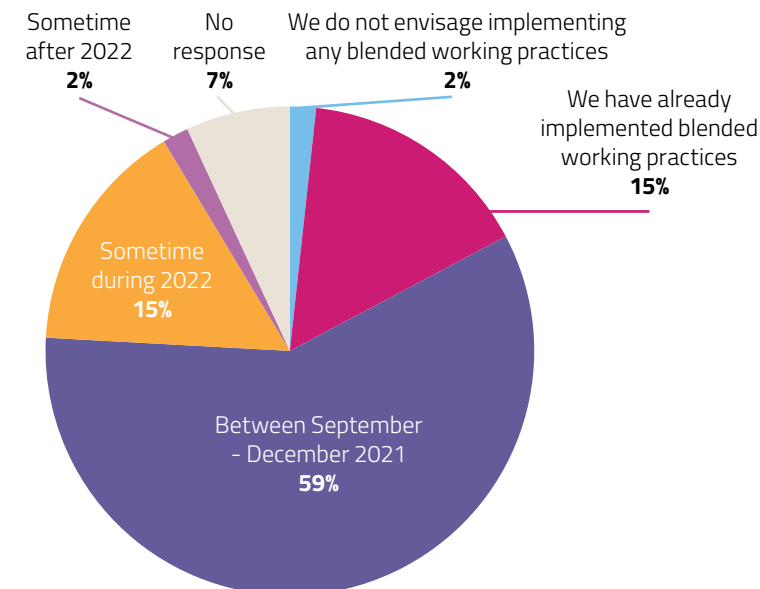


Figure 10. Implementing blended working practices



“Initial implementation of the pilot projects could be in 2021 but more realistically it will be sometime during 2022 before all necessary physical and IT changes are able to be implemented and all department areas are included.”

FUTURE PLANNING

What amenities do people desire within their reach in the workplace? What are the physical constraints? What now drives policy and attracts new talent? How has the value of workplace shifted? And what does it mean for design in the short and long term? How has the shift in behaviours from being at home impacted what we want from a workplace?

These challenges must be sensitively addressed to create a more feasible, viable, and desirable workplace environment for institutions that supports the right activities and the culture.

Changes are happening. 85% of respondents are in the process of planning or implementing blended/ agile working, with a further 10% already having implemented some type of change.

TEST AND LEARN

Many HEI's indicated running pilot programs, to trial varied models of both blended and agile working.

These pilot programs aim to trial new workplace designs and policies, identify any issues that need to be resolved and build on them.

Pilot programs seek to understand patterns of work and better defining staff & estate requirements. Findings from the pilot programs will then influence revisions to existing policies.

Interestingly, the majority of commentary suggested pilot studies would be trialled initially by nonacademic/ professional staff as case studies, prior to a wider HEI rollout.

Non-academic staff were targeted by many as the ideal test group, as many already work in an agile enabled way.

IMPLEMENTATION TIMEFRAME

Nearly 60% of respondents envisage blended working practices will be implemented before the end of 2021.

Many HEI's are trialling working pilot spaces or 'test and learn' areas, to help with planning implementation. Many are in progress and are set to be occupied from September 2021.

Pilot spaces will be used to determine the full blended working implementation plan, which will be subject to constant observation, critique and improvement, before any costly physical changes to workspace, infrastructure and IT are completed.

Wider adoption and implementation will be dependent on outcomes from staff consultations and success of the piloting trials.

One respondent noted the adoption of blended working was also dependent on how the student experience was impacted and the levels to which blended learning was adopted.

“Staff surveys issued in all departments, new ways of working project team established and work started on four “TEST AND LEARN” spaces to try new workplace designs.”

What education model is best?

THE CAMPUS IS THE BEST PLACE TO TEACH

An on-campus experience is viewed as important to students. Despite some lectures, in particular the large ones remaining online, over half of the respondents anticipated teaching will mostly be face-to-face in future (60%).

Respondents believe 60-85% of learning will be face-to-face, with the remaining teaching likely to occur online. The expectation from HEI's is that large lectures will remain online for the 2021/22 academic year.*

In the future, when campuses are fully open and not subject to periodic lock-downs, HEI's will need to find a balance not only between how much learning is completed online, but also the on-campus experience of face-to-face learning and ensuring the online experience is worthwhile and world class.

ONLINE LEARNING IS CHALLENGING FOR EVERYONE

While online learning and teaching was both convenient and necessary during 2020, the survey revealed overwhelming support for in-person contact between students and staff as a means to communicating ideas, teaching practical skills and forming friendships and future professional networks.

Online learning definitely has advantages, allowing a much wider range of knowledge leaders to contribute. They are convenient for students who are unable to make it to campus – for work, family or geographical reasons.

Many respondents expressed concern about protecting the student experience, suggesting the key was on-campus. Many saw a need to limit online seminars, due to the inability to truly connect with students in a meaningful way online.

One HEI shared they were embarking on a blended learning pilot project, trialling one course area per faculty.

For some HEI's, online learning means potential space savings, with recorded lectures and online tutorials needing less space.

