

WHITEPAPER

REVOLUTIONISING ACADEMIC WORKSPACES

INNOVATIVE STRATEGIES FOR MODERN
UNIVERSITY WORKPLACES

[READ NOW](#)

SUMMARY

Many universities are considering moving away from the default of allocated individual work settings for academics. However, past attempts to introduce more shared ways of working in academia have faced significant challenges.

Veldhoen + Company has worked extensively in higher education workplace strategy and have found reasons for the challenges being:

Historical Importance of Offices:

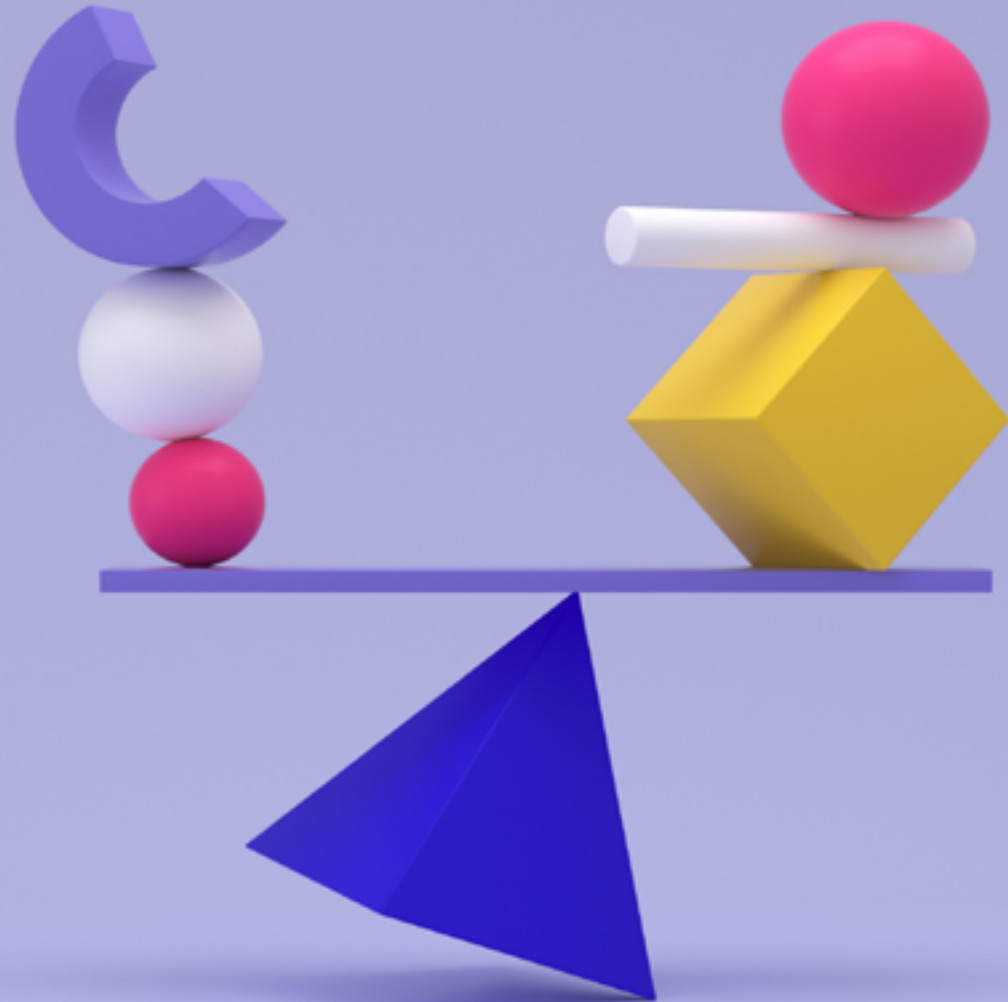
Offices have long been associated with academic identity and prestige.

Mixed Experiences with Shared Workspaces:

Studies have shown mixed results regarding the impact of shared workspaces on academic productivity, concentration, and well-being.

Diverse Needs of Academics:

Academics have varying work styles, preferences, and needs depending on a multitude of factors, including career stage and research focus.



THE ACADEMIC LOUNGE CONCEPT

This concept draws inspiration from the experience and functionality of airport business lounges to create a shared workspace that meets the unique needs of academics.

The concept places equal importance on the emotional needs as well of the functional needs of academics.

Pride, Place, and Prestige:

The Academic Lounge aims to create a space that fosters a sense of academic identity, belonging, and achievement.

Contemplation, Collaboration, and Collegiality:

The space provides a variety of settings to support individual focused work, collaborative projects, and social interaction.

Additionally, 'Digital Placemaking' is seen as a central aspect to the concept. It aims to leverage the use of technology to foster connections, celebrate achievements, and support networking opportunities.

The Academic Lounge concept is designed to address the key concerns that have hindered

the adoption of shared workspaces in academia, such as concentration, productivity, privacy, autonomy, identity, and student interaction. Importantly, the concept is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Critical to a successful outcome will be engagement, consultation, and co-creation with academic groups to develop a space that best fits their specific emotional and functional needs as well as the strategic goals of their institution.

