Educational Visit to Australia
August 2014

Funded through the Robbie Ewen Fellowship and University of the West of Scotland

Report by Craig Nicol, Student Link Development Manager, UWS

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Overview

In August 2014, Craig Nicol, Student Link Development Manager had the opportunity to visit Australia through funding secured via the Robbie Ewen Fellowship. The trip included eight site visits to institutions in Sydney and Melbourne as well as attendance at the Heads of Student Administration conference in Sydney. The institutions visited were:

- **Macquarie University**
- **University of Sydney**
- **University of New South Wales (UNSW)**
- **University of Technology, Sydney (UTS)**
- **RMIT**
- **Deakin University**
- **Monash University**
- **Swinburne University of Technology**

The Heads of Student Administration conference took place at UTS in Sydney over a two day period. This networking and fact-finding opportunity initiated discussion amongst colleagues from across the sector in Australia and New Zealand.

The initial proposal to visit Swinburne University in Melbourne was due to their service provision and contact made with the University Registrar, Tony Reed. Following discussions about the proposed trip, Tony had made suggestions about other institutions and had included the Heads of Student Administration Conference as a networking opportunity. Site visits in Sydney and attendance at the Conference were carried out with two members of staff from Swinburne University; site visits in Melbourne were attended independently.

Institutions were selected and contacted following recommendations by Tony Reed. Research was done on each institution to look at their service provision and functions. When the site visits were arranged, key contacts within each institution were identified to provide an overview of Student Services provision and the physical spaces.

This report will highlight some of the areas of good practice that were observed, as well as how this relates to some of the opportunities and challenges faced in the UK. Areas of particular interest during the trip were:

- **Space**
- **Buildings**
- **Technologies**
- **Branding**
- **Challenges and obstacles**

Space
The use of space in most of the institutions allowed for flexibility of how students use the areas. The outdoor space is integrated into the environment of the university as a whole. For example, UNSW incorporates outdoor space in their campus into the refectory and open areas to allow students the freedom to move between areas and interact with each other more organically. While Australia has the weather to fully utilise outdoor space, there are

many things that could translate to universities in the UK. The concept of gateways into the university is an example of how the front end of a building can provide an attractive focal point for students and the public. Outdoor furniture could also be used to provide a campus environment instead of solely paved walkways.

Walkways at Deakin University (Left) and Swinburne University (Right)

One of the key themes that was prevalent in the institutions was that flexible space existed across institutions with no visible ownership. Every corridor or space provided the opportunity for a student to sit down and charge their personal device, connect to wifi, work in a group, or indeed relax. This can also translate into good examples of technology and design in function-specific areas, for example, Student Services at the University of the West of Scotland has now developed the Careers space on Paisley campus, this is similar to various institutions in Australia where spaces that were designed for international/study abroad programmes and Student Administration Hub areas were created to feel more open and flexible.
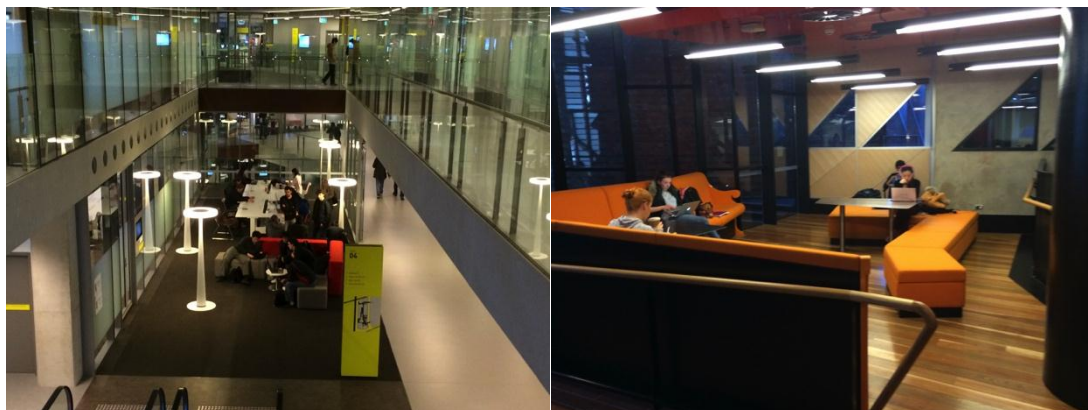

"Touch-down" space at UTS (Left) and flexible open area at RMIT (Right)

Buildings

Student centres have been created within multiple institutions provide a flexible areas for students during non-teaching time. These can be large or small but may incorporate student-facing services. One of the key aspects of new buildings at Macquarie University was that they dedicate ground floor space to students.

