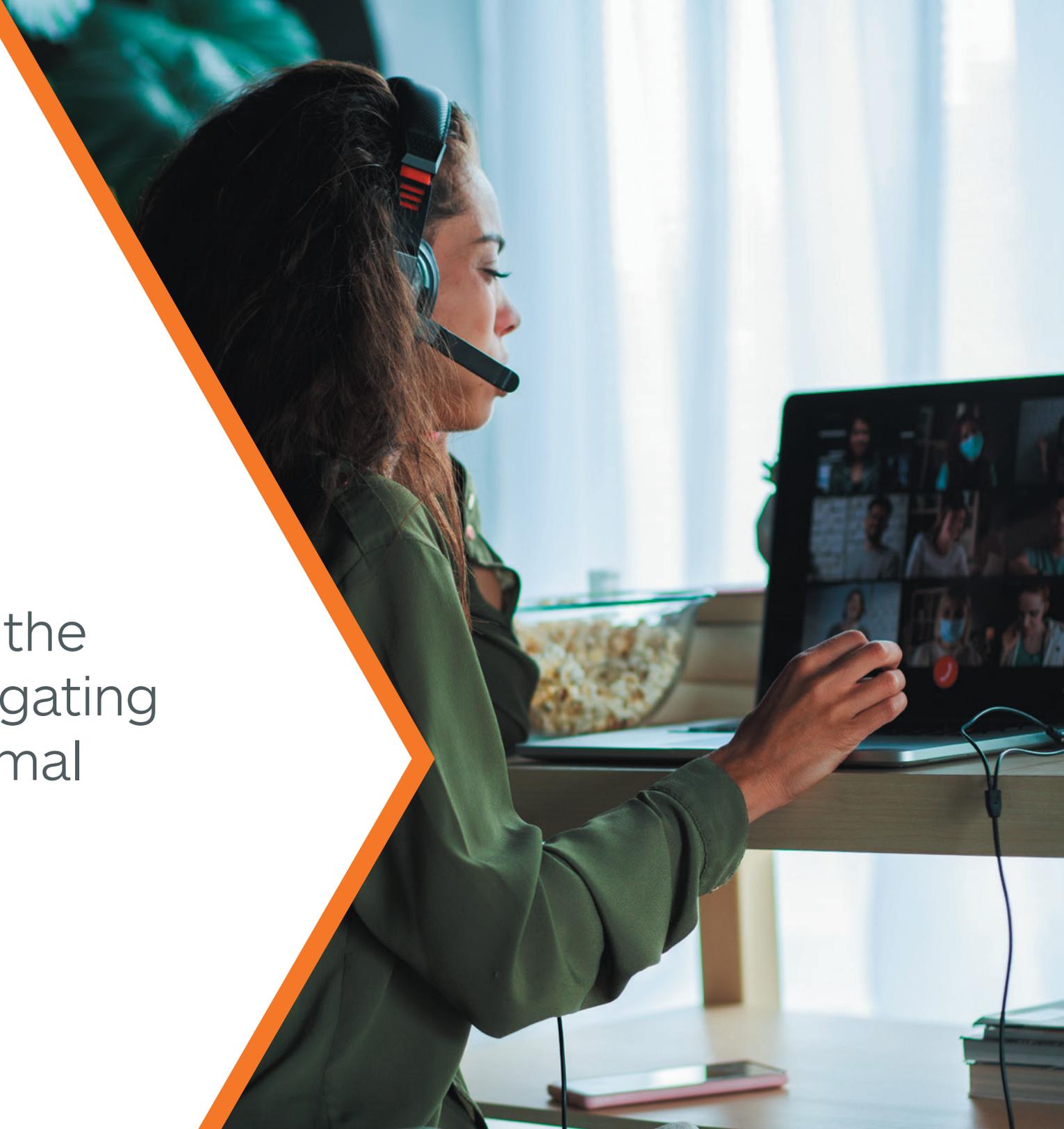


# University of the Future—Navigating the New Normal

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# Introduction

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At the end of March 2020, universities faced an existential crisis. As they dealt with the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, those campuses that were brimming with the exuberance and promise of youth were now completely deserted. It was impossible to tell then, just as it is now, how long it would take for things to return to normal. Would they ever return to normal? Or was this, the eerie quiet of abandoned lecture theatres and empty study labs, the new normal?