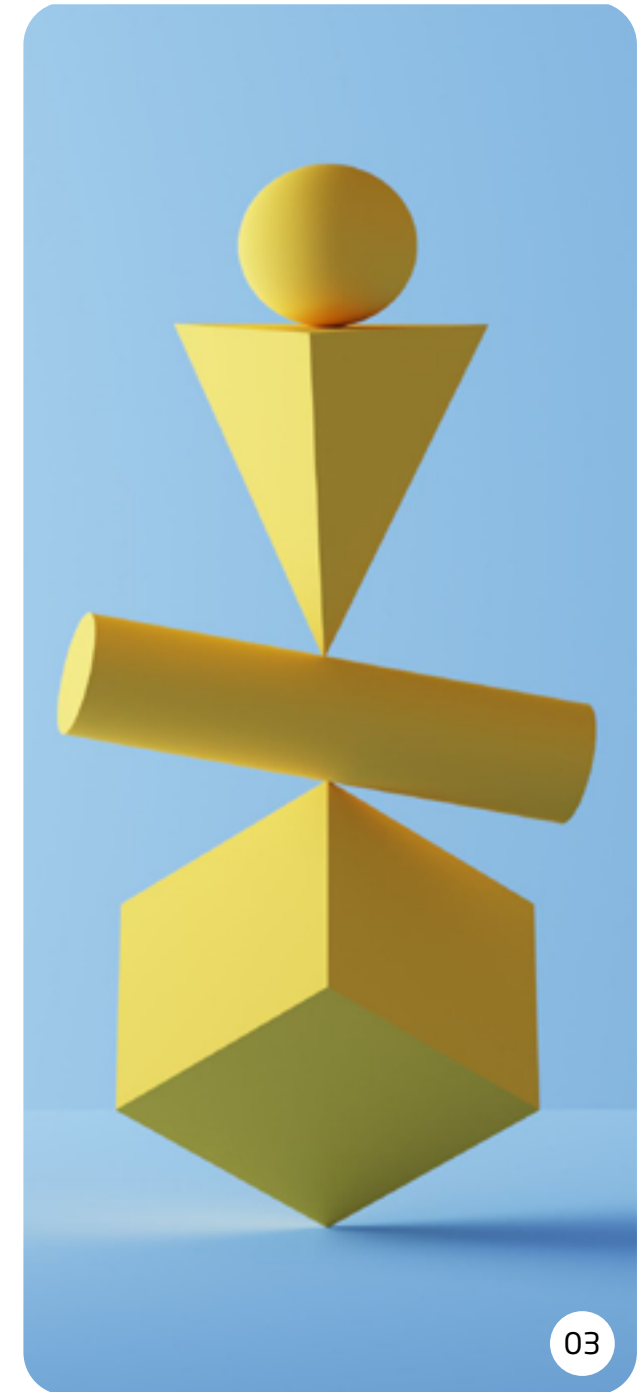
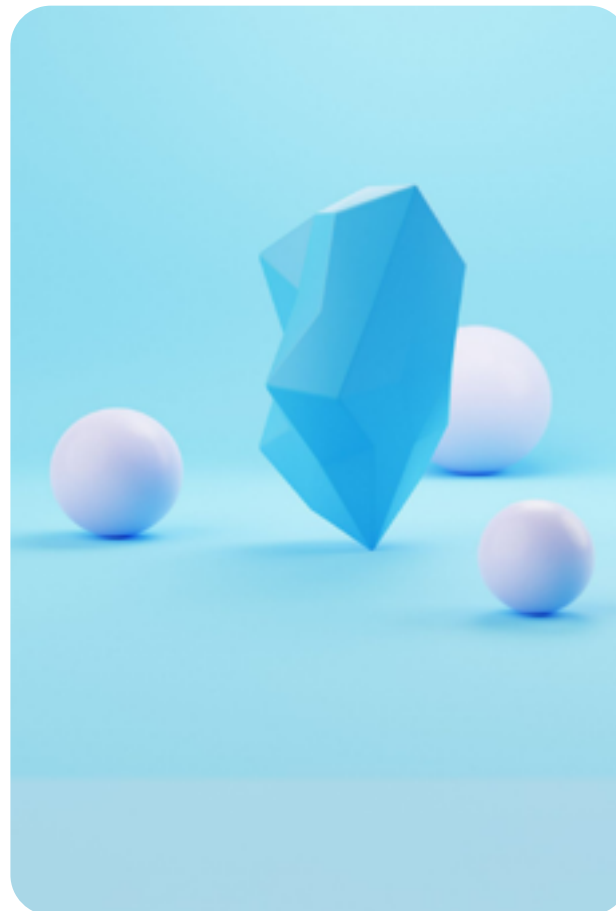


TABLE OF CONTENTS



01 SUMMARY	02
02 THE ACADEMIC LOUNGE CONCEPT	03
03 TABLE OF CONTENTS	05
04 INTRODUCTION	06
The shifting landscape of academia, driving the need for workplace change	07
Workplace strategy in higher education	08
Academic sharing: The gnarly challenge	11
05 THE ACADEMIC LOUNGE CONCEPT	12
The Big Idea: What if we had an airport business lounge, but for academics?	13
Emotionality and Functionality: Supporting the emotional needs and the functional needs equally	14
Emotional Emphasis	16
Digital Placemaking	18
06 SECTOR RESPONSE	19
07 CONCLUSION	21



01

INTRODUCTION

**WORKPLACE STRATEGIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND WHY
ACADEMIC SHARING REMAINS THE GNARLY CHALLENGE**

The shifting landscape of academia, driving the need for workplace change

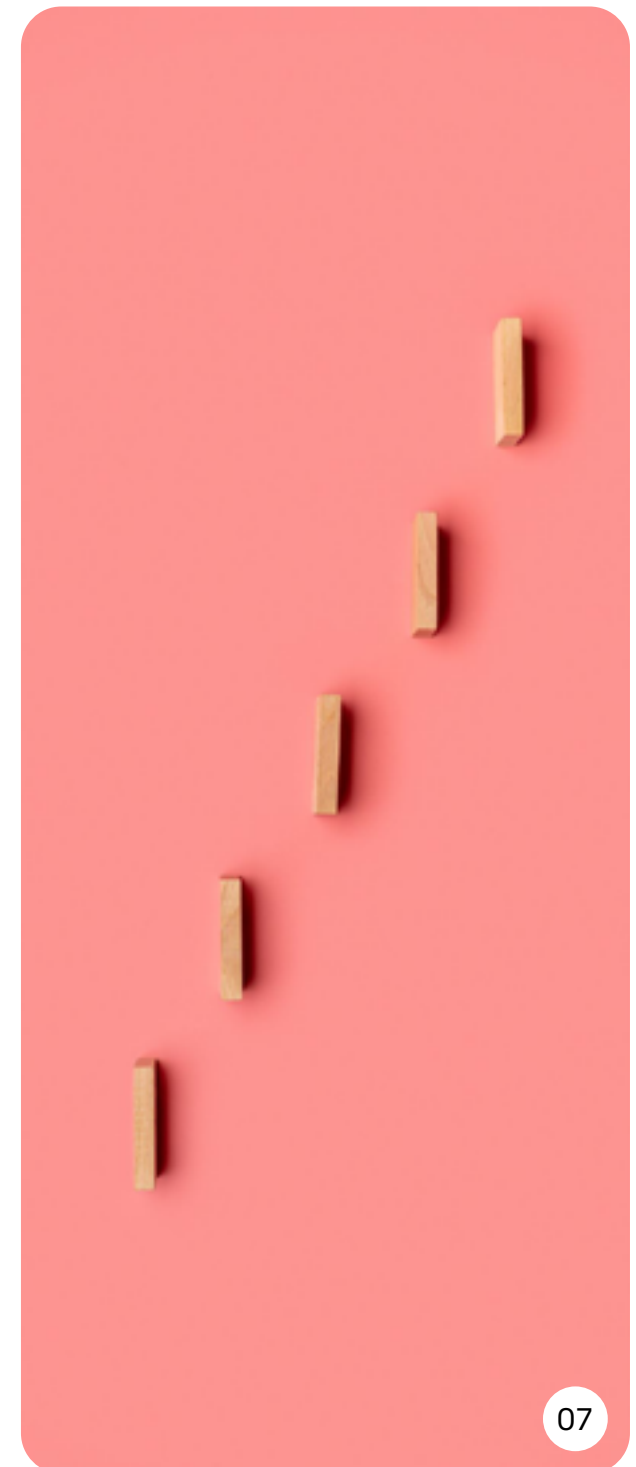
This white paper explores the challenges and opportunities associated with transitioning to more shared and flexible workspaces within higher education institutions. It introduces the Academic Lounge Concept, a novel approach developed by Veldhoen + Company, that aims to address the unique needs and concerns of academics while supporting the strategic goals of campus estate planning.



