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Exploring the Idea of a Community Embedded University in Regional and Rural Australia

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Abstract

A persistent issue in Australia, and globally, is how to improve participation rates in higher education for students from regional and rural areas. In this paper, we tackle this challenge by exploring the idea of a Community Embedded University (CEU). We draw on empirical data from three participatory co-design workshops with university students ($n = 15$) and staff ($n = 6$), to provoke discussion on what a CEU model might look like, the activities it might engage in, and how it would collaborate with local communities to create stronger partnerships and support student engagement. Through our study, we identify key value propositions to a CEU, including fostering students' sense of belongingness and opportunities to engage in relationship-rich pedagogy through community-university collaborative teaching. However, we also identify several challenges to enacting a CEU, such as complexities relating to distributed power-sharing and decision-making, and how to situate learning experiences in place while maintaining flexible learning spaces. We propose that, while the idea of a CEU may remain an idealised model, our outlined principles to creating a CEU may be a useful framework for universities to reflect upon and consider how they engage with their local communities.

Keywords: *widening participation, higher education, community-university partnerships, regional and rural students, regional university centres, participatory design*

Introduction

When scholars and policymakers imagine future models of higher education, they often do so through the language of scale or breadth. They write, or speak, about the internationalisation of higher education or global universities that can traverse borders and cultures (e.g., Altbach et al., 2019; de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Mittelmeier et al., 2019). Increasingly, the discussion is mediated by the potential of technology, to create “hyper-hybrid” learning experiences for students (Nørgård

& Hilli, 2022, p. 26; Skulmowski & Rey, 2020), where students can study from anywhere, at anytime, to suit their preferences.

However, to date, the many iterations of the modern university have largely failed to improve the rates of higher education participation for regional and rural students. In Australia, for example, sustained research finds that regional and rural students continue to participate less in higher education than their metropolitan-based peers (Cardak et al., 2017; Michalski et al., 2017; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). People from regional and rural areas comprise approximately 28% of the population, but only 20.6% of the university cohort (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018; Koshy, 2019). This indicates that the access ratio (the ratio of students from regional and rural areas to students from the overall Australian population) is 73%. This disparity persists in Australia, even after 2012 when the cap on undergraduate enrolments was lifted through the introduction of the demand-driven system (Burnheim & Harvey, 2016).

In this paper, we purposefully provide an alternative to the outwardly global, far-reaching university, and explore the idea of a university that is strongly connected to the local places upon which it is situated and the identities of its local communities. We pursue the exploration of this university model, coined here as the Community Embedded University (CEU), to provoke ideas and discussion on how universities could improve the participation of equity-deserving cohorts in higher education and yield stronger, more reciprocally beneficial relationships with local communities. Influencing our study is continued research that finds wide-ranging barriers to the participation and/or completion of university for regional and rural students, including logistical, geographical, financial and emotional barriers (Burke et al., 2017; Halsey, 2019). Recent studies exploring the impact of COVID-19 on regional and rural students found heightened equity issues during this time, such as limited internet connectivity and a lack of wellbeing and practical support (Cook et al., 2022; O'Shea et al., 2021).

Our study also seeks to address the ongoing awareness from scholars that solutions to improve regional and rural student participation in higher education need to run deeper than modifying entry pathways or providing one-off moving expenses; instead it would seem important to explore how universities could reposition themselves as valuable partners with their local communities (Carrillo-Higueras & Walton, 2020; Dollinger et al., 2021; Gore et al., 2017; Naphthine et al., 2019; O'Shea et al., 2021).

Our paper begins with an introduction to the context of Australian regional and rural student participation in higher education. We then present our approach to exploring the idea of a CEU through a series of three participatory, co-design workshops with students and staff. We used a framework to help workshop participants consider political, economic, social, technological, environmental, and legal aspects (the PESTLE framework; see Aguilar, 1967), thus exploring trends in local communities that might drive a CEU model. Our findings indicate that the enactment of a CEU is challenging, although not without merit.