Swinburne University has a specific building that has commercial outlets on the ground floor, staff offices on floors 2 and 3, with student residences directly above. This brings

staff, students and catering outlets into the heart of a city campus. Although the Hawthorn campus is in a suburb, it allows for much more of a "campus" environment which in turn, fosters the community spirit of the institution.
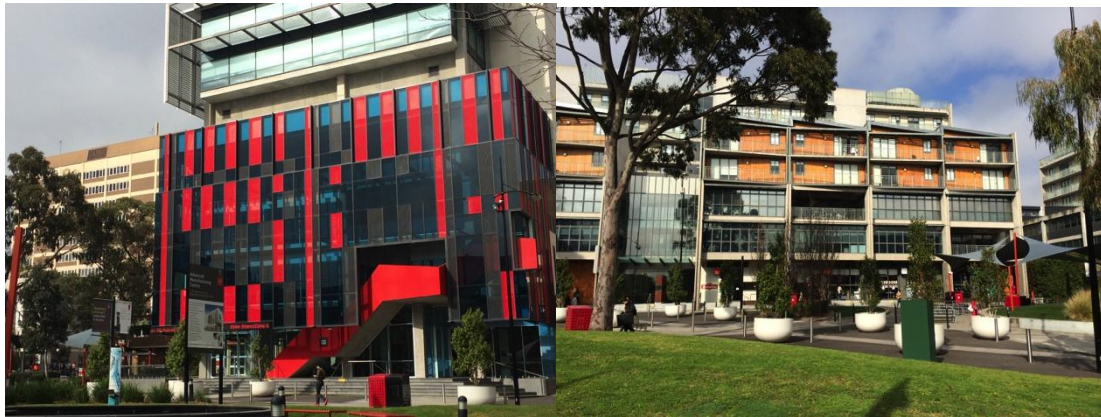
Student Centre at Swinburne University and Retail, Office and Student Accommodation

Technologies

Technology is a driving factor in higher education and can contribute to the learning experience of students. That being said, many institutions were not implementing visible, physical technologies to encourage students to stay on campuses, etc. Rather, work has been done to ensure that technology is functional and fit for purpose. Wi-Fi networks have been strengthened across institutions in recognition that many students have their own devices or will have access to mobile technology. Other use of technology included room/group pod booking systems, electronic ticketing/queue management, apps and electronic student cards.


Lecturer theatre at UTS with numerous Wi-Fi access points

Electronic Ticketing/Queue Management

Through the use of electronic ticketing systems at Student hubs, services are able to keep up-to-date statistics on enquiries. There are staff members employed to run the data and collate information on wait times, staffing levels required, time to resolve queries, etc. This system and structure allows for managers to staff hub areas appropriately depending on projected trends. This system allows for queue management and in some cases was there to allow students to "check-in" when they arrive on campus or leave a reception area to go to a learning space/café and receive a text when it was their turn to see someone at the

enquiry desk. Queue management appeared to be a priority due to the high numbers of students on campus and the course advice being given from service areas. Course advice is not necessarily something that is provided from a One Stop Shop location in the UK although colleagues across the sector may handle this in different ways.
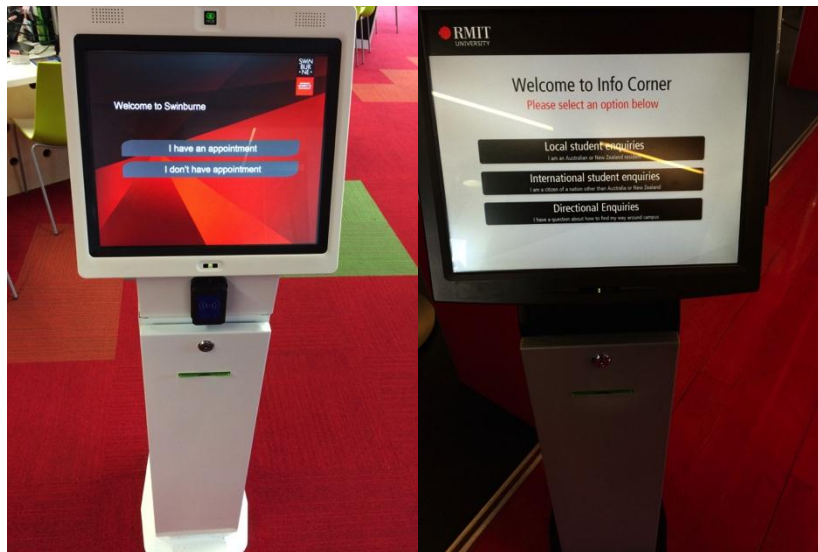
*Queue Management systems at Swinburne and RMIT*

