

# TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION STRATEGIES ACROSS THE GLOBE.

Following a detailed analysis of teaching and learning strategies from 50 universities across the globe, this paper identifies common trends and offers insight on how institutions can position themselves to deliver against their strategic goals and ambitions.

## An introduction to this paper and the idea of future readiness

The news is littered with stories about how robots, automation and AI will impact our lives. Some are highly amusing, some seem hardly credible, but without question pressure will only increase on universities to turn out students who can thrive in a rapidly changing world. Employability as a primary educational aim can be contentious - for some it calls into question the value of higher learning as a goal in itself. So here at PebblePad we tend to talk in terms of future readiness, a construct which accommodates employment, further study, research, entrepreneurship, volunteering - indeed, anything beyond any immediate episode of learning.

For quite some time, we've been noticing a shift from the hegemony of content and courses to a focus on learners and learning – especially learning through real world experience. At least, we think we've been witnessing a shift. So why the modicum of doubt? Well, the ethos of PebblePad has always been about placing the learner at the heart of their own learning experience and we've had to stop and ask ourselves (since we're also big on self-reflection) whether the reason we see a shift towards learner-centred approaches is because we're viewing the world of higher education through our own lens, and we're therefore guilty of a subconscious 'confirmation bias'.

In order to deduce whether we are seeing a genuine shift, we set about tasking our teams in Australasia, the UK and North America to review the published learning and teaching strategies of 50 universities across the globe in order to discern the targets, tactics and timelines being promoted by the universities.

The results? Well, read on and discover what we found. Enjoy.







# STUDENT-CENTERED APPROACHES

## What our analysis showed

44% of the teaching and learning strategies highlighted a desire to develop a learner-centred approach, one in which students were viewed as partners in a co-operative education model. Similarly, personalising the learning experience was also highlighted as an ambition in a number of strategies.

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Our strategy will take co-operative education to the next level, making experiential education an integral part of the way all students learn, embracing new and emerging technologies.

An extract from one of the analysed strategies

## Student-centred approaches

### GLOBAL TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION STRATEGIES

Included in  
**44%**  
of strategies

**15%**

wanted to support peer review in assessment (especially assessment *for* learning rather than *of* learning)

**1 in 5**



wanting to empower students to manage their own learning

### Our tips on developing a student-centred strategy

- 1 Strike the right balance between the privacy and security of a personal space for learning and your organisation's own assessment agenda. You'll experience better outcomes if learners feel a sense of ownership and control over their own learning. Achieving this balance is entirely possible if you have the right tools for both personal learning and assessment at scale.
- 2 Use technology to add structure but not at the expense of constraining individual creativity. Your technology toolkit should combine support for freeform reflection and showcasing skills and experience, along with tools to help you build frameworks that guide, scaffold and assess development.
- 3 Your technology armory should support secure collaboration, sharing and peer review, and allow students to capture learning anywhere, on any device (even if that happens to be in the queue for a latte and a muffin).

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The availability of templates and workbooks allows us to introduce structure, without frustrating learners' creative exploration and self-reflection.

Duke University on PebblePad's support for student-centered learning.



# EMPLOYABILITY AND GRADUATENESS

## What our analysis showed

Employability featured at the heart of many of the strategies we reviewed. Indeed, 73% of the strategies from universities outside of the current top 100 rankings<sup>1</sup> had employability at the heart of their agenda, with this figure dropping to 62.5% for universities inside the top 100.<sup>1</sup> Whilst employability wasn't always mentioned explicitly, it would be fair to say that some aspect of future readiness could be discerned in all of the reviewed strategies.