As Australian universities adapt to a post-pandemic future, they face numerous challenges. Long-standing business models were completely overturned overnight with international students unable to enter the country, face-to-face teaching is now delivered digitally to an incredibly dispersed student-body, and the financial pressure on institutions is leading to wide-spread job losses across the industry—all while the need to support the student and academic experience in light of the upheaval is more profound than it has ever been.

To gain a deeper understanding of the challenges facing the industry, we spoke with a number of academic leaders from some of Australia's leading universities. These veterans of the higher education sector were asked to share their insights on how COVID-19 had impacted the industry, what strategies they're using to attract new students and overcome disruptions to traditional business models, how they're bridging the graduate skills gap, and the role of technology in facilitating change.

In doing so, we seek to begin to understand the one fundamental question facing the sector; what is the university of the future?



# The impact of COVID-19

“The pandemic accelerated trends—not just for Deakin or higher education, but more generally,” said Professor Liz Johnson, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Education, at Deakin University. “We made a conscious decision to focus on our digital learning environment and digital operations a decade ago and COVID-19 accelerated our investment.”

Professor Steven Warburton, Executive Principal, Education Futures at the University of New England agreed: “Rather than impact our strategic vision, the pandemic really focused how we thought about the future. It accelerated some of the activities we already had in train around designing for online, becoming digital first, and reprioritising what we thought were the things that really mattered.”

This rapid shift to remote, digital-first learning also accelerated the uptake and acceptance of online pedagogies among academics who, before the pandemic, were reluctant to change their approach according to Dr. Chris Campbell, President of the Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education (ASCILITE) and Senior Lecturer Learning Futures, at Griffith University.

“Overall technology adoption has really improved. People who were technology-hesitant have been forced to teach online. Some academics have gone from needing support for very basic technical elements to now teaching completely online—creating and sharing videos, hosting breakout rooms, everything. It’s caught the tail-end of those who didn’t use technology before and made them use it,” she said.

Importantly, despite challenges surrounding the pace with which digital tools had to be deployed in the immediate response to COVID-19, higher education institutions have embraced the benefits of remote learning. With many of the investments made set to become permanent features of the learning experience, universities are now seeking to build on the lessons learned throughout 2020 to develop premium blended learning models that further enhance both student and academic engagement.

Key to the success of this blended approach is building confidence in the use of technology, said Prof. Warburton: “Confidence is something we should build across every element of a digital education platform. We need academics and teachers who are confident teaching in an online mode, in preparing their lectures, and confident in their pedagogical approach. Similarly, students must feel confident in being able to express themselves and be fully engaged in their online educational experience. Confidence is critical.”

**“Behaviourally, once restrictions wind down, people will have had a taste of working and studying from home and will demand it as part of the experience—we need to make it possible because there’s no point fighting against it. In fact, there’s a lot to be gained by doing so,”**

*Professor Liz Johnson, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Education, at Deakin University.*



# Attracting the modern Student

In stark business terms, the biggest impact of COVID-19 on Australia's higher education sector was the loss of income from the international student market. In 2020 alone, universities were expected to lose **up to \$4.6 billion** from the evaporation of international student fees. The losses are predicted to be higher in coming years, ultimately reaching **\$16 billion** by 2023.

Across the sector, international students contributed **26.2 percent of total revenue in 2018**, with some institutions relying on the market for almost 40 per cent of their revenue. Combined with pending legislative changes to funding and course structures, universities are under immense pressure to attract new students.