Regional and Rural Student Participation in Australian Higher Education

In Australia, approximately 7 million people (28% of the population) live in regional or rural communities, many of which exhibit geographical dispersion and isolation (Bradley et al., 2020; Partridge et al., 2021). Barriers to higher education for those living in these locations are multi-faceted and often interrelated, and span financial, personal and logistical challenges which may be further compounded by low socioeconomic status (Chesters & Cuervo, 2022; Cook et al., 2022; Fleming & Grace, 2017). As many researchers have noted, these circumstances and experiences may influence students' subsequent aspirations or (un)imagined futures (Fleming & Grace, 2017; Fray et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2016). Because of their school experiences and sociocultural environments, as well as personal factors (Gemici et al., 2014; Zipin et al., 2015), regional and rural students may hold different educational preferences from their metropolitan peers and find that

access to opportunities and educational resources is challenging (Akos et al., 2007; Birks et al., 2010; Yates et al., 2017). While aspirations for higher education may be influenced by university visits and other outreach programs (Walton & Carrillo-Higueras, 2019), aspirations for young people often start at a younger age than when career-specific guidance begins (Gore et al., 2015, 2017; Mahat et al., 2022).

Unfortunately, even when regional and rural students do participate in higher education, barriers may persist, most significantly through a perception that they do not belong. As Crawford and McKenzie (2022) argued, the logistical challenges to higher education, such as fees and long-driving times to reach a campus, often manifest within students as a lack of belongingness at university (i.e., non-belonging). When students do overcome the barriers to enrol and feel included in the university community, it ultimately feels like university is not for them (Crawford & McKenzie, 2022). Regional and rural students may also feel anxiety due to separation from their family (King et al., 2015), and have the perception that their family may not be supportive of their decision to study at university (Devlin & McKay, 2017; James, 2001), particularly if they have had to leave their local community to do so.

In Australia, a relatively new approach to better include regional and rural students in higher education has been through the creation of Regional University Centres (RUCs). First established in the 2018–2019 Australian Government budget after a national review (Naphthine et al., 2019), RUCs provide a physically closer site of learning for many regional and rural students and include a range of services such as study support, as well as study spaces and high-speed internet (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023). Emerging evidence suggests that RUCs may be a key mechanism for improving regional and rural student participation in higher education, with King et al. (2022) finding that high school students were more likely to consider studying online with the help of a RUC. Stone et al. (2022) also reviewed the impact of RUCs, with their findings indicating students' improved sense of belonging to a learning community and greater access to academic skills support.

However, as recently discussed by Professor Robert Brown who served as CQUniversity's National Director of RUCs, relatively few universities currently offer study through RUCs and they often do so at a loss. CQUniversity, for example, has the largest RUC-enrolled cohort of any university, with approximately 420 students in 2021 across six partner RUC campuses, making up only 1.3% of CQUniversity's total student population (Brown, 2022).

In this study, we build on the existing research on how universities can strengthen partnerships with local communities by exploring the idea of a CEU. We draw on sustained research, including Crawford and McKenzie (2022) and the recent positive findings from RUC evaluations (King et al., 2022; Stone et al., 2022), to suggest that a place-based university model, where study offerings are situated within the local community, is a key mechanism to improving regional and rural student participation.

The Context of Study and the Methods

In this study, we wanted to explore the idea of a CEU with university students and staff. The empirical data collection took place in May 2022 in Victoria, Australia, at a university in the Australian Technology Network. This was part of a broader project funded by Advance HE (a member-based organisation that supports higher education) to explore the future student experience. The university has several campuses across the state of Victoria, with 21% of students studying regionally and a significant proportion of online students (32%).

The research team came to this study with a shared interest in student equity in higher education. Their varied interests in student pathways, constraints and enablers in relation to students' personal goals, and how pathways might be improved for students in regional and rural locations underpin this research.

Following institutional human ethics clearance (HEA-22-014), data collection took place during three participatory co-design workshops, using the CoLabs method (Dollinger & Vanderlelie, 2021). The participants were 15 students and six staff (N = 21). Students were recruited via the university student blog and a university students-as-partners program. They were asked how they identified: metropolitan, regional, or rural or remote. The participants represented a mixture of metropolitan (n = 9) and regional (n = 6) students. No participants identified as rural or remote. Originally, we aimed to recruit only regional and rural/remote students, but students who self-reported as metropolitan also signed up for the study. It is unclear if they were originally from regional or rural areas and now lived in metropolitan areas, and therefore selected that choice on the pre-survey. Staff were invited to participate through their faculty leadership, again with representation from staff who identified as from a metropolitan area (n = 2) and regional areas (n = 4). We were mindful that some participants may have relocated as a result of the COVID-19 lockdowns. Because this time was difficult for many, we decided not to interrogate the details of the locations stated by the participants.