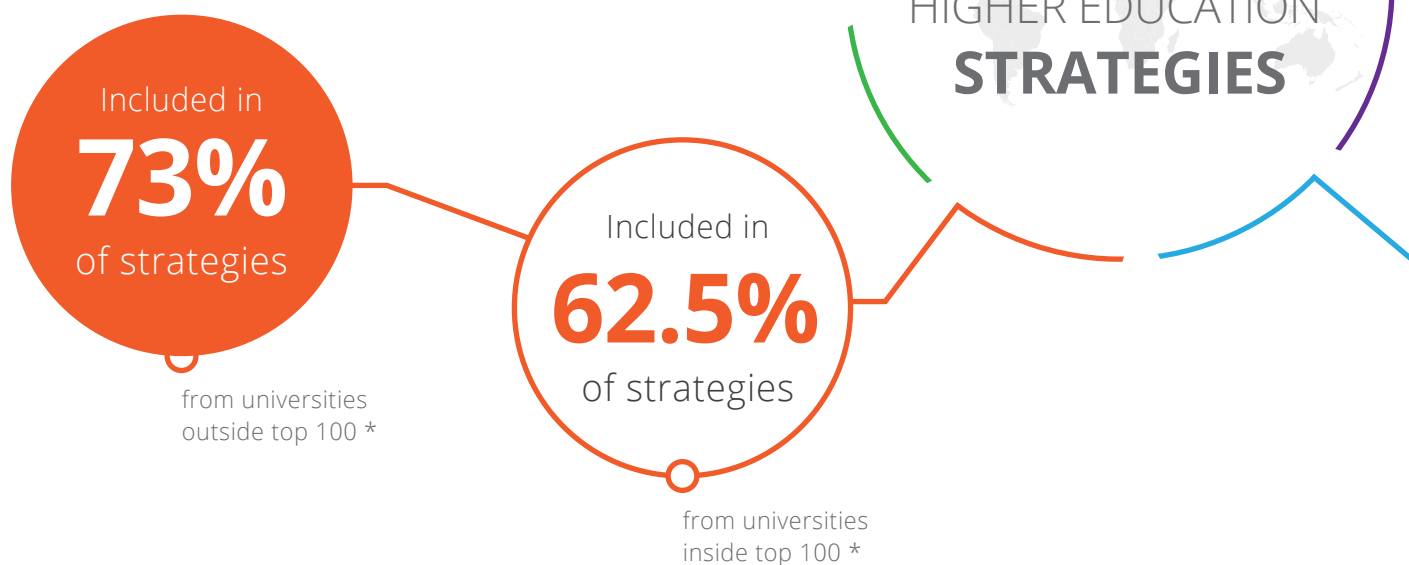
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Our goal is to ensure that our graduates are career capable, well-rounded individuals. We will embrace the changing environment to deliver flexible and personalised education.

An extract from one of the analysed strategies



# Employability and Graduateness



## Delivering on your employability ambitions

Increasing access to employment opportunities is one of the biggest priorities for universities across the globe. It's also one of the biggest reasons for students embarking on university life, with recent work by Jisc referencing the fact that 70% of students believe that a university education will improve employment prospects.<sup>2</sup> In determining your own 'employability readiness' as an organisation, ask yourself:

### How easy is it for students to:

- Record activities of curricular and extra-curricular activity?
- Record and upload media evidence, even if they're offline?
- Collate their unique experiences and reflect on them to build a better self-awareness of their strengths and capabilities?
- Bring others into the process to provide formal and informal feedback?
- Selectively share and showcase their ability in an age when knowing how is becoming increasingly more important than knowing what?

### How easy is it for you as an organisation to:

- Add structure or an award framework to help students engage and record evidence of their experiences that may otherwise be lost?
- Add structure without compromising student creativity and reflection?



# STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND RETENTION

## What our analysis showed

Student retention featured at the heart of many of the strategies we reviewed. 72% of the strategies from universities outside of the current top 100 rankings had retention as a focus area, with this figure dropping to 50% for universities inside the top 100.<sup>1</sup>

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With the higher education market becoming more competitive, it is far more cost effective to retain a current student than recruit a new one.

Hanover Research Paper, 2014<sup>3</sup>



## Student retention



### Upping your game when it comes to student retention

The simple fact is that it's far more cost effective to retain a student than recruit a new one. But beyond the simple economics of a good retention policy lies an obligation for universities to create environments which foster success. The right technology, implemented in the right way, can be a great way to improve retention. Below are two common technology mistakes that can impact on retention.

- 1 Learning technology is used only as a vehicle to deliver transitory learning experiences, where content is king.

The solution: From orientation through to graduation, students should be able to tell the story of their ambitions and challenges, alongside evidence of their curricular, co-curricular and extracurricular experiences. It's monitoring this kind of activity that can have a positive impact on identifying disengaged students.

- 2 Offering limited opportunities for self-reflection and mentorship.

The solution: Embedding structured and personal reflection into the learning experience improves a student's self-awareness. This increases the likelihood of a student identifying and sharing issues they may be experiencing with a tutor or mentor, thereby supporting greater scope for early intervention.



PebblePad is invaluable as it helps us flag when students need extra support from their lecturers and when we need to get a student in for a meeting in the case of an incident on placement.

La Trobe University on PebblePad's support for student centered learning.



# OPPORTUNITIES FOR REAL WORLD LEARNING

## What our analysis showed

Creating opportunities for real world learning featured in almost 68% of the strategies we analysed. We also discovered this ambition often went hand in hand with a desire to develop learners with strong self-reflective skills and a lifelong learning mindset. Indeed, 12% of all strategies said developing these qualities were important.