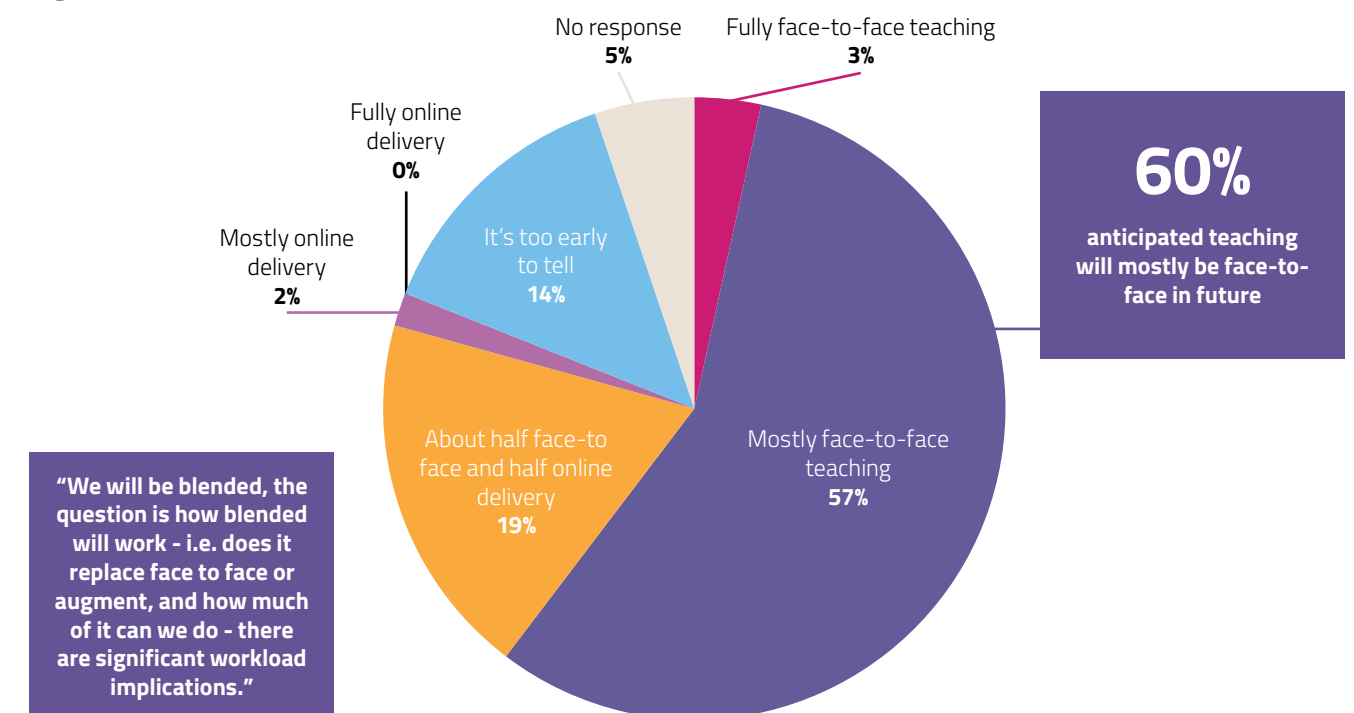
FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE

A high percentage of survey respondents indicated face-to-face teaching is vital and will remain, confirming the need for teaching spaces. A few respondents suggested a new typology of teaching spaces were also being considered to maintain the quality of both the experience and interactions between students and with teachers.

“Initial expectations are set in the context that the full value of University education is to be found in face to face teaching on campus although the environment that takes place will increasingly be in high value activity. There will likely be an ongoing conversation about the value and format of more transactional lecture formats.”

“Online teaching is convenient, but lecturers have concerns about learning quality and student engagement.”

Figure 11. Balance of face-to-face and on-line education



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*Percentage shown is the average given in the respondent commentary to the survey question.

Finding the right balance

In a world where there are relatively fewer people on campus, how can HEI's create a more interactive and collaborative environment? Finding the right balance of spaces that offers the opportunities for people to come together will be key.

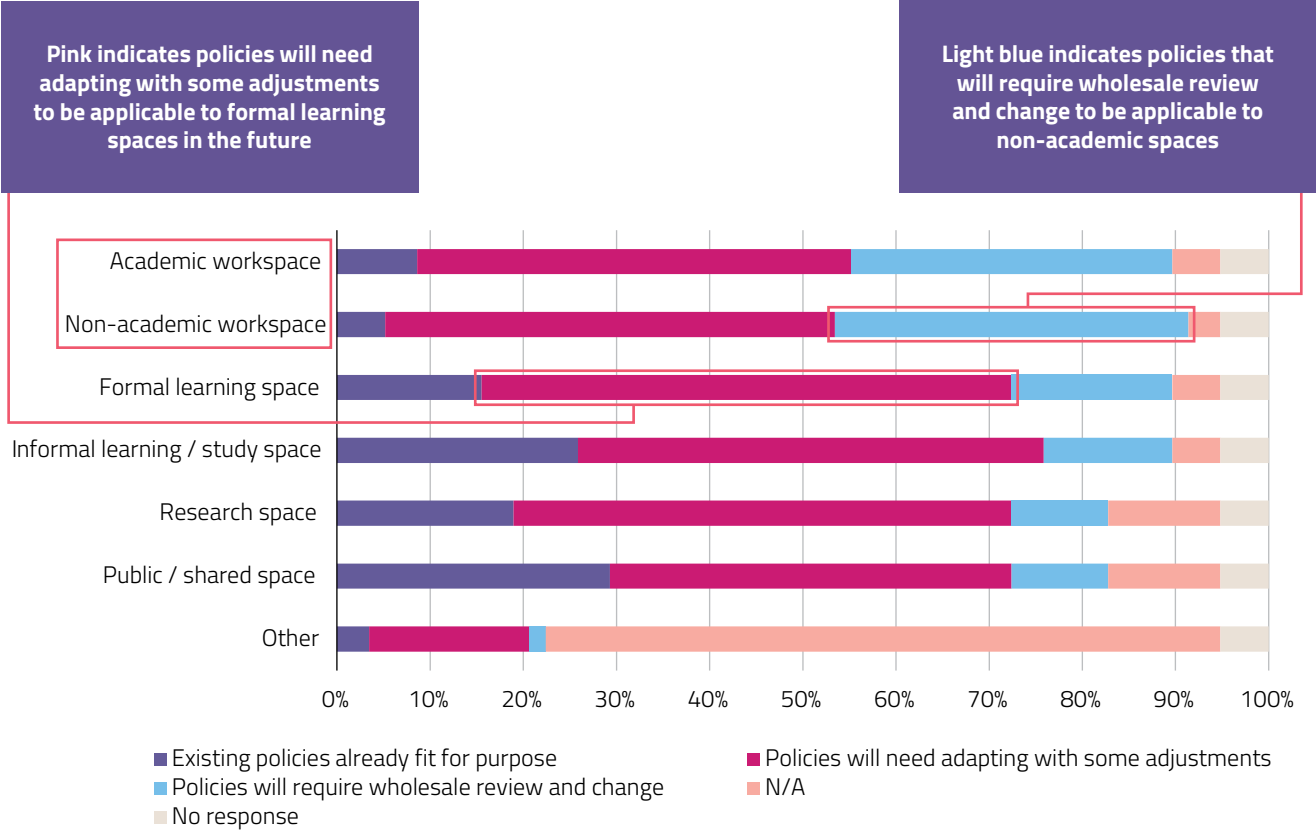
Academic and non-academic workspaces are the top space types which respondents believe the policies need to be adapted or changed.