Data were collected during the workshops, which were of 90 minutes duration and were hosted by authors Dollinger and Piskiewicz. The workshops were hosted online on Zoom in conjunction with an online collaborative whiteboard platform called Miro (see Miro, 2023). Students were reimbursed for their time, whereas staff were not. Students and staff selected a workshop time to attend. Each workshop followed the same protocol of activities (see Table 1), guiding the participants through a scaffolded set of exercises. In particular, the workshops aimed to spur reflection on a CEU model and consider the benefits or challenges of enacting such a model.

Table 1: Overview of Workshop Protocol

Activity	Description
Activity 1: Defining a community embedded university	In this activity we asked participants to share their conceptualisations of a Community Embedded University. Question prompts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What values/words underpin your community? • What values/words underpin a university? • How would you define a Community Embedded University (CEU)?
Activity 2: Fast forward to 2035	Using the PESTLE framework, participants were asked to reflect on what problem(s) were facing their local communities, from now until 2035 (e.g., climate change, new train line).
Activity 3: Imagining the role of a CEU	Reflecting on the issues raised in Activity 2, participants discussed and brainstormed: How could/would a CEU address these various problems?
Activity 4: Benefits and challenges	Looking at the activities that have been suggested in Activity 3, what would be the benefits and challenges of achieving this/creating a CEU?
Activity 5: Reflecting on defining a CEU	Participants reflected on their original definitions of a CEU at the beginning of the workshop: Has this definition changed?

To begin each workshop, we asked participants to conceptualise a CEU. To help scaffold this activity, we first asked participants to reflect on community versus university values and to submit their responses via Miroboard post-it notes. As can be seen in Table 1, the PESTLE framework (first developed by Aguilar, 1967) was used to guide the participants' responses to Activity 2. The workshop activities enabled us to get the participants thinking and talking about the notion of a CEU and to post responses using the Miroboard post-it-notes functionality. The

workshops were audio-recorded and transcribed to provide data relating to the discussions that the participants engaged in.

Following data collection, all data were organised by the activity. Each researcher then independently analysed the data thematically, using Bazeley's (2009) three-step coding process of describe, compare, and relate. This coding was done using Excel, and we shared our coding with each other afterwards. Alongside the Excel spreadsheets, we also created a word document to accompany us as we independently coded. This had questions such as "What are your key reflections from the data collected from Activity 1?"

We then met as a research team, to go through each activity and the themes we had identified, until consensus was achieved and linked back to scholarly literature. Please note that, in the discussion of our findings, we do not prescribe pseudonyms to participants, as data were collected both orally and through anonymous Miroboard submissions. This meant that we could not attribute each piece of data to a specific participant.

Findings

In this section, we will discuss the key themes that were developed from the workshops with participants. We will discuss the findings across three dimensions: 1) participants' definitions of a CEU, including key values or principles, 2) the practices that participants suggested a CEU would embed, both in and outside the classroom, and 3) participants' perceived challenges and benefits of enacting a CEU.

Participants' Initial Definitions of a CEU

In Activity 1, the participants were asked to reflect on community versus university values. While a few values overlapped for both community and university (e.g., collaboration and respect), other values were markedly different with many participants seeing communities, rather than universities, as networks of relationships. To illustrate, of the 55 community values that were submitted by participants across three workshops, over half (31 of 55, 56%) related to relationships with others. Submissions included "loyalty," "love," "trust" and "being there." A further 20 of the community value submissions related to inclusion, such as "diversity," "welcoming" and "sharing resources," while only four submissions related to learning or growing, such as "development," "creativity" and "questioning."