The higher education sector is undergoing a period of significant transformation, driven by several key factors:

- + **The imperative for cross-disciplinary collaboration:** The need to foster collaboration across disciplines to produce groundbreaking research and education is becoming increasingly crucial. This requires creating spaces that encourage interaction and knowledge sharing between academics from different fields.
- + **Evolving student expectations:** Students today have different expectations of their learning environments, shaped by the rise of remote work and study. They seek a human-centric campus experience that complements their online interactions and offers a rich blend of physical and digital learning opportunities.
- + **Intensifying funding pressures:** Universities face mounting pressure to operate more efficiently and effectively. Optimising space utilisation and reducing the overall footprint of campus estates are becoming key priorities for institutions grappling with financial constraints.

These converging trends are prompting a re-evaluation of traditional academic workspaces, which often rely on allocated private offices. While this model has historical roots and offers perceived benefits such as privacy and autonomy, it can also hinder collaboration, limit flexibility, and contribute to inefficient space usage.



Workplace strategy in higher education:

A spectrum of approaches

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to workplace strategy in higher education.

Institutions adopted different strategies based on specific circumstances and appetite for change. These strategies can be broadly categorised along two axes:

Scope of Implementation:

Whether the changes are implemented university-wide or at the faculty/unit level.

Allocation Strategy:

Whether workspaces are allocated by default (e.g., assigned private offices and workstations) or unallocated by default (e.g., a shared and flexible workspace model).

This creates four academic workplace strategy approaches, defined as:

ALLOCATED BY DEFAULT

THE UNIFIED STANDARD:

Stability and consistency across campus - with assigned workspaces for all.

Signals maintenance of traditional practices.

THE LEGACY MODEL:

Tradition in Local Hands - Faculty/Unit Level, Allocated by Default.

Traditional, allocated workspaces managed locally.

Signals preservation and identity.

UNIVERSITY WIDE

THE BOLD SHIFT:

Flexibility at Scale - University-Wide, Unallocated by Default.

A flexible, shared workspace model applied at scale to promote collaboration and efficiency.

Signals institution-wide innovation and change.

THE AGILE PILOT:

Flexibility Where It Fits - Faculty/Unit Level, Unallocated by Default.

Localised experiments with shared, flexible spaces tailored to specific faculty needs.

Signals experimentation and adaptability.

UNALLOCATED BY DEFAULT

FACULTY/UNIT WIDE

THE UNIFIED STANDARD:

This approach maintains traditional, allocated workspaces across the entire university. Representing stability and uniformity at scale, aligning the org. around clear, shared standards.

Opportunities:

- + Provides consistency and predictability across the institution
- + Supports predominantly individual work—a model familiar to academics and professional staff.

Challenges:

- + Space-intensive and costly to maintain.
- + Limits opportunities for flexibility and collaboration across disciplines.

THE BOLD SHIFT:

A shared, flexible workspace model across the institution. It prioritises collaboration, mobility, and adaptability over assigned desks or offices; whilst maintaining support for individual work.

Opportunities:

- + Encourages collaboration, cross-disciplinary interaction, and a dynamic campus environment.
- + Optimises space utilisation, reducing costs associated with underused real estate.

Challenges:

- + Requires significant cultural change, which can face resistance from academics accustomed to private workspaces.
- + Demands strong governance, support systems, and well-designed spaces to ensure adoption and success.
- + May struggle to meet the needs of disciplines or roles requiring high levels of individual focus or secure work areas.

THE LEGACY MODEL:

Faculties or units maintain control over their workplace strategy, typically defaulting to a traditional allocated workspace model. It reflects long-standing academic norms, where individual disciplines operate like “mini fiefdoms” with autonomy to manage their spaces.

Opportunities:

- + Allows faculties to tailor workplace arrangements to the specific needs of their discipline.
- + Preserves a sense of identity and ownership within each faculty/unit.
- + Minimises disruption for staff who value the stability of private offices and designated workstations.

Challenges:

- + Reinforces silos and may hinder collaboration across the broader university.
- + Can lead to inefficiencies in space utilisation and increased operational costs.
- + Creates inconsistencies in workplace experience across faculties, limiting opportunities for shared innovation.

THE AGILE PILOT:

Faculties or units to experiment with shared, flexible workspaces on a localised level. It enables small-scale testing of innovative workplace strategies, serving as a stepping stone for broader adoption across the institution.

Opportunities:

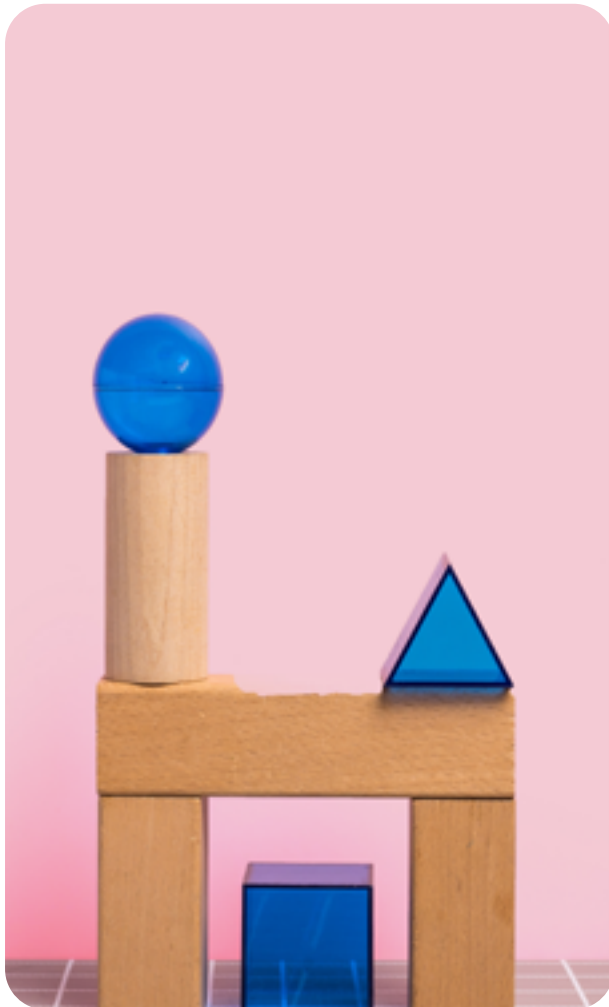
- + Supports innovation and experimentation, allowing faculties to adapt workplace strategy to their unique needs.
- + Provides proof-of-concept for flexible workspace models, building momentum for broader change.
- + Optimises space within specific units that are open to adopting more agile ways of working.