Student focused spaces such as formal learning, informal learning and study spaces need adjustment if they are to be fit for purpose in the future.

Concerns were raised over campus IT and communications hardware specification, allocation and use, when adopting a blended work model.

There was additional commentary regarding policies relating to the student campus experience, such as green spaces on campus (how they are used) and student accommodation.

Figure 12. How current policies may apply to the post-COVID-19 workplace



TIME FOR AN OFFICE COMPROMISE?

Academic office space has been a long-standing issue for space management teams at institutions, due to under-utilisation, funding and space pressures on campus.

In a recent Hassell study about a global view of the post-pandemic university workplace, it found that most academics (72%) work from a private office, varying from a low of 55% in the UK to a high of 83% in the US.¹

In contrast, comparable data from a recent Hassell study about commercial workplaces shows only 32% of office workers around the world worked in a private office.²

Institutions can no longer justify policies that prevent staff working from home on the basis of productivity. The question must also be asked if academics can justify an exclusive space on campus, be occupied for half a working week.¹

The academic office has always been a prized and private space where confidential conversations, deep thinking, research and administration tasks can and do get done.

They also provide convenient storage for books, files, equipment and other academic paraphernalia. In the fierce competition for academic talent, they are sometimes seen as a useful enticement.¹

There are good reasons for many academics to have a private office, and there will be resistance, as there often is, to changes in space allocations and policies.

While the office perks of personal book shelves, private space and the prestige that comes with having an office on campus may not be replicated in a shared space, other benefits (working from home, equitable space allocations, window views for all, and better collaborative and social spaces) may go some way to compensating for the loss of a room of one's own.¹

LEADERSHIP ENGAGEMENT TO CHANGE

53% of respondents indicated their senior management is committed to making significant changes.

Many respondents commented that senior management had already made changes and committed to making more if necessary in the future.

1. HASSELL, 2021 People work on campus, Paper work at home. Email our research team to receive the full report

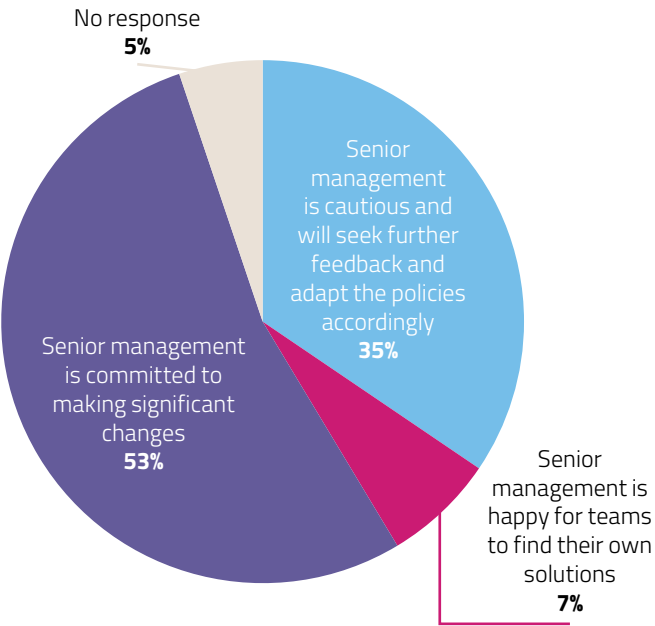
2. The Workplace Beyond 2020. <https://www.hassellstudio.com/conversation/the-workplace-beyond-2020>

"Financial pressures will now carry more weight to drive space efficiencies."

"The intention is to change policies but this is seen as a major piece of work and a large shift in corporate understanding."

"Senior management in the University have implemented wide ranging reviews of working practices with respect both to recent COVID-19 lockdown experiences and our commitment to supporting the Climate Emergency and Net Zero Carbon"

Figure 13. Senior leadership engagement in making changes to the workplace



Are we ready?

SYSTEMS AND SPACE READINESS

While digital collaboration tools in most institutions are ready to facilitate blended/agile work styles, the survey found that majority of the institutions do not have adequate tools to support them in managing their space.

The top three survey results focus on institutions being collaboration and technology ready, which is a result of staff working from home due to the pandemic. Technology and infrastructure systems were required to be ready overnight, with staff to collaborating digitally over various digital platforms.

The bottom two survey responses indicate that many institutions are not quite prepared and equipped with the tools to manage the space and new way of working.

For institutions that are not ready, a phased roll-out of spaces as required is seen as the best way forward - part of a more comprehensive and crosscampus consistent approach.