In contrast, the values submitted for universities were centred on knowledge creation or learning, with almost half (27 of 58, 47%) related to this theme, including "love of learning," "learning how to think," and "source of new knowledge." The second most common theme for community values was around respectful environments, including "cultural understanding" and "equal opportunity" with 18 (of 58) submissions (31%). Finally, the third theme with 13 (of 58) submissions (22%) related to innovation or change, such as "new ideas frontier" and "transformation." When comparing the difference in themes, participants' predominantly saw universities as places where you learn independently, albeit in inclusive and innovative ways, and communities as places where you connect with others and as sources of communal support.

Translating these values to definitions, participants conceptualised a CEU as a collaborative, safe space that would bring together diverse expertise. As one participant submitted, a CEU was "an organisation focused on building respectful relationships amongst members and the environment, fostering connections to share knowledge and learning." Another participant conceptualised the merging of a university with community as "a group of people sharing a common goal to achieve together." Participants in the activity also emphasised through their responses that a CEU would be a university that adapted to local contexts; for example, "staff create connections with regions where courses are in need." Another submission described such a university as "one where our research and teaching is linked to various communities." A third theme identified from

participants' conceptualisations, probably heightened due to the COVID-19 pandemic, was also around a CEU as being a blended online and physical space, that traverses boundaries. As one participant submitted: *"a university that comes to me (a university without walls)."* Another stated: *"a shared space for formal learning outside of a traditional campus."*

Situating the CEU model in the Context of Community

In the workshops, we also sought to collect participants' ideas on what issues their local communities faced, and how a CEU model might help address, or even alleviate, these issues within communities. We began Activity 2 by first asking participants to submit challenges their local communities currently faced or may face by 2035. We asked participants to organise their submissions using the PESTLE framework. Because the participants were from a range of backgrounds (metropolitan and regional), their ideas of *local* varied. This resulted in 84 submissions spread across economic (31, 37%), technological (24, 29%), environmental (16, 19%) and other, including political, legal and social (13, 15%).

As the findings indicated, economic issues were often top of mind for participants, including *"less certainty around job security," "increase in freelance,"* and *"the great resignation."* However, many economic issues also blended with the theme of technology, highlighting the intersectionality between these two spheres; for example, *"personalised and flexible learning opportunities to respond to students who work shifts and multiple jobs"* and *"less focus on soft skills and talking to people, due to a greater reliance on technology."* Other issues for local communities that arose included responses around emergency response applications, linking to the 2020 Australian bushfires and *"the centralisation of physical services compounding access issues for regional and remote communities."* Submissions related to the environment also included *"less farmers, less food"* and a *"growing consciousness of an individual's footprint on the environment."* Other issues from participants across political, legal and social dimensions also included the desire for the corporate sector to be more ethical, reduce the growing class divide between rich and poor, and improve the family violence system.

In the second part of the activity, we prompted participants to reflect on what a CEU might do to support communities facing these challenges. Participants submitted an array of suggestions, ranging from more placement opportunities for students to the sharing of resources across universities and communities (e.g., shared loaning libraries). Other suggestions included *"offering digital literacy courses to community members," "co-teaching between academics and professionals,"* and providing equipment (e.g., *"drones during large bushfires to enable more people to assess the fire"*).

A central thread running through these suggestions was also the emphasis on partnership and collaboration between the community and the CEU. To illustrate, participants touched on a need for university and community members to engage in reciprocal learning. One participant submitted: *"two-way learning approaches,"* and another: *"not just a top down (ivory tower) approach but to grow knowledge from the ground up."* Responses also included practical suggestions to build connections between a CEU and community, such as *"use local newspapers to share more about what the universities are like," "more pathways from vocational or training providers,"* and *"regular consultation and co-design with diverse communities to better improve teaching and services."*

Challenges and Benefits of Enacting a CEU

In the final activity of the workshop, we asked participants to consider the ideas they generated about how a CEU would work with communities, to reflect on the challenges and benefits. In Table 2, we highlight a selection of the actions for a CEU that were discussed, as well as participants' reflections on the benefits and challenges.

