

Rise of the monster campus devouring uni communities

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Compared with Britain, Europe and particularly the US, Australia is unusual in concentrating so many of its students into large universities.

The average size of a four-year college in the US is less than 5000 students, but the median size of all 39 universities in Australia is more than 20,000 equivalent full-time students.

It's easy to understand why. In the US, there are 1121 universities, or one for every 290,000 people, not including community colleges.

In Britain, there are 130 universities, or one for every 500,000 people, not including colleges of further education.

In Australia, there is one university for every 635,000 residents, virtually no college sector and more than 300,000 international students.

Unsurprisingly, six of our universities, with more than 40,000 students on one campus, are among the most populous university campuses anywhere in the world, ranking with the largest in the US.

Unlike most large campuses in the US, where nearly all first years and many second years live on campus, most domestic students in Australia are expected to commute.

At the other end of the scale, Central Queensland University has spread less than 13,774

students in 2016 (measured in full-time equivalent terms to take account of part-timers) across 16 campuses, only eight of which could be described as being in central Queensland. The CQU campus in Perth opened last year.

The freedom universities have enjoyed under the demand-driven system to set targets for enrolments and make decisions about their capital spending certainly has had interesting consequences, with two key approaches evident.

Most of the Group of Eight universities, as well as Macquarie, RMIT and University of Technology Sydney, are expanding their main campuses as fast as they can, while other universities are attempting to attract more students by opening additional campuses in widely dispersed locations.

For example, Western Sydney University operates six main teaching campuses across the western suburbs of Sydney to service the equivalent of about 35,000 full-time students while University of NSW effectively has one campus to do the same thing.

Large campuses can be good for the university bottom line, but the evidence seems to show that they are not that great for students. In Australia, very large campuses appear to be associated with lower rankings for student experience, as measured by the federal government's Quality Indicators in Learning and Teaching.

In NSW, WSU has a higher QILT score than UNSW or the University of Sydney. Similarly, in Victoria, Deakin with four moderate-sized campuses, has a higher QILT score than Monash or the University of Melbourne.

The top QILT performer in Australia is Bond University with a single small campus. Edith Cowan University in Western Australia, with three smaller campuses, also is a standout.

This is not to say that campus size is the sole determinant of QILT performance; University of Queensland and Macquarie deliver good results from larger campuses, but these are the exceptions rather than the rule. The same character of results are visible in the US and Britain.

Campuses of middling size, particularly those offering lots of student accommodation, tend to dominate the rankings for student experience. Is it any accident that of the top 100 universities

in the Academic Ranking of World Universities, most have fewer than 15,000 undergraduates?

Clearly, the most compelling advantages of a place-based university — the capacity to meet people, to make friends and participate in extra-curricular activities — are compromised by long commutes and jumbo-sized cohorts.

Similarly, very small campuses do not provide course variety or activation. According to the 2016 Student Experience Survey national report (published on the QILT website), Australia appears to lag the US and Britain on student experience.

Exactly why is not clear but it seems reasonable to suspect that campus size and the lack of on-campus student accommodation may have something to do with it. A proper study of this urgently is required.

It also needs to be noted that the location of some Australian campuses is hardly ideal. Many universities were allocated cheap land by cash-strapped state governments in the 1960s. As a result, Monash University's Clayton campus is in the backblocks of southeast Melbourne with no rail or tram connections. UNSW's Kensington campus is on an ex-army base that was supposed to have a heavy rail connection 40 years ago that was never built.

Providing public transport to campuses that have grown large in poor locations is expensive. The Berejiklian government in NSW is spending more than \$2.1 billion to deliver a light rail system with UNSW Kensington as the anchor at its southern end.

In Melbourne, the Andrews government has just announced an investigation into a similar project for Monash Clayton. It would not be surprising if another \$1bn or so were required to deliver this, if it ever goes ahead. It seems relevant to observe that a new campus to accommodate 15,000 students and a substantial research effort in a location close to public transport could be delivered for about \$1bn.

The trend to ever larger campuses for those universities with substantial research efforts is likely to continue while commonwealth funding arrangements allow universities to use student income to subsidise research.

Having flirted with the idea of putting a lid on enrolments by being more selective about their

students before the collapse of the 2014 Pyne “reforms”, Sydney, UNSW, Monash and Melbourne have all committed to growing larger as quickly as they can. Some of the numbers being bandied about are frightening.

The federal government should not allow campuses to grow indefinitely, particularly where the cost of coping with this growth is borne mainly by taxpayers rather than the university.

There is no rational reason a single university campus should grow larger than 30,000 full-time equivalent students, and only those campuses that are located within walking distance of transport hubs or have large amounts of student accommodation should be candidates to grow to this size.

By the same token, the government must be wary of campus proliferation. Small campuses offering cherrypicked courses to generate revenue are unlikely to lead to good outcomes for students or the sector.

Relatively few Australian campuses are in the sweet spot between 10,000 and 20,000 students, big enough to guarantee diversity, activation and operational savings but small enough to ensure most unit cohorts are not so large that teaching academics give up on learning student names.

Government policy should encourage a more sensible approach to campus development with the most urgent priority being to stop the growth of mega-campuses simply to generate revenue.

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