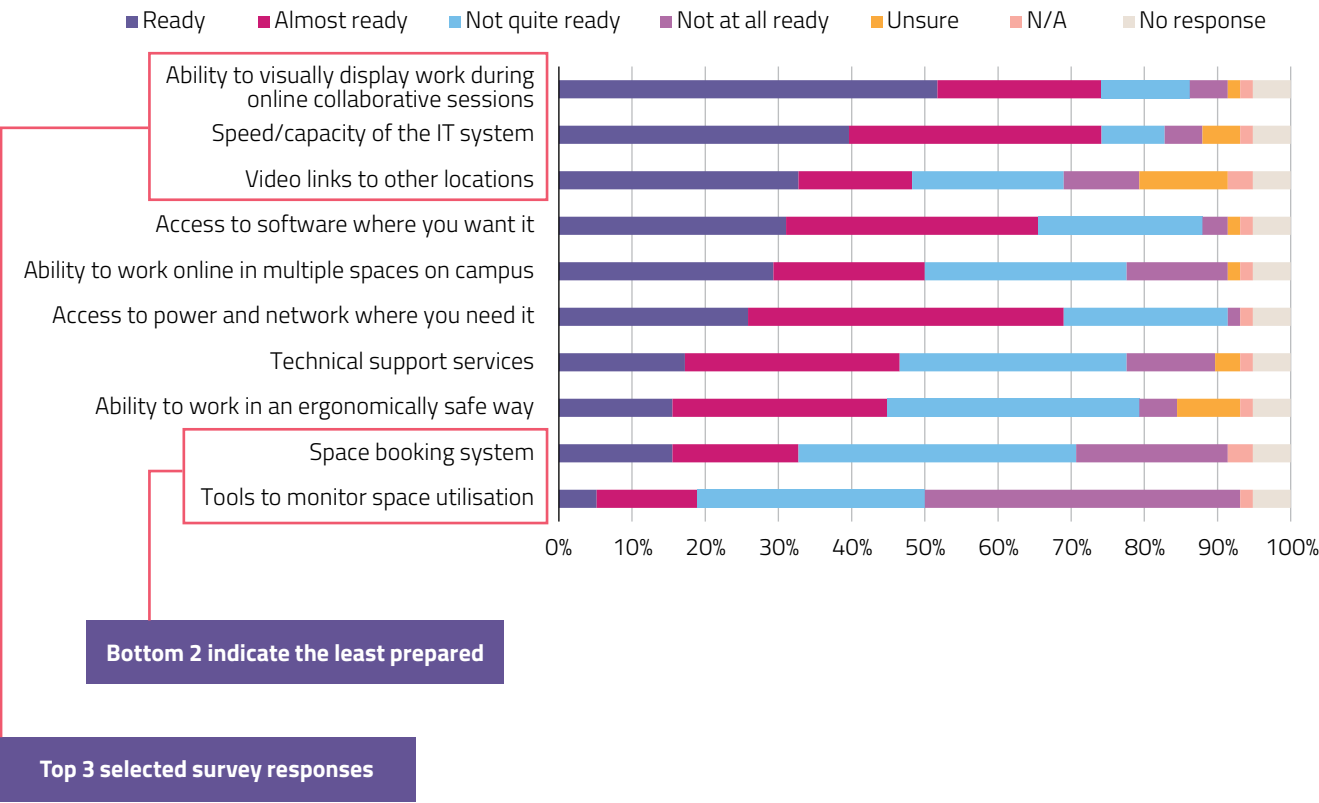
DESK BOOKING SYSTEMS

A topic of hot debate that arose from the survey was the requirement and use of desk booking systems or other tools to help monitor space utilisation, in a blended work model. Many institutions mentioned trialling various types of booking systems to enable staff access to the workspace during the pandemic, with varying levels of success. Many are still trialling different systems and approaches through pilot periods.

Institutions can work toward agreed benchmarks of office use for staff with flexible work arrangements, but must provide more bookable workspace with secure storage for academics attending campus.

Many corporate workplaces that have implemented a form of agile working manage their space and desk allocation through clever planning of zoned neighbourhoods and work ratios that work for staff and team requirements. Booking systems are generally only used for meeting.

Figure 14. How are the current workplace systems ready to facilitate blended / agile work styles



SPACE DIVIDEND

There is a high expectation that space dividends will be gained from adopting a blended/agile work style. However this will not be realised in the immediate term.

Respondents accounted the delayed implementation to staff engagement and the amount of local decisions regarding how blended/agile work styles could work for teams over the next year to inform longer-term, more coordinated projects and policies.

Interestingly a distance learning institution commented that prior to the pandemic they had the right amount of space, but given the numbers recruited during the pandemic to meet the increase in online learning, they are facing a shortage of space and considering new ways of working to accommodate the increased headcount.

FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE

Space dividends will be used to increase the provision of other space types, with teaching and learning spaces the number one choice, followed by student spaces, and social and collaboration spaces.

A summary of how institutions intended to reallocate the space dividend:

- Teaching and learning spaces
- Student spaces
- Collaboration and social spaces
- Staff spaces
- Reduction of estate space
- Student residence
- Academic spaces