Contact Centres

Many universities use a contact centre to field incoming telephone calls. These centres were organised as call centres with queuing systems, wait times/targets and were focused on customer service. These centres provided a single point of contact for all enquiries; staff provide initial contact resolution where possible and would have information on directing calls if they could not provide sufficient support. This call centre concept provided a different approach to student services queries than a lot of institutions are used to in the UK. This concept meant that a member of staff followed a process and script to direct queries, this may not be solely for Student Services but also for academic queries, timetabling, enrolment, graduation, etc.

Call Management System at Deakin University

Mobile Apps

Apps and use of mobile technology are becoming more prominent in the sector. Some institutions are further ahead with this than others, with some looking at the introduction of electronic student ID cards which would be held on a mobile device.
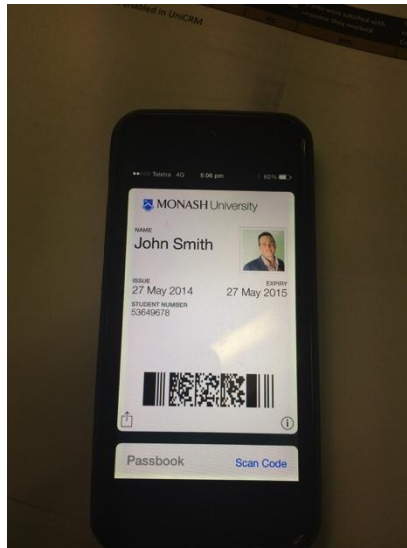
Proposed electronic student card at Monash

Branding

Many institutions utilised a strong brand to emphasise their "product". The concept of the university as a brand was prominent within the universities themselves, marketing teams were co-ordinated to ensure that departments had a contact to discuss their materials and get these turned around in sufficient timeframes. This allowed for publicity materials both internally and externally to have a single "voice". This was illustrated in universities such as Swinburne who have a simple, yet effective logo and brand. This is utilised across campus on flags, banners, leaflets, buildings, computers, etc. The brand in most cases was accompanied by a fact about the university, where it ranked, what graduates have achieved, as well as reminders about key dates and times in the year.

Flags at Swinburne University

Branding also extended to signage and furthermore, digital signage. On many campuses the use of technology allowed for touch screen interactive maps, as well as simple digital

signage instead of physical wall mounted boards. These were always up-to-date and were able to serve a dual purpose of promotion and signposting.
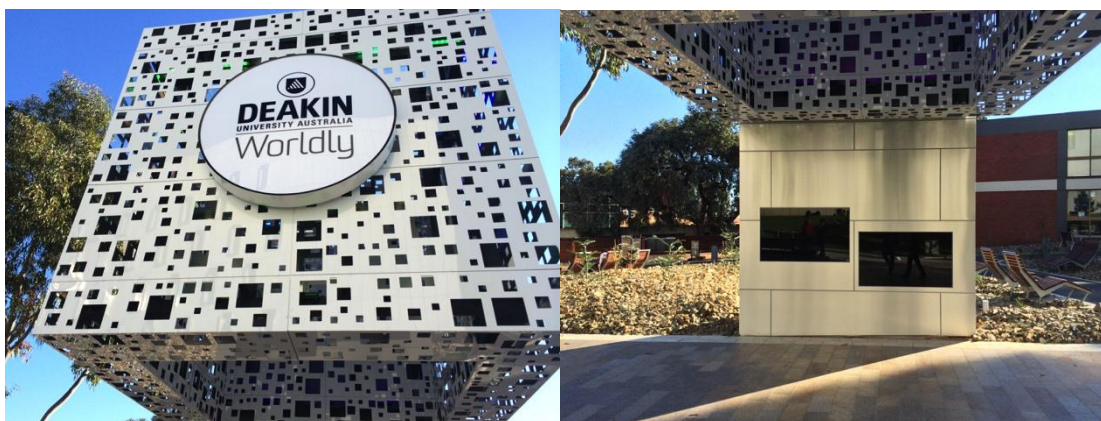
Outdoor screens at Deakin University