Among the three academics we spoke with, attracting new students hinged on one key element—delivering the best possible student experience.

According to Dr Campbell, supporting educators to feel confident in their use of digital tools was crucial to delivering an engaging online experience.

“In remote learning, engagement is critical. As such, we've introduced several support mechanisms to help academics build their confidence in using the technology, understand how to use the tools to make the experience more engaging for students, and develop their online pedagogy. This not only helps attract new students, but also to retain them,” she said.

For Prof. Warburton, a key element to attracting students in an increasingly competitive market was offering a digital platform with high fidelity technologies that offer a seamless user experience—one that matches the learner's expectations.

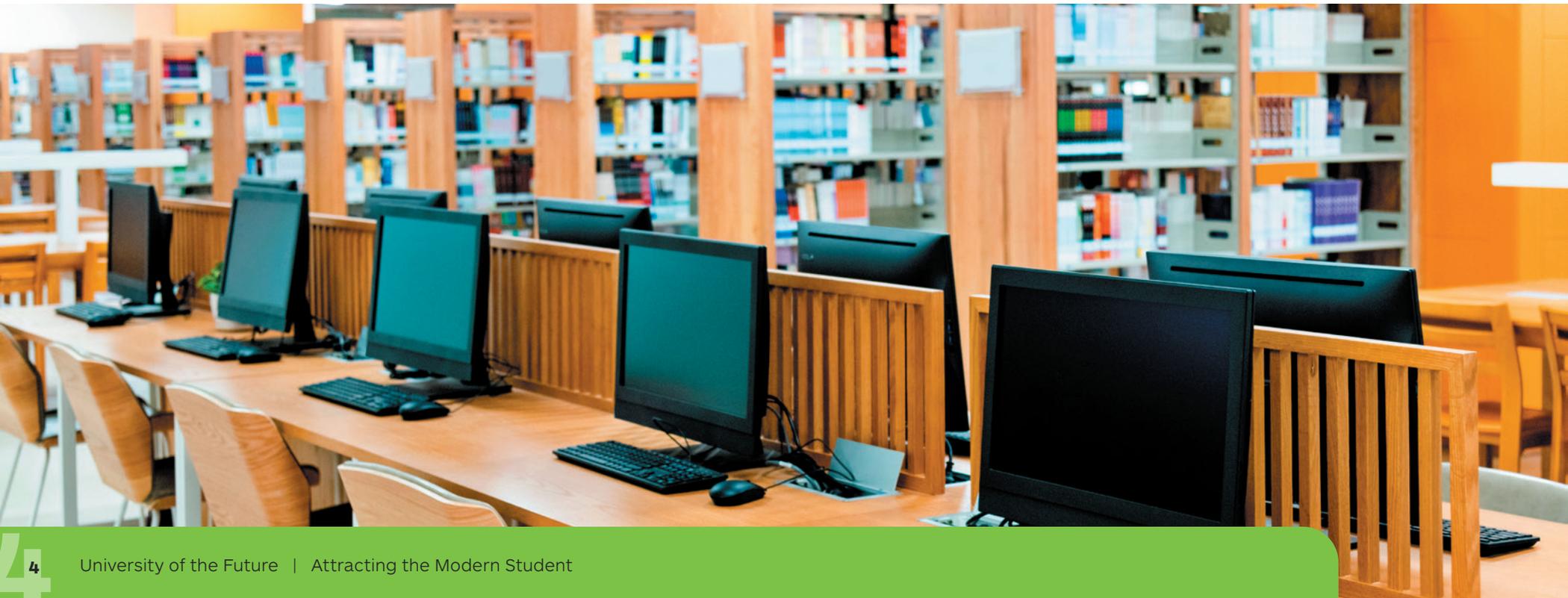
“Learners are used to using platforms and apps like Facebook, Google, or Uber that offer a smooth, seamless user service. That's the experience they expect,” he said. “Traditionally, in an education setting, the digital experience has been clunky, the systems didn't talk to each other, and it was frustrating for the user. Whereas previously we would have concentrated on functionality, one of our top priorities now is the user experience.”