Figure 16. Planned use of space dividend

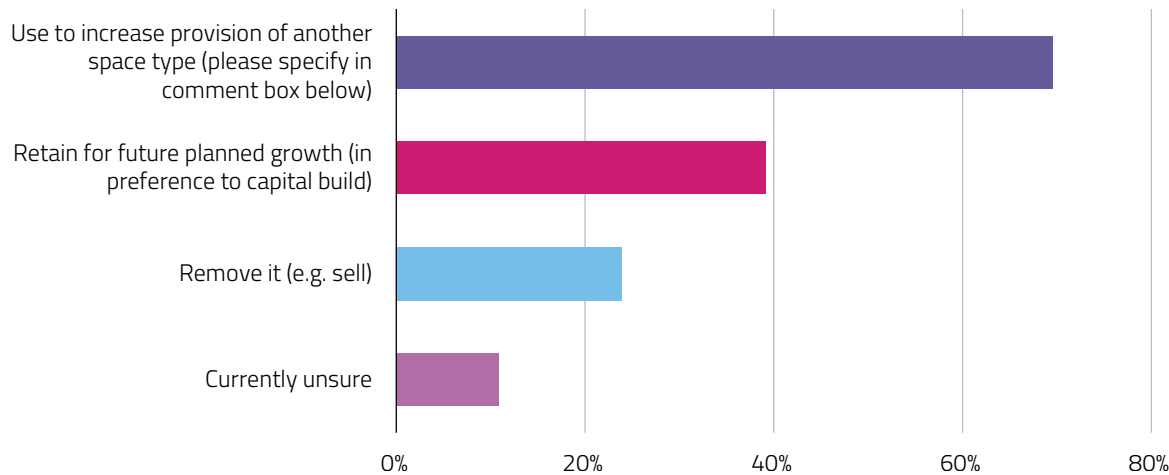
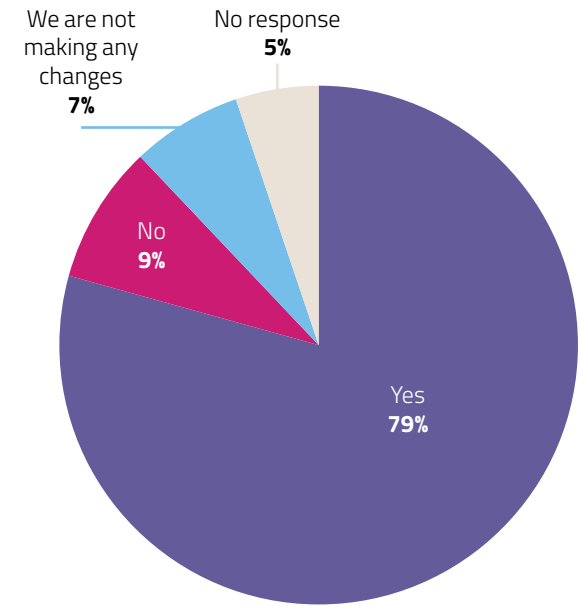


Figure 15. Expectation on potential space dividend after adopting blended/agile work style



“A shift from staff to student facing space - more flexible learning settings for sure, but still evolving our ideas on this. The space should more closely match the income profile of the University - i.e. 70% from T&L”



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The right space

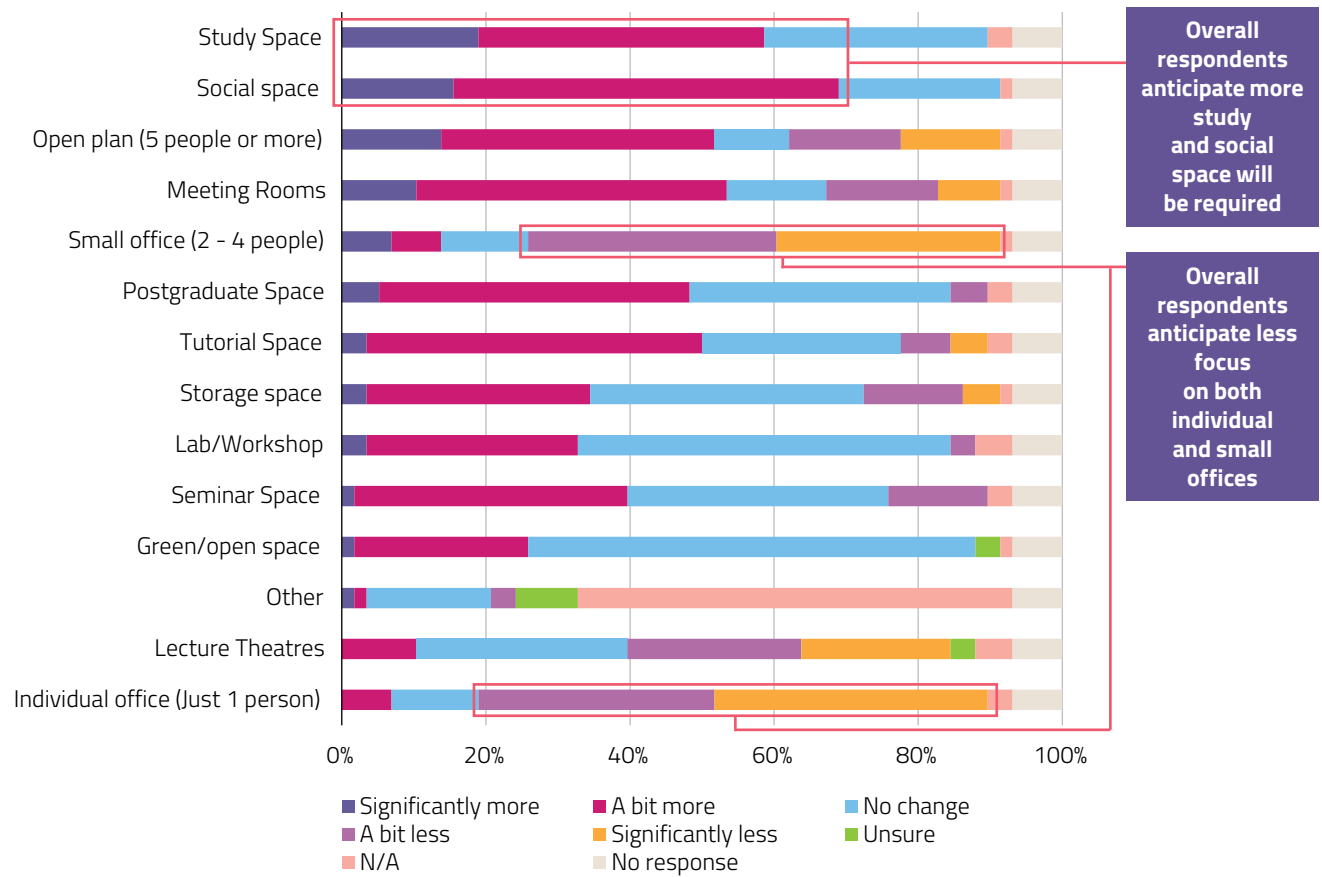
ANTICIPATED SPACE REQUIREMENT

There are a lot of studies out there about how workplaces are going to change after the upheaval of the pandemic, but very few of them are specific to universities. We know that academic workplaces are different to commercial offices. We also know that academic activities can vary considerably across the academic year, and the type of faculty.