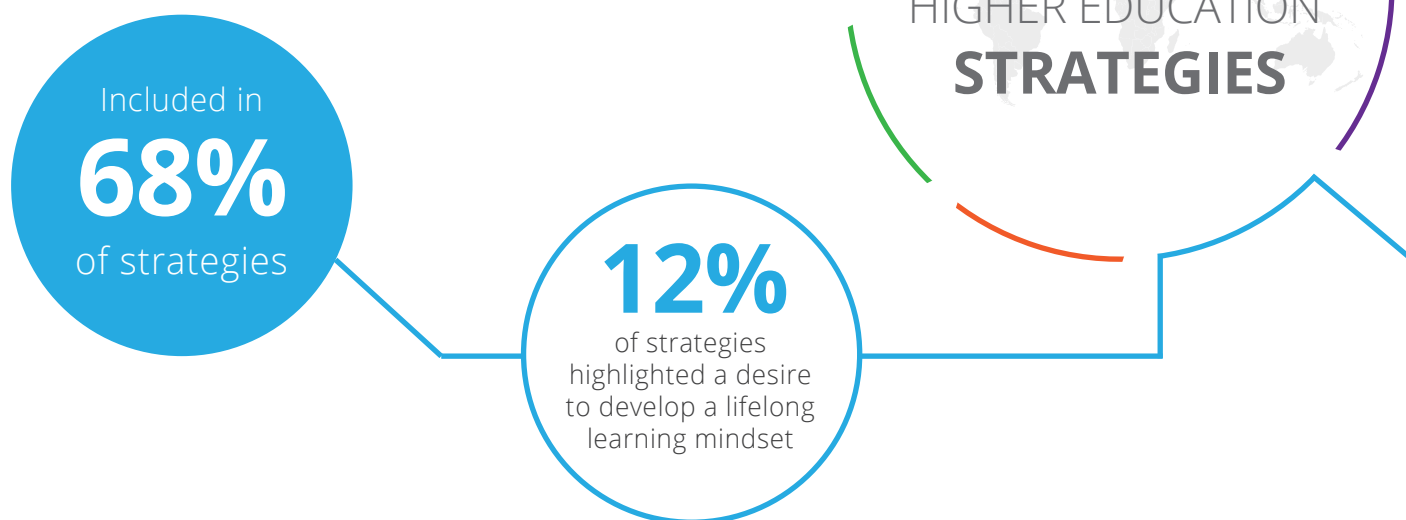
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We will work with relevant employers in the design and teaching of our courses and offer integrated workplace learning where possible. We will ensure our students develop the skills required to be independent lifelong learners in the workplace.

An extract from one of the analysed strategies



## Real world learning



### Using technology to support real world learning

Providing opportunities for real world learning will inevitably require your students to venture out into the world of work. It can be a daunting prospect (for you as much as your students) as you start to consider how you'll offer remote support, monitor progress, and make sure your students are getting the very most from their experiences. Supporting remote students is an area where technology can make a real difference. Here are our top tips on how to use technology to support real world learning:

- 1 Make it simple and straightforward for staff in the workplace to be able to provide formal and informal feedback on student progress.
- 2 Creating digital placement workbooks can offer week-on-week structure without constraining creativity or the type of evidence a student can include. Providing structure in this way means placement supervisors can easily monitor progress and identify issues early. The completed workbook can also form a story of your students' development, which can then be included in showcase portfolios to improve career opportunities.
- 3 Embedding reflection throughout your placement processes will allow students to make sense of their real world learning and enrich the whole experience, especially if this is integrated with strong mentorship. The ability to record and reflect easily can be the difference between success and failure – allowing your students to reflect via an app, even if they are offline, is a great idea.



A man wearing a brown hat and glasses, seen from the side, looking out at a calm ocean under a cloudy sky. He is wearing a red shirt. The background is a soft-focus landscape of a beach with pebbles.

# EDUCATING THE WHOLE PERSON

## What our analysis showed

Almost half of the strategies analysed made reference to the importance of educating the whole person. Whilst this concept was articulated in a variety of ways, it can be best described as the ambition of universities to develop resilient, globally aware, enterprising, future-ready graduates.

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Our ambition is to build linkages between disciplines and develop deep engagement with research, external partners and co-curricular activities.

An extract from one of the analysed strategies

## Educating the whole person



Earlier in this paper, we identified a common problem with technology implementation - the one in which content is viewed as being the most important element of the learning experience. This approach often results in transitory episodes of learning and rarely contributes or accumulates in 'evidence' of a student's capability as a whole. So how can you avoid this mistake? Here are our 3 top tips:

- 1 Your learning technology armory should be unpinned by a 'course-agnostic' platform to help your learners record learning of any and every experience – curricular or extra-curricular.
- 2 Students should be able to work freely, easily and creatively, and make use of technology on their terms. Winning students over in this way will make it easier for you to develop the student as a whole. This calls for apps, media-rich evidencing of skills, and the straightforward involvement of others in endorsing skills and capability.
- 3 Your students should be able to easily articulate and review their learning journey as it progresses. A platform that supports dynamic feedback and assessment processes allows students to receive the guidance and scaffolding they need to shape their journey and address any skills gaps.