Expanding on the notion of user experience, Professor Johnson from Deakin University said understanding the needs of the student and offering a personalised learning journey was critical.

“You have to think hard about what it is that helps a student participate,” she said. “We’ve put a lot of effort into talking to students, understanding the learning journey, and mapping out what makes it easy for them to participate. It comes down to access—this can mean good course design, facilitating interaction with peers, teachers, and the institution, all the way through to being able to download materials in multiple formats to suit their broadband capacity.”

**“The new challenge facing nearly every institution in the world is understanding the value of online education and, within this, re-assess their identity.”**

*Professor Steven Warburton, Executive Principal, Education Futures, at the University of New England.*



## Bridging the skills gap

While the academic leaders we spoke with all acknowledged a gap existed between the skills graduates have upon completing their studies and those required in the workplace, University of New England's Prof. Warburton said this wasn't necessarily negative as it served as the catalyst for conversation between the world of work and the world of education.

"There always has been a skills gap, there always will be, and there should always be a skills gap," he said. "A university is not simply a training centre for the workforce, it provides a transformational learning experience that develops graduates with the skills, knowledge, and attitude for them to be able to transfer easily, readily, and adaptively into and across the workforce. In a volatile employment market, most of us will go through several different job types, so which one are we training for? The fourth, the fifth?"

Prof. Warburton added that through partnerships with industry, there were ways to teach specific skill sets required for particular industries as university students became life-long learners once entering the workforce.

"What you need is a set of skills to bring you rapidly into the job space such that you can gear your learning to the way the business

operates," he said. "Two things are very helpful around this, the first is work-integrated learning. This is an excellent way to add those extra skill sets through engaging in the world of work within the broader enterprise of study.

"The second is to think about what the micro-credentials—or the bits of micro-learning—are that the institution can identify to supplement the academic offering. For example, this might be in design thinking or digital fluency, and this becomes a value-add in terms of graduate attributes."

This university-industry partnership was key to preparing students, not only for the workplace as it is today, but—more importantly—the world of work five years from now, according to Prof. Johnson.

"Universities need to be porous like a sieve," she said. "We need an inflow and outflow of ideas coming in and going out. Technology can help facilitate this because the industry partner doesn't have to stop what they're doing to engage with the university. That's critically important when engaging with industry, particularly SMEs that can't dedicate somebody to interacting with universities—it has to be in their time, their space, and in their way."

Griffith University's Dr Campbell added that the new and emerging technologies used in higher education could not only help bridge the gap through the delivery of industry-specific content, but also as a way to develop learners' skills in using the digital tools they'll need in the workforce.

“Universities need to shift to ensure students are ready for this new workforce, not the workforce we had,” she said. “Take teaching courses for example. Are universities teaching their students how to teach remotely? Universities need to adapt what they're teaching to cater for this new reality and ensure graduates have enough skills to cope and succeed during these shifts.”

**Digital has become the normal way of working. It's now not just a matter of access, it's also a matter of authenticity—if you're going to create learning for workers of the future, you'd better be doing it digitally, because they'll be working digitally.”**

*Professor Liz Johnson, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Education, at Deakin University.*



# Using Technology to facilitate change

While the stopgap measures Australian universities implemented succeeded in carrying them through the initial waves of the pandemic, the academics we spoke with said more robust remote learning platforms would be needed for the long-term.

Whether for students or educators, some of the common features highlighted as being priorities of their future digital campuses was the ability to facilitate collaboration, provide feedback, and analyse usage patterns and data to provide personalised support.