Table 2: Participants' Reflections on the Benefits and Challenges of Enacting a CEU

Action for a CEU	Potential Benefits	Potential Challenges
Increase opportunities for work and placements in regional and/or rural areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using student accommodation to host internships/placements. Expands world view and may even encourage more motivation to work regionally or rurally upon graduation. Supports regional and rural communities. Enhances employability skills in young community members. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Need to be supported in a new community. Are they completely on their own with little-known relationships? Placements are usually unpaid. Could they be paid? For metro students, this may mean complete loss of income if they have to live elsewhere for a semester and cannot attend normal jobs.
Student-driven solutions for local case studies e.g., agriculture students solving a local problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students gain context and understanding about different communities and are required to perform in-depth research. Students could bring new ways of thinking that utilise modern methods. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local communities are not without agency and are not damsels-in-distress. They need to be treated with respect for their ability to solve problems. Making sure this work is properly documented and can be used for future job applications.
Important to begin with the experience of participants in the local context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensures what is taught is actually helpful and relevant to learners. Not just a top-down (ivory tower) approach but to grow knowledge from the ground up. Learning together as a group. No forms of discrimination and inequity from Indigenous communities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Too many opinions. Could be issues around diversity and experience.

Note: The table is made up of direct submissions on Miroboard from participants using the post-it function.

As can be seen in Table 2, participants identified a wide range of benefits and challenges to actions that could be undertaken through a CEU model. For example, while participants saw the value in offering more local placements to students, including in regional or rural areas, they also saw challenges; for example: How would students be supported, both socially and financially, in regional or rural areas? And how would regional or rural placements (i.e., work-integrated learning placements) affect students' potentially metropolitan-based commitments around other study, part-time work, or accommodation? Similarly, participants also stressed the importance of maintaining a positive narrative about the value of local communities (see also Mahat et al., 2022), and that actions undertaken by a CEU should be seen as collaborative. As one participant submitted, "*local communities are not without agency and are not damsels-in-distress.*" Further, while participants saw the value of integrating local communities' expertise and perspectives

within a CEU model, they also noted concerns over too many opinions and potential issues around diversity or various experiences.

Other challenges for enacting a CEU that were discussed related to reconceptualising the role of the teacher. For example, participants suggested that actions undertaken by a CEU could be dismantling the traditional roles of teacher versus student and creating a learning environment where everyone is seen as a learner. Yet, while participants saw value in this idea and how a greater number of people could contribute expertise, one participant submitted a note that it would “*disrupt the power relationships and practices.*” Another participant similarly added that there would be “*challenges in ensuring mutual respect between students and staff.*” Participants also reflected on the challenges that would arise from a CEU that dually delivered online and face-to-face learning experiences. While participants saw value in flexible study options, such as greater opportunities for people to engage in university if they had work or carer responsibilities or did not want to relocate to a city campus, submissions also reflected on the “*need to ensure student outcomes are still delivered,*” and “*less connection to the university experience if it’s through a screen.*”

To end the workshop, we invited participants to share how their initial conceptualisations and definitions of a CEU might have changed as a result of the workshop discussions. While most participants indicated no change, a few took the opportunity to once again emphasise that people and relationships would be at the heart of a CEU model. To illustrate, one submission was “*value who and what is around you, provide an inclusive learning opportunity for all,*” and another said “*with not for – about a community,*” highlighting the importance of authentic partnerships in enacting a CEU model.

Defining a CEU

Through the analysis of our data, we defined a CEU as striving to create 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. Emphasised in this definition is the importance of co-creating value for, and of, the university across students, staff, and local communities and industry partners. This could involve collaborating across stakeholder groups to consider what research priorities the university would take or how course offerings could align to local communities’ needs and/or gaps in the labour market.

The data suggested that a CEU should be guided by five key principles:

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.

We suggest that the five principles may be a useful lens for universities to consider their current state-of-play and how they might partner with local communities and support regional and/or rural students. As discussed through our research, we also stress the potential value propositions that may arise from a CEU model or approach, including supporting a positive narrative about the community, strengthening local industry networks, and providing students with the opportunity to learn about local knowledges and engage with curriculum that aligns to local identities. We also suggest the benefits of a CEU for academics and the university, such as a chance to enact a relationship-rich pedagogy through collaborative teaching and improved reputational status among local communities. Finally, the benefits for local communities could include a pathway

towards shared decision-making and authentic partnerships, and a greater ability to apply the various benefits of a close university partner, such as targeted research, skill development and job pathways.