Challenges:

- + Risks creating a fragmented campus experience, with varying levels of support, consistency, and success across faculties.
- + Requires clear leadership, consultation, and design to ensure effective implementation.
- + Change fatigue can occur if experimentation is poorly communicated or lacks long-term vision.

The choice of the most appropriate approach depends on factors such as institutional culture, academic work practices, available resources, and the level of stakeholder buy-in.

We asked Campus Estate leaders from 20 Higher Education institutions to indicate where their universities current workplace strategy sits in the context of the framework.



44% indicated they had The Unified Standard: Stability Across Campus model.

33% indicated they had The Legacy Model: Tradition in Local Hands model.

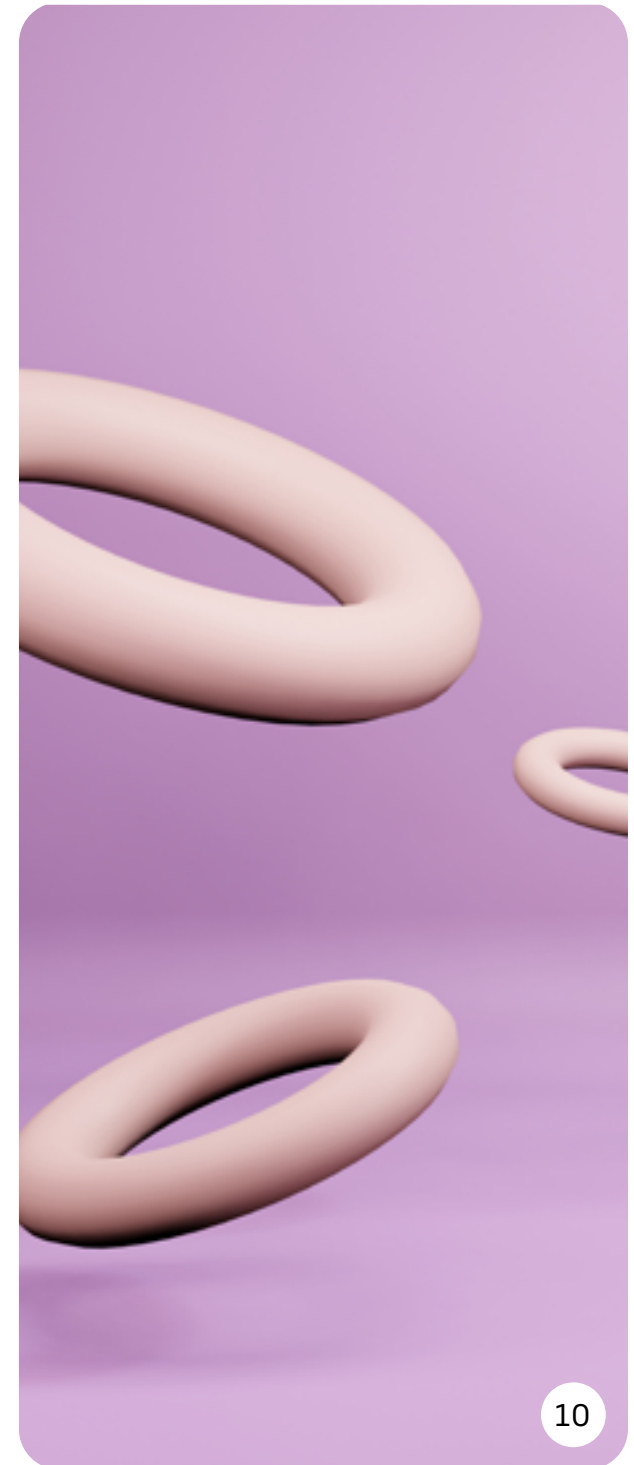
10% indicated they had The Bold Shift: Flexibility at Scale model.

10% indicated they had The Agile Pilot: Flexibility Where It Fits model.

We then asked them to indicate where they thought their universities should be on the grid.

90% indicated they their university would benefit from The Bold Shift model.

10% indicated they their university would benefit from The Legacy Model model.



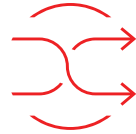
Academic Sharing: The Gnarly Challenge

Despite the potential benefits of shared and flexible workspaces, transitioning to such models in higher education has proven to be a persistent challenge. Several factors contribute to this “gnarly challenge,” including:



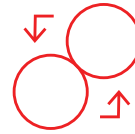
HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE OF ACADEMIC OFFICES:

Academic offices have deep historical roots and are often seen as symbols of status, identity, and belonging within the university structure. This historical context can make it difficult to challenge the traditional model and implement change.



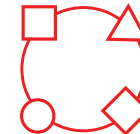
MIXED EXPERIENCES WITH SHARED WORKING ENVIRONMENTS:

Studies on activity-based working (i.e. workspace sharing) in higher education have shown mixed results, with some academics reporting increased productivity and collaboration, while others experience challenges related to concentration, privacy, and a sense of belonging. These mixed experiences can create resistance to change.



CONSULTATION AND IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORT ISSUES:

Successful transitions to shared workspaces require careful consultation with academics to understand their needs and concerns and to address them through thoughtful design and implementation. Insufficient consultation and support can lead to negative experiences and resistance.



DIVERSE AND DYNAMIC NATURE OF ACADEMIC WORK:

Academic work is diverse and dynamic, with academics engaging in a wide range of activities, including research, teaching, student supervision, and administration. The types and proportions of these activities continually change depending on a range of interconnected factors such as role type, semesters, and field of study.