Challenges and Obstacles
Although there is good practice and innovation across the sector in Australia, institutions still face many of the same challenges as the UK. Campuses are constantly evolving, with major redevelopment and investment across the sector, there is change year on year. Institutions spoke of the struggle for "sticky" campuses – keeping students on campus when classes finish. In the UK we have struggled with this and have tried to adapt learning spaces and include students in the design of social spaces but are still faced with the problem of students attending class and leaving the building. Colleagues in Australia spoke of the same challenges, with some campuses in the heart of major cities such as Melbourne and Sydney; they are faced with the prospect of competing with some of the largest retail/food and beverage outlets in the country.

Institutions are finding ways to combat these challenges and are looking to provide comfortable and flexible environments for students to use outwith class time. Universities have included "touch-down" spaces and areas where students can collaborate which appeared to be well used. With furniture that is not institutional/educational per se, they have provided an atmosphere that allows students to adapt the space to their needs. One institution had walls that opened and closed to create a space that could be private or open.

City campuses were faced with this obstacle more than outer lying universities, that being said, those campuses out of the city still had to cater for the needs of a fast paced student body. On-site catering facilities (internally managed or otherwise) provided numerous options for students and staff. Student Centres and non-teaching areas were utilised and adapted by students themselves to provide the space they wanted to use.

Dissemination of Findings
Following this trip to eight institutions in two major cities within Australia, the intention is to provide feedback to as many colleagues across the Higher Education sector in the UK as possible. Discussions prior to the trip have allowed for a number of things to be put in place immediately, while others are in the planning stages.

Internally

Within the University of the West of Scotland, information was disseminated across the institution in a variety of ways for a number of different purposes. Feedback was provided directly to the Principal of the institution as well as for the following projects:

Student Attainment Group

This group was focused on the learning environments within Australian institutions. The group requested information and images from the trip to inform an ongoing campus redevelopment project.

Refurbishment Projects

Images and feedback were also given to additional groups looking at redevelopment of the Paisley campus, which is the largest campus within the institution. This was used to propose concepts to a designer to inform the development of projects within the university. New campus entranceways and flexible spaces within the institution are developing to incorporate more fluid spaces which allow students to be flexible in the way they are used, this provides a more dynamic and inviting environment for learning.

Externally

Outwith the University of the West of Scotland, findings and feedback are being provided through a variety of presentations/events across the UK. Presentations are scheduled for the following events:

One Stop Shop Conference

This group was particularly interested in the visit as it was focused on observation of shared spaces. The integrated model at various institutions and information on the provision of services is being provided as part of the One Stop Shop National Conference 2015 being held in Sheffield.

Event at UWS

An event is being planned to include colleagues from across the wider Scottish sector to attend an event providing more in-depth feedback from this trip. This event will allow for colleagues to attend and engage with various presentations focused on specific aspects of the trip. This event will take place at the University of the West of Scotland and will incorporate developments made on campus and how services have been reviewed following the findings of the educational visit.

Proposals for dissemination of information have also been sent to the following organisations:

AMOSSHE, the Student Services Organisation
Association of University Administrators (AUA)
National Association of Student Money Advisers (NASMA)
NASES

Dissemination of information to the above organisations may include written findings for inclusion in newsletters, presentations at upcoming events and contribution to internal membership discussions.

Conclusion

This trip provided a platform to observe numerous institutions and engage with colleagues from across Australia and New Zealand. The feedback from staff at those institutions provided valuable insight into the Higher Education system in Australia and also how that relates to the United Kingdom.

In many respects, the service provision and co-ordinated approach to Student Services in the United Kingdom and particularly at the University of the West of Scotland is, by comparison, more integrated than some institutions in Australia. There are certain things that are being done very well in Australia, the use of physical space is exemplary, however there are some approaches being utilised in the UK to providing a service which could also be considered exemplary.

Student Services at UWS provide a range of supports services for students which are under the umbrella of Student Services and delivered through a single information point, the Student Link. This in many ways mirrors the integrated service model being utilised in Australia, however the management of this service in the UK does not include course advice which significantly eases the pressure on waiting times at reception areas.

This trip has highlighted areas for improvement across much of the sector in the United Kingdom, but does also highlight a lot of good practice in this country. There are many challenges facing institutions across the United Kingdom and ultimately, many of these are the same challenges being faced in Australia.