Overall, respondents anticipate after the pandemic their institutions will require more study and social spaces, but less individual and small offices.

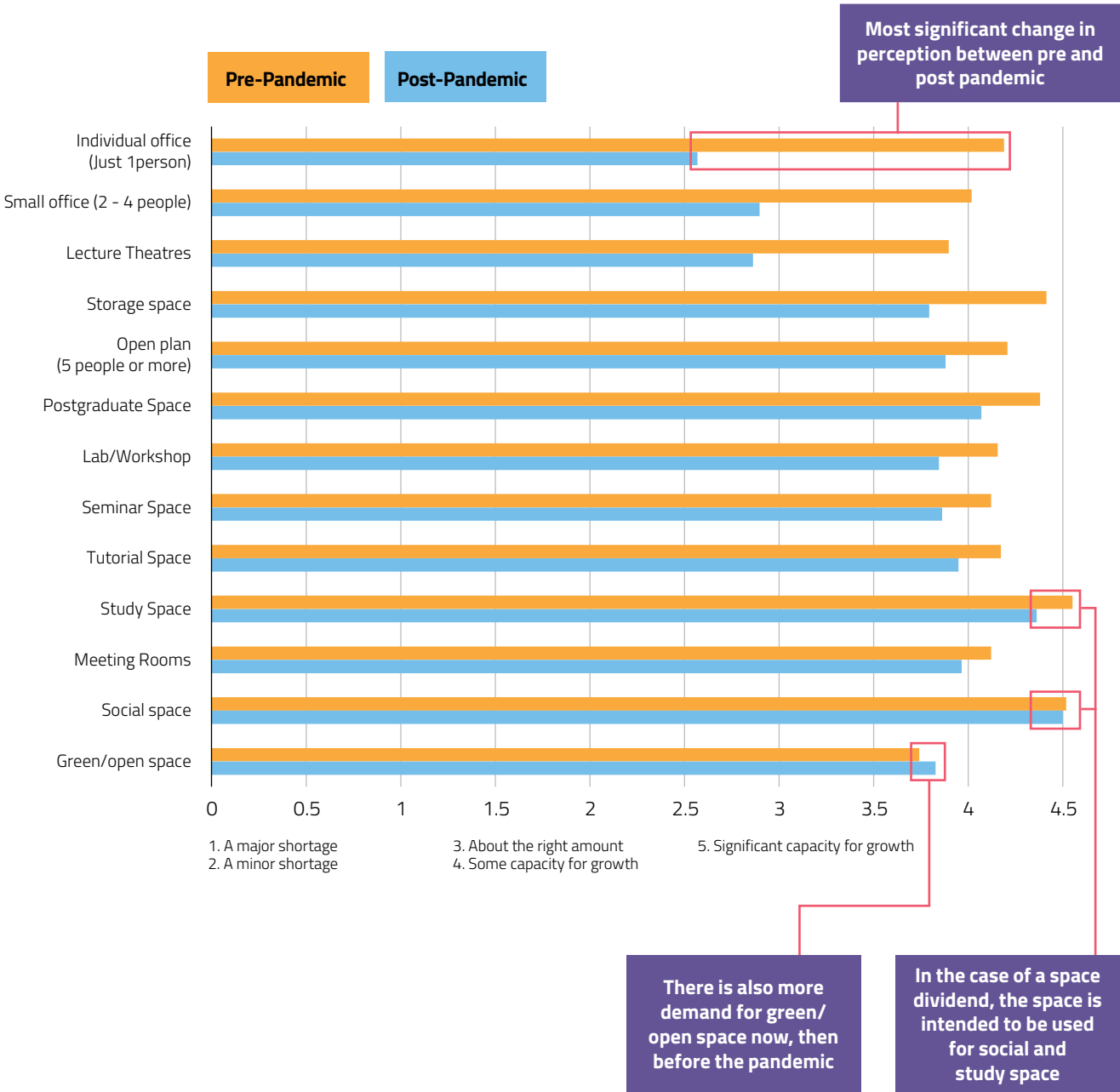
There is an increased need for more technology enabled spaces on campus, for both teaching and work - smaller rooms for synchronous online teaching and meetings.

Figure 17. Anticipated post pandemic space requirements by space type



Demand on spaces: Pre & post pandemic

Figure 18. Comparison between demand on the space pre and post pandemic



MELBOURNE LIFE SCIENCES PRECINCT,
THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA
ARCHITECT: HASSELL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY EARL CARTER

Our research shows that the campus is the place to talk and connect with students and colleagues, and, perhaps most importantly, to teach.

We compared the responses to two survey questions to understand how the pandemic changed the perception on demand for spaces. The biggest change came from the view on the need for individual offices.

The results shown to the left are ranked by size of difference (gap) between pre and post pandemic. The bigger the difference, the bigger the change in the space requirement. By viewing the blue bars, you can see the demand overall is significantly less than the pre-pandemic.