02

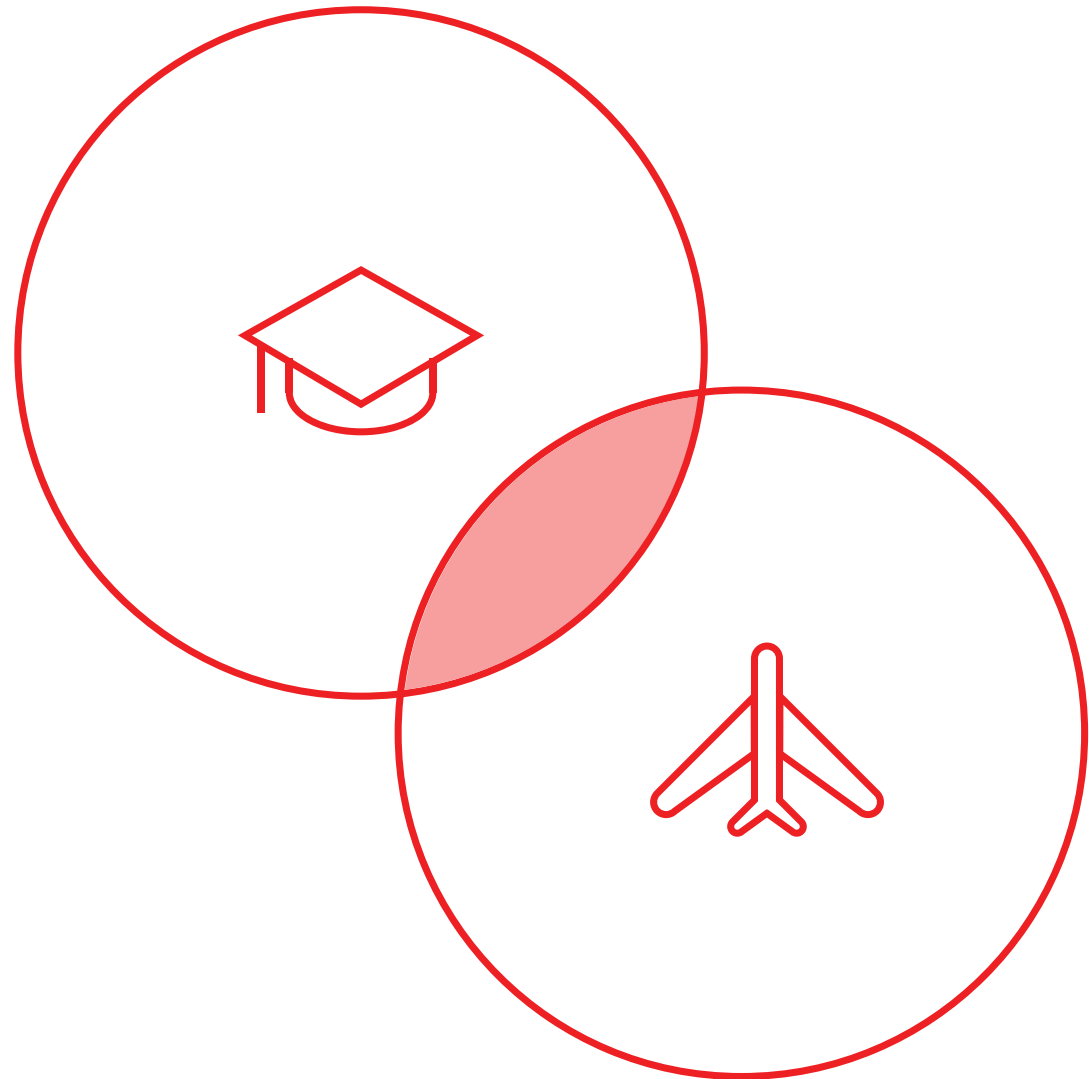
THE ACADEMIC LOUNGE CONCEPT

The Big Idea: What if we had an airport business lounge, but for academics?

To address these challenges, Veldhoen + Company has developed the Academic Lounge Concept, a novel approach that draws inspiration from the experience and functionality of airport business lounges. The concept recognises that transitioning to shared workspaces requires addressing both the functional and emotional needs of academics.

Key Elements of the Academic Lounge Concept:

- + **Pride, Place, and Prestige:** the concept aims to create a workspace environment that enhances academics' emotional connection to their work, fostering a sense of pride in their achievements, belonging within their community, and prestige associated with their professional identity.
- + **Contemplation, Collaboration, and Collegiality:** the concept prioritises the functional needs for academics including enclosed private spaces for scholarly work, online teaching, and quiet contemplation; spaces that support a variety of mode of collaboration; and spaces that promote social interaction and ad hoc knowledge sharing.



Emotionality and Functionality:

Supporting the emotional needs and the functional needs equally

EMOTIONALITY



PRIDE

The workplace is a source of pride, providing a personalised space that highlights their achievements and contributions to the academic community.



PLACE

Reinforces the identity of academics, grounding them in a physical space that reflects their role, discipline, and personal dedication to their field.



PRESTIGE

Represents a form of prestige, a symbol of status and the legacy of academic achievements.

FUNCTIONALITY



CONTEMPLATION

A balance of spaces encouraging academics to reflect, research, and work deeply in a quiet refuge and an environment for relaxation and cognitive recharge.



COLLABORATION

Provision for engagement and intellectual exchange - collaboration that transcends time and place, learning, and innovative discussions.