Limitations and Future Research

We note here, however, the limitations of our findings: that this is a pilot study and, despite the rich data provided by our participants, it nonetheless represents a small sample taken from a single institution in Australia. Further, we were unable to attract any student participants who identified as rural. Although they make up a relatively small proportion of the students at the institution where the study took place, their insights would have been a valuable contribution to how a CEU would manifest in rural contexts.

We encourage future research to build on the findings presented here through greater sample sizes and engagement with participants from industry and community. With a larger sample size, we would also encourage future researchers to explore how specific student cohorts (e.g., regional versus rural, or student differences across year-level or gender) may conceptualise engagement with the university differently and how that might impact their desires and ideal support.

We also highlight that our sample was from the state of Victoria and, therefore, offers a very different context from locations such as Western Australia or the Northern Territory. These states are larger and have fewer towns and cities, many areas that would be defined as rural and/or remote, and a greater number of Indigenous communities. Such contextual differences raise questions about how a CEU model might be perceived in different locations.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our study has prompted several important considerations for universities seeking to improve or develop their local community engagement, or for researchers reflecting on the value of higher education. The first is a question of image, where universities, as described by our participants, are not seen to be places of support or relationships. Instead, our participants saw universities as transactional places, where students evidence their learning and gain qualifications, and where their roles are defined in the traditional teacher-student dyad. In other words, students learn, teachers teach. Further, while participants spoke of encouragement to be creative and to analyse critically, the university community itself was not thought to encourage values like loyalty, trust, or comfort.

There are two ways to interpret this finding. On the one hand, the fundamental mission and responsibility of universities is undoubtedly to help people learn and provide credentials that certify evidence of their learning to others. Yet, on the other hand, the modern university, as discussed by Barnett (2000, 2011) and more recently by Nørgård and Bengtsen (2021), is increasingly posited to have a remit far beyond learning minimum standards and credentialing. Rather, it is seen as an experience, one that shapes a person's life and, therefore, one that should support relationship-rich education (Felten & Lambert, 2020; Fjellkner-Pihl, 2022; Goodyear, 2022).

In this light, the university, at least in the context of our study, has a significant way to go to promote this image to its staff and students, and arguably to the general population. These findings also link to several recent studies that highlight the importance of creating a sense of belongingness for equity-deserving cohorts (Crawford & McKenzie, 2022; de Bie et al., 2021). If universities want to attract and retain regional and/or rural students, there likely needs to be a greater focus on how to explicitly help them develop a sense of belongingness to the university and identification with the university community.

Another commentary to arise from our findings, and one that is increasingly pertinent in today's context, is that of place. On a superficial read of the data it seems that students want it all. They idealise a CEU to be a university that is strongly linked to local communities, even sharing physical resources with the local community (as previously suggested by Gore et al., 2019), but also one that allows them to study in a blended format, or even wholly online, should that be necessary for their current circumstances. To be everything at once is, of course, a challenge for any university. However, an alternative interpretation of the data is that our participants are more likely reflecting on the differences between place and space. Drawing on Tuan's (1977) notion that space is abstract, without value or meaning, and place is imbued with significance and embodiment, to our participants a CEU would be both a space and place. For example, they would experience the ease of access to a physical location, such as the Australian RUC model, where campuses are in regional and rural areas and staffed by members of the local community who understand their lived experiences and sense of self. But a CEU would also offer almost limitless potential in space; for example, connecting them to teachers and peers from across the globe, and offering a multitude of study options that align to their preferences.

In essence, students would have two mechanisms to support their belongingness: a physical place located in their local community, and an online space that connects them with a greater world. This finding links to Nørgård and Bengtson's (2016) conceptualisation of a "*placeful university*" (p. 5) that goes beyond the physical spatiality of the campus to refocus on human experiences and connection as place. Therefore, the challenge for universities wanting to align to a CEU model is how to support purposeful learning sites that foster a deep sense of connection to the local place, while continuing to offer numerous online and/or blended learning opportunities that allow them to occupy a diversity of spaces.

