

Understanding the effects of the Hobart Apartments student accommodation community garden project

Report One: Leadership and Management

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March 2020



Healthy Landscapes Research Group

The Healthy Landscapes Research Group is critically examining the impacts of the development of community gardens at the UTAS student accommodation sites in the city.

The aim of this mixed-methods research project is to understand broad impacts of community gardens on:

- subjective experiences of health, wellbeing and quality of life;
- opportunities for meaningful interactions between students and the broader community;
- patterns of interaction in the space – human with non-human nature;
- student and community sense of connectedness with nature;
- students with rural backgrounds sense of ease and capacity to complete their studies; and
- student and community trust in the University.

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Executive summary

The University of Tasmania is beginning the journey to shift focus from Sandy Bay into the Hobart CBD. One of the first steps on this journey is to improve the public landscape and integration of the Melville St student accommodation into the CBD through a community garden. This provides a tremendous opportunity to track the impact of the shift on the health and wellbeing of the student body, local communities, and the environment. Our research project, funded by the DVCRs office, aims to understand how an inner-city student accommodation community garden project can benefit the health and wellbeing of students, the broader community.

The first phase of this research project has now been completed, which involved qualitative, quantitative and observational data collection and analysis before the community garden was installed. Methods used included interviews, focus groups, observational studies of public use of the space, and an online survey. The purpose of this report is to inform future management of the community garden site as it develops. The second phase of the project will collect and analyse data after the community garden has been established (late 2020, COVID-19 restrictions permitting).

The Phase One research identified four critical areas for ongoing leadership and management:

- i. While the public spaces within the City Apartments site are perceived in both positive (e.g. modern, restful, suitable for activities) and negative (e.g. cold, draft, underutilised) terms, people were passing through rather than using the space, and were unclear about who the spaces are intended for;
- ii. Greening interventions such as a community garden were seen as a great way to improve the public spaces, that would have benefits for people's wellbeing and social connections;
- iii. The surrounding retail community was concerned that there has been limited interaction with Melville St students and engagement from UTas concerning the shift of the campus to the city. While there was some optimism that the shift to the city could help create a more vibrant city, there was concern that the sense of place and community were not being respected; and
- iv. Urban greening professionals were concerned that a proposed garden needed a management model to be sustainable, but optimistic that a community garden could be a hub that helps integrate UTas with the local community and foster interactions and collaboration with other urban greening entities in the city.

In summary, a community garden was seen as a worthy initiative that could improve the public spaces at the Melville St accommodation, and potentially help integrate UTas and the student body into the local community and broader urban greening community. However, success for the community garden (and the broader shift of the campus into the city) is dependent on respectful engagement and improved relations with the local community, the integration of the student body into the broader community, and the adoption of sustainable management practices.



Project background

As the University of Tasmania (University) moves to a city campus model, there is a need to integrate development of health-promoting green spaces and to track their impacts on both the student body and nearby communities, as well as the environmental health of the city. Aligning the development of green spaces with UTAS strategic directions (place-based, responsive, people centred and linked in) provides opportunities for strong relationships with the city community and within the existing urban greening movement, improved student wellbeing and educational outcomes.

This report provides a brief overview of findings from the first stage of this research, undertaken at the City Apartments site, prior to any active community garden development on site.

The focus of this report is on implications for leadership and management into the future as UTAS move into the city of Hobart continues.

Project Aim

The project aimed to understand how an inner-city student accommodation community garden project can benefit the health and wellbeing of students, the broader community, and the environment by exploring impacts on:

- subjective experiences of health, wellbeing and quality of life;
- opportunities for meaningful interactions between students and the broader community;
- student and community sense of connectedness with nature;
- students with rural backgrounds sense of ease with the city and capacity to complete their studies; and
- student and community trust in the University.

Methods

The first phase involved qualitative, quantitative and observational data collection and analysis.¹

Method	Data Collection	Stakeholder Participation
Survey	Online	Students residing in UTAS city accommodation (n=51)
Public Life Observation (Gehl)	Researcher observation (7 hrs, various time periods, 4 days) Video Footage (14 hrs, various time periods, 4 days)	Members of the public utilising the spaces
Interviews	Semi-structured in depth, face-to-face, in surrounding Midtown businesses	Local Business employees and owners (15 sites)
Interviews	Semi-structured, brief, face-to-face	Members of the public utilising the public outdoor space (n=20)
Focus Group	2-hour semi-structured discussion	Urban green practitioners and community gardeners (n=10)

¹The questionnaire results and a separate study of biodiversity through air and soil samples for microbial analysis are not included in this preliminary report as analysis has been delayed due to the COVID-19 response.

Findings and Implications

Phase One findings identify four critical areas for ongoing leadership and management:

- i. how the public spaces within the City Apartments site are used and perceived;
- ii. opportunities for improving the public spaces;
- iii. managing change respectfully with businesses and community;
- iv. sustainable, beneficial community gardening.

Quiet and private, or empty and cold? Use and Perceptions

Some participants describe the City Apartments public spaces in positive terms:

- industrial with 'eye catching' modern, concrete blocks like an installation
- open and quiet with an accessible car park and a café area where they can meet
- restful and a quiet place for students
- good for events and activities (i.e. the larger space off Brisbane Street)
- a place with plenty of potential to engage community and encourage interaction

Others describe the spaces in less welcoming terms:

- cold, drafty, underutilised and too quiet with nobody stopping or spending time there
- limited sun and high exposure to wind, especially in the laneway through the middle
- architecturally cold from the widespread use of concrete
- lacking connection with the surrounding community

The majority of students, public and local businesses using the spaces were walking through from the car park or the accommodation - taking a short cut rather than stopping and spending time.