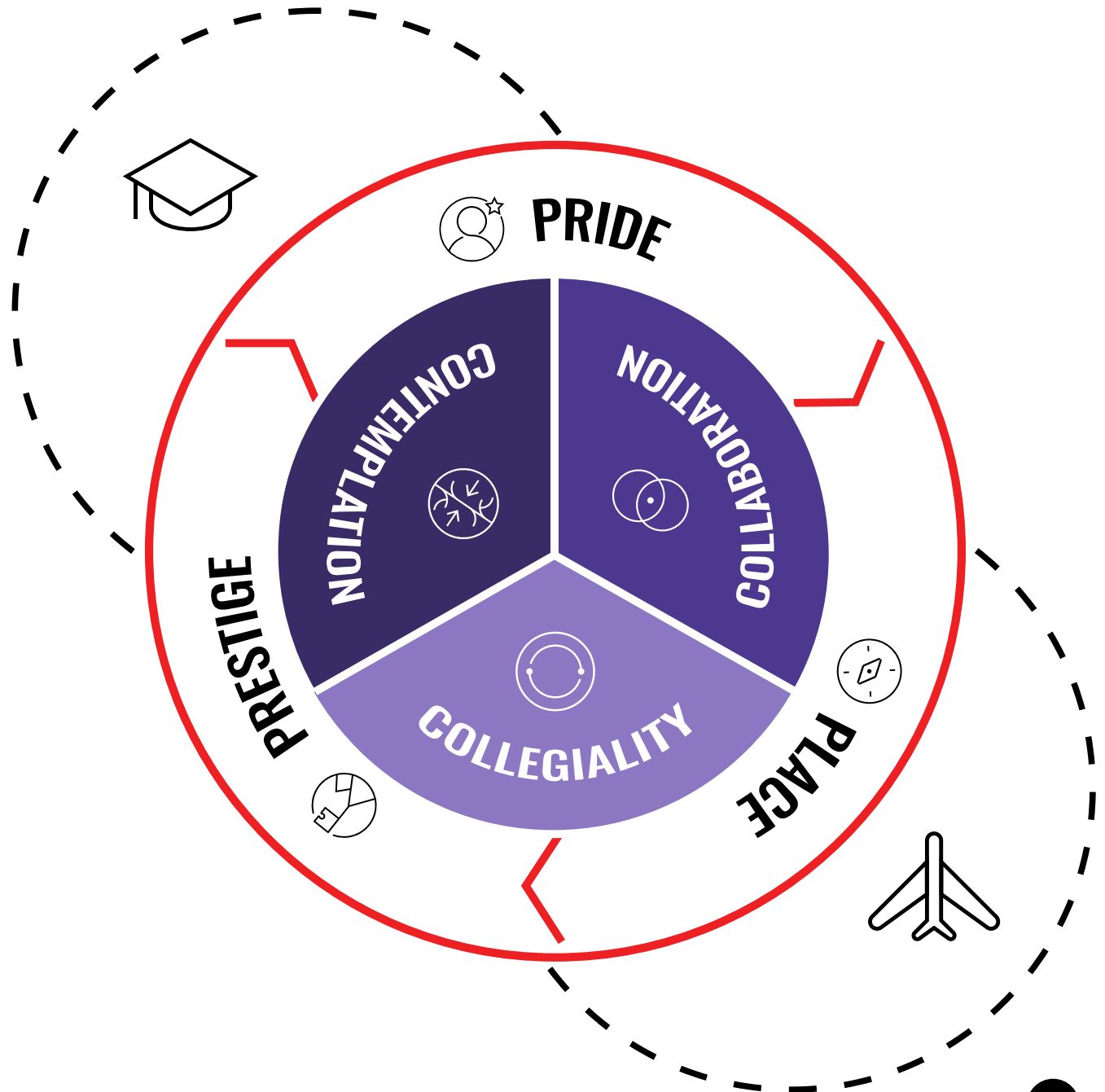
COLLEGIALITY

A warm, welcoming space for social interaction, networking, and shared experiences, that celebrates the identity and achievements of the academic community.

A traditional academic workplace relies on trust, with dedicated spaces for focus, collaboration, learning, and social connection.

A business lounge is designed around experience, featuring dedicated areas for reception, networking spaces for casual conversations and group discussions, and wellness zones for relaxation and recharging.

The Academic Lounge is crafted around identity and experience, offering spaces that foster collegiality and social interactions, support collaboration and cognitive engagement, and provide quiet zones for contemplation and individual work.



Emotional Emphasis

Why is it that we assert that the Academic Lounge Concept must place an equal amount of focus on the emotional needs of the academic groups as well as the functional needs?

In our experience in introducing time and place independent ways of working precipitates a greater disruption to the emotional needs (identity, belonging, recognition) than the functional needs (scholarly pursuits). We base this on our extensive engagement with academic groups across a range of universities.

When discussing potential changes to academic workspaces, certain concerns are readily and frequently voiced, while others remain largely unspoken, though no less significant. This reveals a discrepancy between the surface-level, practical objections to shared workspaces and the deeper, emotional anxieties that often go unexpressed.

Concerns that are frequently and openly expressed often revolve around the perceived functional drawbacks of moving away from the traditional model of allocated offices.

These commonly voiced concerns include:

- + **Disruption to high-focus and confidential work:** Academics express worries about the potential for noise and distractions in shared spaces to impede their ability to concentrate on demanding tasks and maintain the privacy of sensitive information.
- + **Impact on student-faculty interaction:** The shift away from dedicated offices raises questions about how to effectively manage student consultations, supervision, and support.
- + **Accessibility of resources:** Concerns persist, though perhaps less prominently in the post-pandemic world, regarding the availability and accessibility of books and materials in a shared workspace environment.

In contrast to these readily articulated practical concerns, there exists a set of deeper, more emotionally charged anxieties that are rarely voiced in open discussions, particularly in group settings.

These unspoken concerns centre around:

- + **Academic identity and belonging:** The office, in its traditional form, has become deeply intertwined with academic identity, representing years of hard work and achievement. The prospect of losing this dedicated space can evoke feelings of insecurity and a diminished sense of belonging within the institution.
- + **Perceived devaluation of scholarly pursuits:** The changes to the academic landscape, including funding pressures and evolving work practices, can contribute to a sense of unease among academics. Some may interpret the shift toward shared workspaces as further evidence that the institution no longer values traditional scholarly endeavours.
- + **The office as a sanctuary:** For many academics, the office provides not only a functional workspace but also a safe and private haven from the demands of their work. The potential loss of this sanctuary can be a source of significant anxiety, particularly for those who rely on their office as a space for emotional processing and restoration.

THE STAKES AT PLAY



**SPOKEN
OFTEN**

- + I need my office to support high focus confidential work
- + I can't change the way I work
- + I need my office to meet my students and colleagues
- + I need my office to have all books and other material always in reach



**SPOKEN
RARELY**

- + I worked hard to get my office
- + My office symbolises status and provides a sense of belonging
- + I don't agree to the way my university is changing and is managed
- + The university no longer values scholarly pursuits
- + The university sector has changed significantly, I do not want more change
- + My role as an academic has become precarious
- + I sometimes need a secluded space to cry



This contrast between spoken and unspoken concerns underscores the importance of a nuanced and sensitive approach to implementing changes in academic workspaces. Acknowledging and addressing both the functional and emotional needs of academics is crucial for ensuring a successful transition to a more time and place

independent way of working. We advocate for a consultative and co-creative process, engaging academics in shaping their future ways of working and the workspaces that will support them; and in incorporating solutions, such as digital placemaking, that can effectively support both their practical needs and their sense of identity and belonging.