Campus remains vital

It's the beating heart of a vibrant and interactive university community; a place for sharing ideas and developing important relationships.



Teaching belongs on campus

While necessary and convenient during the pandemic, online teaching is detrimental to social and learning outcomes for students. While acknowledging some benefits, institutions are wary of a substantial shift in delivery modes.



Compromise is coming on the academic office

The pandemic has given staff time to consider a more balanced working week. It will be interesting to see in the future if staff will be willing to share their workspace in return for more time working at home.

Change is slow

IMPLEMENTING BLENDED WORKING PRACTICES

55% of respondents expressed that the implementation of blended working practices will happen campus wide. Some respondents indicated changes are mainly with the non-academic staff.

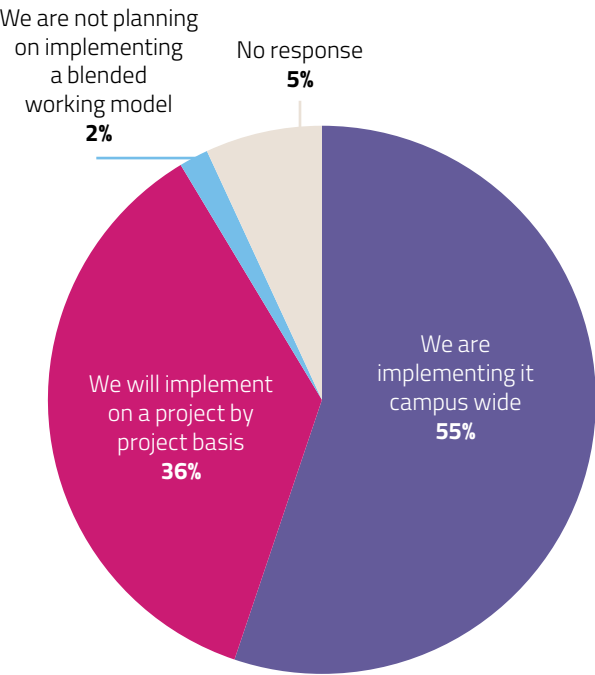
In the short term HEI's are focusing on changing the way professional and non-academic staff are working.

There is little to no commentary in regards to changing the way academic staff work. Most respondents indicated that initially it will be project by project, and wherever possible implementing blended working without making changes to the design of the existing space.

The success of pilot projects will eventually dictate how HEI's proceed with campus-wide guiding principles.

Most anticipate that all staff will work more flexibly, but in the short term they may do this from the space they historically occupied.

Figure 19. Implementing blended working practices:



“Our University Agile Working policies, (which existed before COVID-19 but are being extended now,) will apply to the whole University but there is also a more specific initial implementation in all of our Professional Services departments.”

Pivoting the workplace

DESIGN ELEMENTS

In the face of myriad pressures, many institutions are adopting the more nuanced idea of a spectrum of choices within the workplace.³

Informal collaboration spaces are the number one design element to accommodate agile/blended way of working.

The high percentages for more informal collaboration space and more lockers storage correlates with the move towards a more agile/ blended way of working, i.e. no allocated desk and the requirement for additional collaborative and focus spaces to complement this style of working.

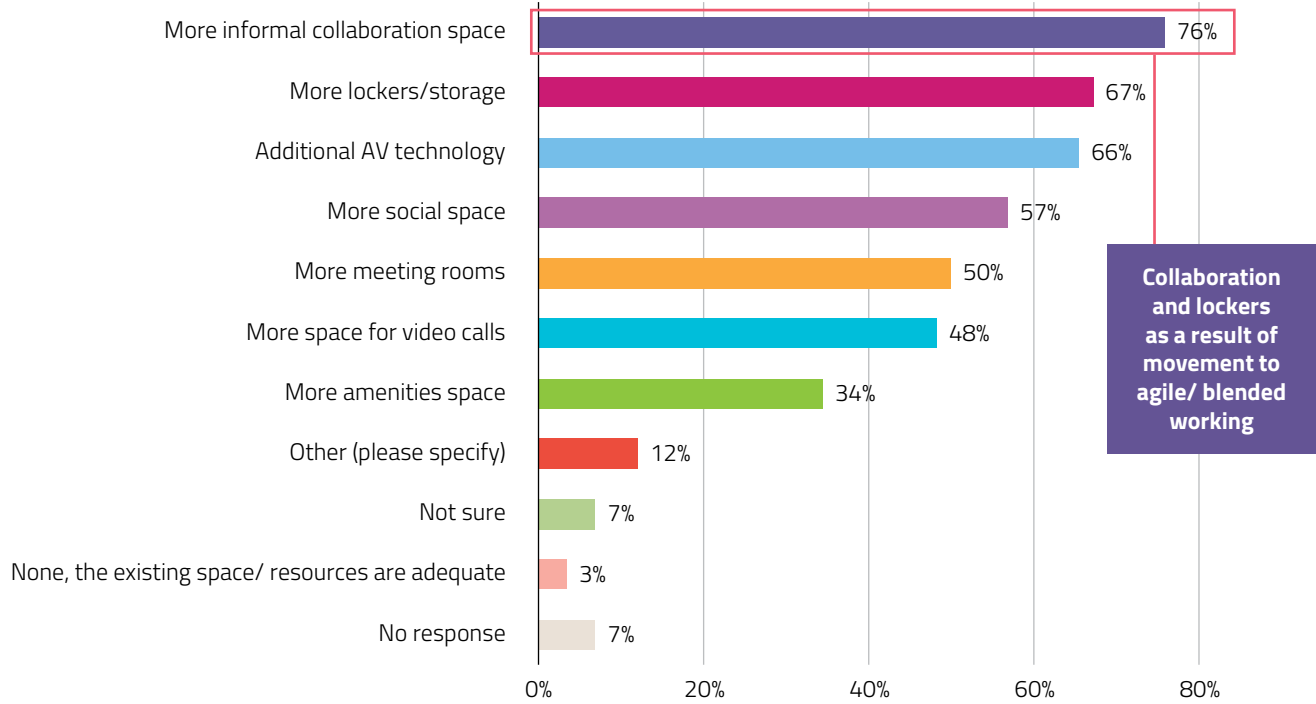
The request for more tea and breakout rooms for staff to utilise could be considered under informal collaborative spaces.