PebblePad helps our students reflect on what they are learning by documenting curricular, co-curricular and community learning and the relationship between.





# SUSTAINABILITY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

## What our analysis showed

A key focus of a third of the strategies analysed was sustainability and the environment. We found that most sustainability ambitions extended beyond simply minimising the impact of university activity on the environment. Indeed, many universities cited the need to develop an inherent awareness of sustainable practice in their learners as an equally important ambition.



The University's response to climate change, and to sustainability more broadly, requires us to carefully consider our ethical choices and everyday practices.

An extract from one of the analysed strategies



## Sustainability and the environment

Included in  
**1 in 3**  
strategies

### GLOBAL TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION STRATEGIES

Whilst large-scale environmental projects like solar power and sustainable building design may seem like the most obvious green initiatives for universities, it's also the cumulative effort of smaller initiatives that can make a big difference. But does learning design have a role to play in positively impacting the green agenda? We think it does. Here are a few ideas to consider when it comes to learning technology and the environment:

- 1 Providing students with their own online space to develop work over time, where they can receive ongoing formative feedback, means you can significantly reduce the need for paper, improve assessment efficiency and mitigate the risk of lost work.
- 2 Making it easy for any assessor (whether internal or external to the university) to assess and provide student feedback electronically can significantly reduce the need for travel and paper-based practices as well as improving responsiveness.
- 3 Supporting the ability to upload media evidence of practical skills and facilitating peer review can dramatically improve the ability to assess competency and can significantly reduce duplication of effort and the need for assessors to travel to students.

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With previous paper-based processes proving costly, PebblePad has helped the university transition all of the 12-week course materials and activities into an electronic workbook, reducing costs and the environmental footprint.

The University of the Sunshine Coast

# ADAPTABILITY AND OFFERING VALUE

## What our analysis showed

In an age of unprecedented technological advancement and significant shifts in what the tech-savvy 21st century learner is demanding of a university education, it doesn't come as much of a surprise to find that 1 in 3 of the analysed strategies made reference to a need to offer better value and a greater capacity to change and evolve more quickly.

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One-third of deans believe the pace of change on their own campuses is too slow.

2017 research from Arizona State-Georgetown University Academy for Innovative Higher Education Leadership and 2U.<sup>4</sup>



# Adaptability and offering value

## Surviving and thriving

The simple truth of the matter is that for universities to survive and thrive they need to be able to adapt quickly to change, offer greater value, and place the learner at the heart of - and in many ways in control of - their learning experiences. Here we provide a summary of five of the most valuable ideas from this paper designed to help universities offer greater value and deliver a more rewarding learning experience:

- 1 Don't fall into the trap of using technology as a vehicle for delivering transitory learning experiences, where content is king. Strike the right balance between the privacy and security of a personal space for student learning and your organisation's own teaching and assessment agenda.
- 2 Use technology to add structure but not at the expense of constraining individual creativity. Offer apps for freeform reflection and showcasing skills and experience that include adaptable frameworks to help you guide, scaffold and assess development.
- 3 Your technology armory should be unpinned by a 'course-agnostic' platform to help your learners record learning of any and every experience no matter where it takes place.
- 4 Offer rich opportunities for self-reflection and mentorship.
- 5 Offer students the opportunities to record curricular and extra-curricular activity (online and offline through apps) and allow them to selectively share and showcase their ability in an age when knowing how is becoming increasingly more important than knowing what.



Like many other higher education institutions, Griffith University had been looking for an eportfolio platform for our 55,000 users. In late 2016 we determined that PebblePad was the right personal learning environment for the job. Fast forward to August 2017, and we have a successful enterprise-wide implementation

Heidi Blair, Deputy Director of Learning Futures. Griffith University, Australia





## References

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## About us

We are the creators of PebblePad – the award winning personal learning platform. As a company, we've spent the past 12 years blazing a trail in the eportfolio and personal learning space, and we have absolutely no intention of stopping. Our mission is simple – to help learners shape and share their unique skills and attributes in an ever more competitive world.

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a black leather tank top, black leather pants, and black boots, is posing dynamically against a yellow wooden plank wall. She is holding a dark purple umbrella with her right arm extended upwards, and her left arm is out to the side. Her legs are spread wide in a playful, energetic pose.

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**We help university  
students aim high  
and succeed.**