“There’ll be an increase in digital technologies that really promote interaction, feedback, and flexibility as these technologies will play a major role in how we engage with our students online,” Dr Campbell said. “The focus now will be on developing best practice around authentic assessment, enabling students to present and collaborate online, how courses are designed, and how course materials are accessed—for example, can learners watch videos multiple times, can they access video transcripts if they prefer, or can they interact during synchronous online lectures?”

Deakin University’s Prof. Johnson said enabling flexibility also extended to the tools and platforms academics had access to as they developed their pedagogical approaches.

“Universities will have to develop learning models that are more flexible and more familiar to the rhythms of life outside the university,” she said.

“What we’ve got to avoid doing is placing a bet and sticking to it—we need to be responsive. A next generation digital learning environment requires the integration of a network of tools—it’s not just a single solution—and these tools need to be collaborative because learning is all about interaction.”

In addition to tools that promote collaboration and offer flexibility, Prof. Warburton from the University of New England was particularly enthused with the benefits artificial intelligence and analytics could bring to both students and academics in a digital environment.

“With a diverse heterogenous student group, the advantage of adaptive learning is it allows us to deliver a more individuated educational experience,” he said. “We can use data and analytics to have the learning come to the individual, rather than require the individual come to the learning. That’s really important because it leads to better engagement, increased motivation, and compliments our pedagogical and andragogical approach of developing self-determined learners.”

**“When we had the shift to rapid remote teaching, there wasn’t time for academics to consider best practice. But now they’ve done so much professional development, learnt so much throughout the year, they’re now thinking about how to make the experience better, how to make it more engaging, more active, more collaborative, and more authentic.”**

*Dr Chris Campbell, Senior Lecturer Learning Futures, at Griffith University.*

## Using analytics to improve the learner experience

As many institutions have learned during the coronavirus pandemic, it is harder to engage students online if there is no personalisation element to the content.

Triggers within Learning Management Systems enable course leaders to create highly personalised pathways and to intervene where necessary. For example:

1. Student x is only logging onto the LMS once per week
2. They also scored less than 70% on their previous assessment
3. They have only engaged with 50% of the content that has been shared over the past term

Based on any combination of insights, personalised support can be offered to the student. This can include delivering more of the types of content they have engaged with previously or initiating a face-to-face

meeting to provide additional tutoring. Having access to this data makes it much easier for course leaders to focus on learning outcomes on an individual level.

Conversely, students who are working through modules more quickly, or are exceeding expectations in certain areas, can be fed additional content and higher-level tasks. “One of the beauties of learning analytics is that it allows the academic or teacher to sense when things are well-paced and at an appropriate level to a student’s needs at that particular learning moment,” said Prof. Warburton at the University of New England.

Universities that tailor feedback and course delivery based on analytics can add measurable value to the traditional ways of assessing work and delivering feedback, regardless of whether they are providing on or off-campus teaching. “Analytics and artificial intelligence is not just having a chatbot to answer questions. It is using the advanced data analytics to sift through the data, find the insights, and provide human collaboration in the most accessible format,” said Prof. Liz Johnson, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Education, at Deakin University

## Conclusion

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It is clear from the conversations we've had that Australia's higher education sector is still assessing the full impact COVID-19 has had on the students, educators, and institutions that together form one of the nation's most vibrant and diverse industries.

In the space of just two weeks, entire business models had to be shifted from predominately face-to-face to almost exclusively online. As recently as a year ago, such a feat would have been unthinkable. As Australia's universities continue their transformation, they do so with an eye on their long-term future. With an entire generation now facing the prospect of re-skilling or upskilling for a post-COVID economy, universities will be fundamental in helping the nation bridge the gap between the world we knew and the world we're yet to fully comprehend.

By placing the student and educator experience at the core of their remote learning strategies, Australian universities are looking to build signature digital platforms that echo the passion, excitement, and enthusiasm of their physical campuses.



## With thanks to our contributors:

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We would like to thank all the Australian academic leaders who took time out their schedules to share their insights with us and contributed to this eBook:

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## About D2L

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