A few respondents noted the repurposing of large lecture theatres for more experiential spaces, such as performance courses, due to large lectures moving online.

Like all true dilemmas, finding a balance is the key, but just where the academic space sits along the spectrum of choices will depend on the nature of the institution and its work culture.

Figure 20. Design elements to be incorporated to accommodate agile / blended way of working

*Respondents could select more than one response to this answer.



3. HASSELL, 2020 The Future Academic Workplace <https://www.hassellstudio.com/uploads/FutureAcademicWorkplace.pdf>

Actions and Insights

To set you up for success in 2021 and beyond

MELBOURNE SCHOOL OF ENGINEERING FLEXIBLE WORK PILOT,
UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA
DESIGNER: HASSELL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICOLE ENGLAND

The new academic year

Based on the findings from the survey, the new academic year is going to be a trialling period.



Several institutions mentioned running pilots sometime between September to December.



Initial changes are going to be for the professional staff. Some have already implemented changes that they will be assessing and adjusting as required.

Even though the majority believe the future of teaching will be mostly F2F, there is still uncertainty about the ratio.

One

of the challenges is whether HEI's will have the tools to help manage the space effectively.

74%

of respondents indicated they are either 'Not quite ready' or 'Not at all ready' with tools to monitor space utilisation.

59%

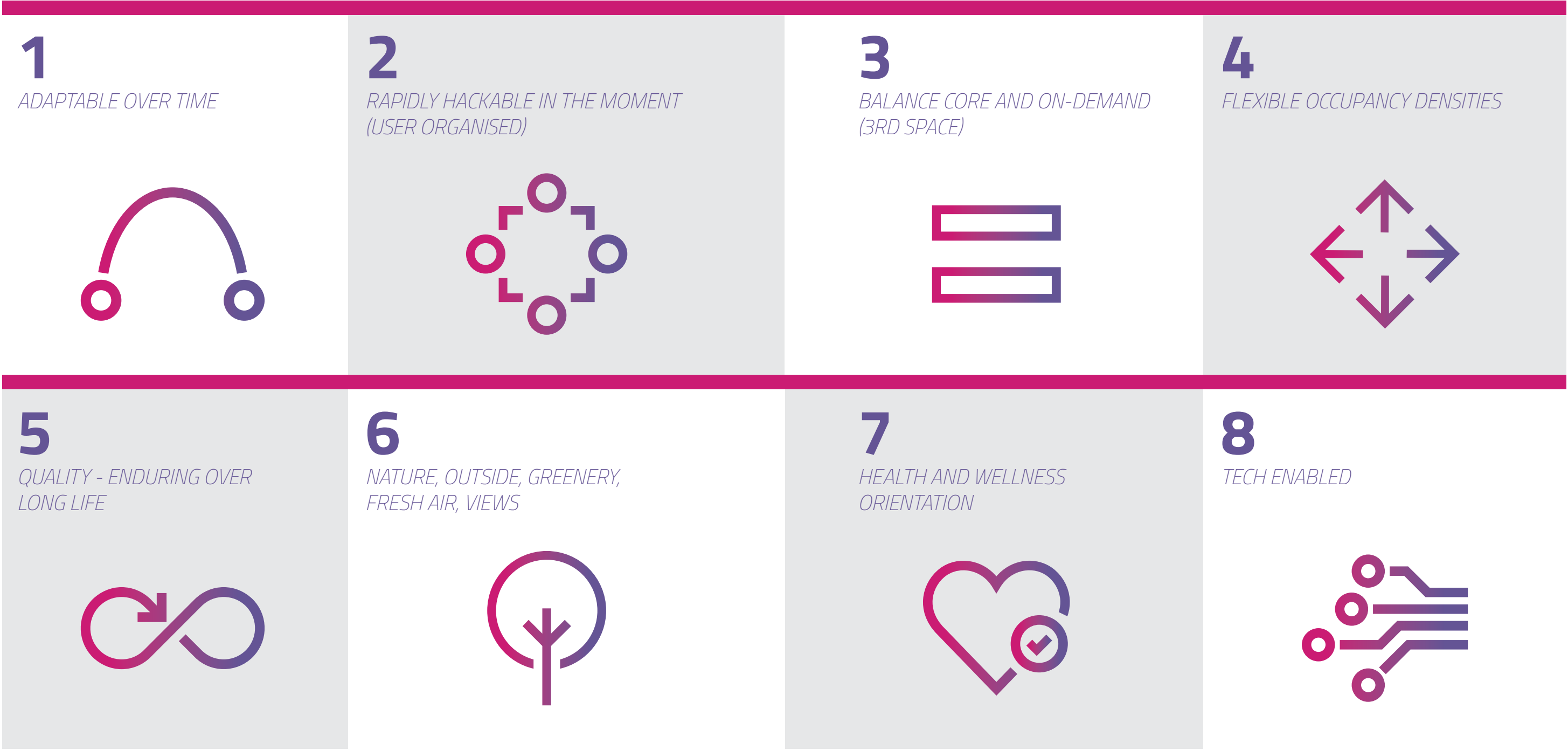
of respondents indicated they are either 'Not quite ready' or 'Not at all ready' with space booking system.

59%

of respondents envisage agile working will be implemented by the end of 2021.

Spatial resilience

Lessons for academic workplace post-COVID-19



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