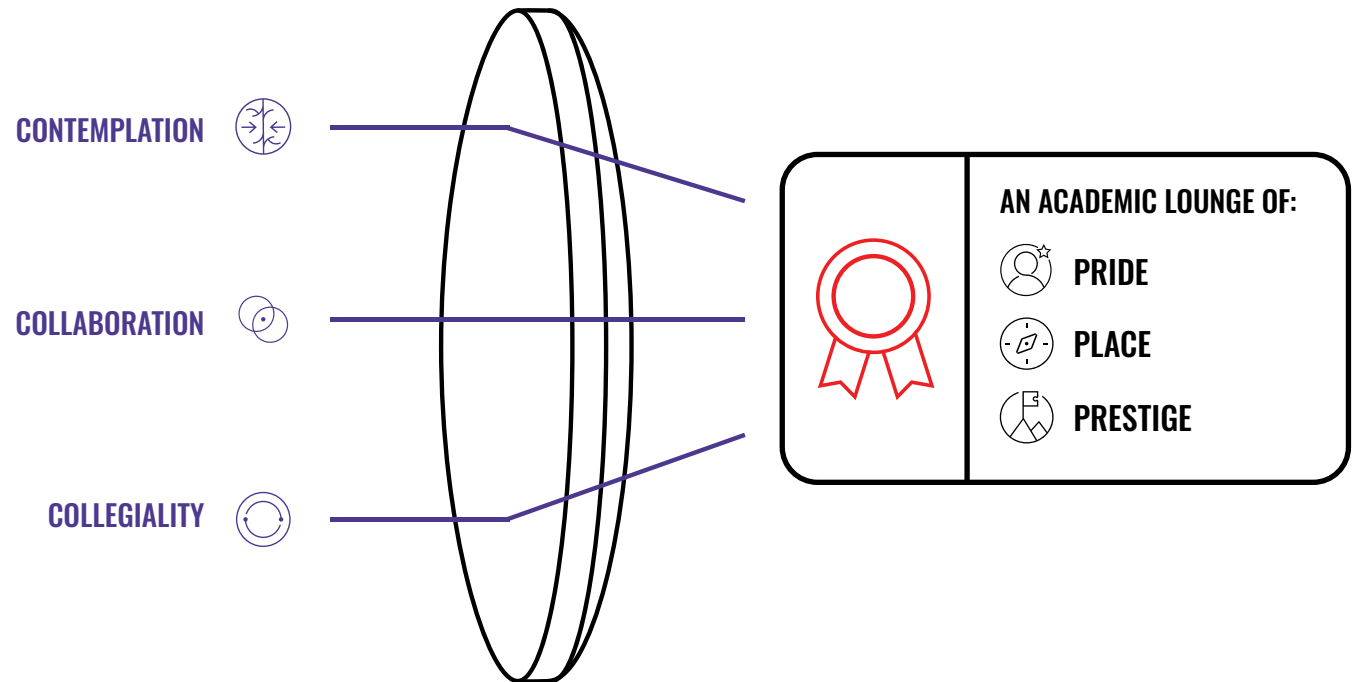
Digital Placemaking

In an unallocated model such as the Academic Lounge, digital placemaking plays a crucial role in fostering a sense of identity, belonging, and connection. This concept, designed to address the challenges of transitioning academic workspaces to a more time and place independent approach, acknowledges the emotional impact of such a change, particularly the potential displacement of academic identity tied to traditional allocated offices.

Digital placemaking is a way to compensate for this potential loss by creating a digital space that can replicate and even enhance the sense of community and recognition previously associated with physical offices. It aims to achieve this by:

- + **Fostering collective recognition and celebration:** Highlighting individual and collective achievements within the academic community.
- + **Sparking curiosity and a culture of knowledge sharing:** Encouraging the exchange of ideas and research findings.
- + **Prompting new research collaboration avenues:** Facilitating connections between academics with shared interests and goals.
- + **Creating a shared identity:** Building a stronger sense of community within the academic space.

DIGITAL PLACEMAKING



BRICKS
The built environment



BYTES
Digital platforms & virtual space



BEHAVIOUR
The culture, rituals & rhythms of work

The scale of the technical solution is not critical to success; the solutions range from sophisticated and expensive platforms to smaller, more modest tools. Critical to success will instead be a thoughtful and curated approach to content that caters to the specific needs of the academic community.

03

SECTOR RESPONSE

Veldhoen + Company have engaged with campus estate leaders throughout the sector to gauge their initial response to the concept.

This is what we found:

The Need to Think Differently

There has been a broad acknowledgment of the concept's potential to address the evolving needs of academic work.

- + An opportunity "to create a more vibrant and interactive academic community"
- + "It's a massive change, long overdue"
- + Potential to shift "the culture and mentality around the office as a symbol of status and belonging."

Focus on Implementation and Feasibility

Many focused on the practical aspects of implementing such a concept, highlighting concerns related to funding, the need for piloting and careful change management, and ensuring buy-in from users.

- + Ensure the concept is "piloted to demonstrate its effectiveness and address concerns before widespread implementation."
- + Increase the likelihood of success by ensuring "funding [is] available to create a truly high-quality and well-equipped space."

The Role of Leadership and Culture

A recurring theme has been the importance of strong leadership support and a culture that embraces change. There is a need for university leaders to champion the new workspace model and for a shift in institutional culture to fully realise the potential benefits of a more collaborative and flexible work environment.