Another reflection from the data is the tension between how a CEU model would distribute responsibility and, consequentially, power and decision-making across university and community stakeholder groups (see also Garlick & Langworthy, 2008). To illustrate, many participants remarked that an authentic CEU would be a partnership between the local community and the university, and yet details on how this partnership would be enacted were vague; for example, would local community members sit on a university council or academic board? How would their opinions or perspectives be incorporated into the formal governance and decision-making of the university? Further, as the participants themselves pointed out, who from the community would represent on behalf of the community? Would it be local officials, or community advocates, or alumni? And what would happen if in fact their perspective was not representative of the community, or at odds with that of the university's values?

As first posited by Kindred and Petrescu (2015), all of these questions, and others, debate whether it is truly possible to create an authentic and just partnership between a university and a local community. It seems more likely that consultation with a community is achievable, albeit a less embedded approach than our idealised model. However, our research still offers several tangible recommendations to improve partnerships between communities and universities. These include expanding opportunities for qualified community experts to co-teach or co-create curriculum, and the promotion and support of community-based placements that would encourage more dialogue between universities and communities. Participants in our research also shared the importance for universities to maintain positive narratives about their local communities, and not only promote work opportunities for metropolitan and global organisations.

Our findings also have relevance for universities and staff who are currently engaged in Australia's RUC model. As discussed earlier, students' desire for a physical site of learning, such as that provided by the RUC model, is a meaningful start to supporting regional and rural students. However, emerging research on RUCs, that highlights the limitations of course offerings and the relatively small take-up from universities to engage (Brown, 2022), indicates that the RUC model

has a considerable way to go in offering students spaces of learning. The principles we outlined earlier, which underpin a CEU, also raise questions for the RUC model; namely, how the RUC model can continue to explore how to share university resources across communities (principle 1), and how to leverage local knowledge and expertise to inform and advance regional and rural-specific curriculum and pedagogy (principle 2).

Specifically, RUCs may want to consider how to modify or adapt the university curriculum for the local context, rather than simply replicating units or subjects that are predominantly taught in metropolitan contexts (principle 3). And while research has already evidenced the RUC model as a mechanism to improve healthy relationships with universities and communities (King et al., 2022; Stone et al., 2022), the rapidly evolving nature of digital design in education underscores the importance for RUCs to continue to harness technological innovations and solutions to enable access across geo-dispersed communities for lifelong learning (principle 4). Future research would benefit from further exploration on how a CEU aligns to the RUC model, and what value propositions would continue to drive participation and engagement in RUCs from both universities and students.

Finally, our findings stress that the idea of a CEU is somewhat flawed, as it implies that there is one community in which universities are to embed themselves. There are in fact numerous communities for universities to engage with, including communities in the nearby physical proximity to that of their multiple campuses (i.e., local), but also communities where university scholars may conduct their research, or areas where industry partnerships may exist. Within these communities are also micro-communities, or smaller groups of people who gather around shared values or goals, be that shared political views, religions, or hobbies. In essence, there is no single voice within a community, and as such, there is no monopoly on what specific issues a university and community could collaborate on, or on which exclusive principles they might base an alliance on.

Again, this necessitates consideration for universities moving forward on which community they aim to partner with, and who this includes and excludes. This finding links to previous research from Barnett (2021) that describes the complexities intertwined with that of an activist university, where ideas, interpretations and attitudes clash. As Barnett reflected, through this lens, universities find consensus in their own value systems only when challenged through epistemic injustices, or at specific intersections where transgressions meet the core mission of the university. Grau (2016) reflected on universities balancing global and local missions: “universities need to understand that they are fundamental to the process of creating knowledge but that they do not have the monopoly” (p. 8). By respecting and collaborating with other forms of knowledge production, including other institutions or local communities, universities can break down “the barriers that prevent scholarly knowledge from reaching the community” (p. 8).

As we found through our study, however, there is still a great deal of work for universities to consider how they can respect and partner with local communities and see these stakeholders as core members of the university community, with equal ability to contribute. While the true enactment of a CEU model, as discussed here, may be unlikely to appear in the Australian higher education landscape in the near future, we hope that by providing a commentary on an idealised model, as described by our participants, we can provoke further discussion and reflection into how universities can continue to strengthen partnerships with local communities.

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