- + A critical success factor will be "leadership actively supported and promoted the concept to encourage adoption"

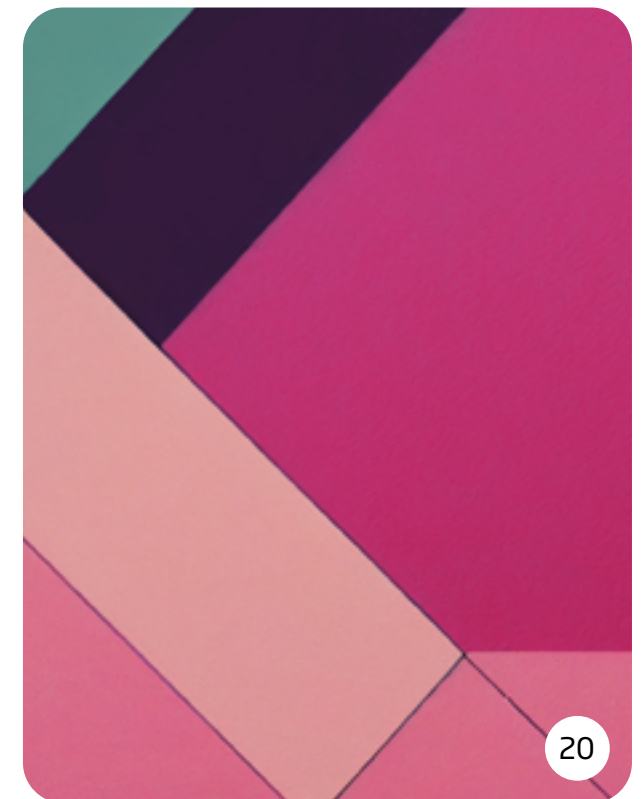
Importance of Addressing User Needs and Concerns

It was seen as critical to address the needs and concerns of academics throughout the design and implementation process. This includes addressing issues related to privacy, student interaction, access to resources, and ensuring a sense of belonging and identity within the shared workspace.

- + Ensure the solution provides "options for private, quiet spaces for focused work and confidential conversations."
- + Provide consultation whereby "academics felt genuinely listened to and their concerns were addressed during the design process"

These themes highlight the complexity of implementing significant workplace changes in academic settings. While there has been strong sector interest and a recognition of the need for evolution, success hinges on addressing practical considerations, carefully managing the change process, and prioritising the diverse needs of academics.

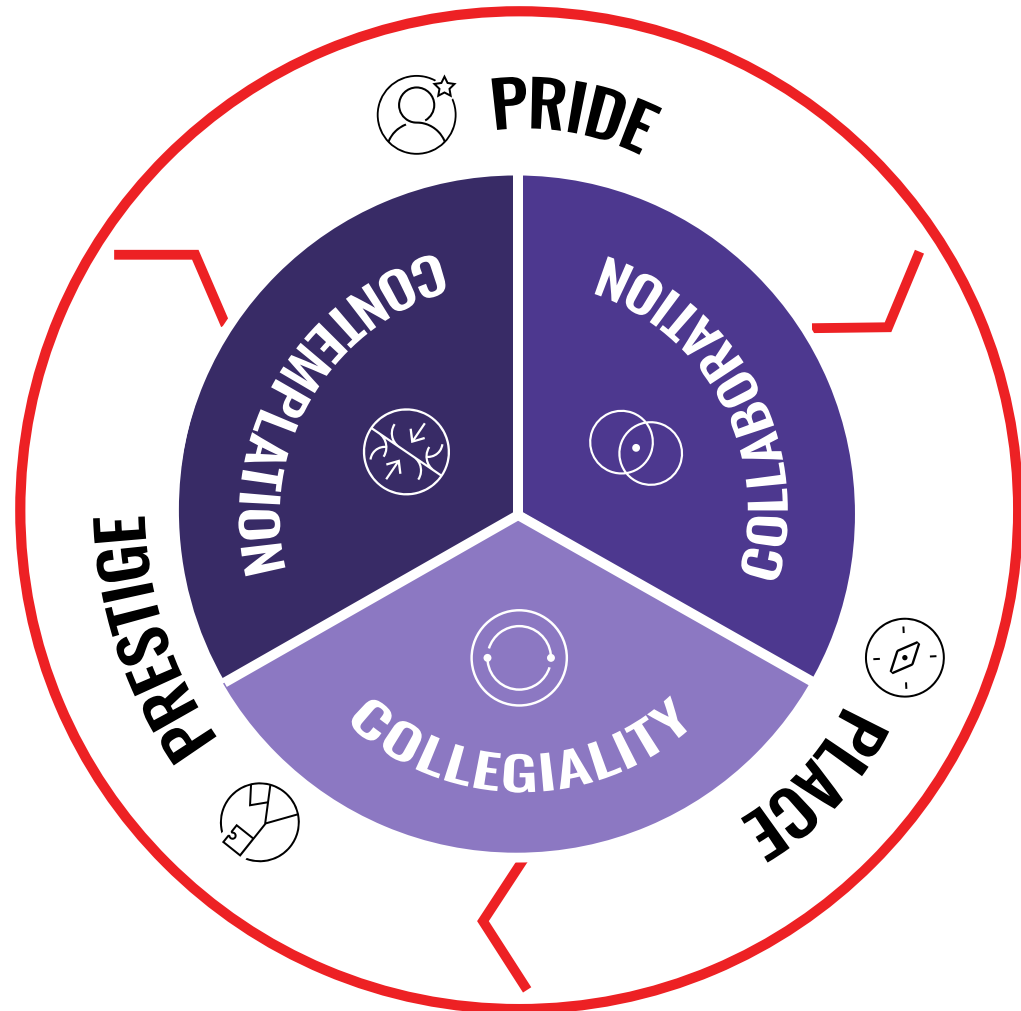
Seen from this perspective, the Academic Lounge concept is not only a built environment solution but also a stakeholder engagement framework for navigating these complexities, offering a potential pathway towards creating a modern and dynamic academic workspace that supports both individual and collective success.



04 CONCLUSION

The Academic Lounge concept presents a forward-thinking approach to reimagining academic workspaces. By addressing the historical and cultural significance of individual offices and the challenges associated with shared workspaces, it seeks to provide an innovative solution that aligns with the diverse needs of academics. Drawing on the successful elements of airport business lounges, this concept prioritises both the functional and emotional requirements of academics. It offers a way forward that emphasises a sense of **pride, place, and prestige** while supporting essential activities such as **contemplation, collaboration, and collegiality**. Moreover, the integration of digital placemaking enhances connection, recognition, and networking opportunities, ensuring the space is future-focused and technologically adept.

The Academic Lounge is not a prescriptive model but a flexible framework that evolves through consultation and co-creation with academic communities. By tailoring the space to meet specific needs and aligning it with institutional goals, the concept addresses key concerns like productivity, concentration, privacy, and academic identity. This collaborative approach ensures that the resulting workspace resonates deeply with users and provides an environment that not only supports but enhances the multifaceted roles of modern academics.



REVOLUTIONISING ACADEMIC WORKSPACES

CONNECT WTH V+C

Dr. Eileen Sim 

Consultant

(AU) +61 477 959 664

eileen@veldhoencompany.com

Madalena De Barros 

Country Lead Australia/NZ

(AU) +61 400 735 107

madalena@veldhoencompany.com

www.veldhoencompany.com