It is unclear to many who the spaces are intended for: if they are private spaces entirely for student use, or if the public can also use them. For example, some local businesses know the public can use the café but aren't sure about going through to the space at the back; other participants think the whole space, café included, is only for students. The screen in front of the café appears more public than the laneway and the back space, but some feel neither space is 'activated' or engages community or students.

Key implications:

- Mixed perceptions by current users and surrounding businesses;
- Largely considered a (missed) opportunity for accessible, comfortable, attractive, active and sociable spaces.

Green, welcoming and healthy: opportunities for improvement

Greening the space, connecting with nature and creating social interactions was associated with positive health and wellbeing outcomes and social responsibility as a global citizen. Participants suggested the spaces need to have trees, more green, wind protection and less concrete.

Green spaces are seen as calming, de-stressing, positive and wanted in the city, especially if away from traffic noise and buildings. A community garden was seen as a progressive step for student wellbeing, as a valuable means of engaging them with the broader community and also as an opportunity for urban agroecology and sustainability. Waste management and compost systems incorporated into the existing accommodation and any new University buildings were suggested.

Concerns over the wellbeing and mental health of the students staying in the City Apartment building were raised, and participants felt it was important that people don't mentally 'separate out' students. Rather, students are part of the broader community.

Suggestions to make the spaces more comfortable include putting chairs, grass to lie on, a children's slide, bean bags, couches, a fountain or water feature.

A more welcome site would encourage engagement particularly through events and activities, including pop-up bars and rotating performing musicians and bands. Others suggest community yoga or laughing groups, community exercise or relaxation, with a roster of people to be the instructors. Adding a basketball court was favoured by one business. Several felt the enclosed space along Elizabeth Street could also be improved by removing the glass front and adding greenery. Another suggested turning the vacant internal spaces into a museum, and becoming an information point about the town.

Key implications:

- Widespread support for greening of the space, and for a community garden in particular;
- Appreciation of the wellbeing benefits from green space, social connections and sustainable agroecology;
- Incorporation of public events with local businesses welcome.

Collaboration and Vibrancy: Managing change with businesses and community

Several businesses near the City Apartments feel disappointed with UTAS communication and consultation to date. They feel they were not presented with a clear, or accurate, vision for the site development and that it was not followed by action with their involvement.

Several local businesses are very optimistic about the broader University move to the city, although few had noticed the direct impact from students to date. Most businesses say they were told the student accommodation would bring retail benefits to the area but almost all stated profitability is low as students are not necessarily able to frequent the retail outlets, cafes or bars.

Participants feel it is critical that the University brings the community along with the city changes, engages them directly in the development process and allows community to collaborate on the proposed models. One local business pointed out that it is important the new spaces welcome community as well and are not purely student focused, and emphasised the importance of continuing to keep talking and (re)building the relationship with community.

Several raised issues around social responsibility with resources and the perception that the University has a lot of money but is not necessarily using it responsibly, particularly in the broader context of disadvantage in the state.

Some see the site as a significant opportunity for creating vibrancy of the city, particularly in the mid-town area. One business noted that as the City Apartments site was being built the vacant shops in the area filled if a business is inside, their customers are potentially positively influenced, and this can feed into community perception and experience. One local organisation interacting with students also sees enhanced opportunities to work with the University due to its closer proximity.

However, some participants saw the move to the city as merely adding to overcrowding and to the parking, transport and poverty 'woes' Hobart already has. Others saw a 'loss of identity' for the University reflecting on the Sandy Bay campus stating that the main campus provided a sense of connection for University students and a central place with an identity. Others were concerned as the University bought buildings throughout the city noting a potential change to the fabric of Hobart itself. Finally, some participants raised concerns that the University was catering to international students rather than local communities and putting their needs ahead of Tasmanians.

Key implications:

- The City Apartments are located within a city precinct that considers itself not as a street of individual traders, but as a community;
- Students rarely visit the Midtown businesses, businesses are not regularly involved in the student accommodation sites;
- Changing the leadership style to be characterised by good communication, collaboration and integrity was seen as critical;
- The context of local disadvantage requires due consideration and accommodation.

Empty raised beds or sustainable, health-benefitting community gardening?

Establishing, managing and sustaining a community garden was the central focus of the urban green practitioner discussion. Participants highlighted the need for professional horticultural management and/or a facilitator to ensure the success of a community garden, and noted that community gardens often failed where sustainable, ongoing management of sites were not adopted.

Once the garden is up and running successfully, activities to increase community participation and engagement can be incorporated. It was noted that volunteers and students will come and go depending on the time of year, other commitments and the university calendar, and so having a manager and a small core of workers, staff or small community group would be required to keep the community garden going all year.

Implementation of a community garden may require a multi-staged approach, but participants saw an opportunity to make the garden a hub, with interaction and collaboration from other urban agroecology projects and gardening entities in the city. Having a very clear strategy which is resourced for ongoing maintenance and activities is essential. The strategy needs to articulate the integration of the space into the city, with community, local business and student engagement.

Key implications:

- Sustainability and success will be enabled by stable management e.g. through a paid community garden coordinator and professional horticultural input;
- Potential for the garden to function as an educational, social and community hub;
- There is a lot of good will in Hobart around community gardening and there is an opportunity for the university to build on that good will.



Aligning UTAS Community Gardens with the UTAS Strategic Plan

Direction	Message	Actions
Place based and regionally focused	Community members, businesses and students told us they want public spaces in Hobart that are greener (and hence better for health, wellbeing and environment) and more comfortable, welcoming and active. Creating opportunities in the city can help shape the future of the state.	Work with local community, businesses, organisations and students around a shared vision and build opportunities. Draw on in-house expertise, local good will and multi-sectoral advice.
Responsive, accessible and vibrant	In a regional island setting with a small population, socio-spatial developments must be suitable for all Tasmanians. Spaces must be more accessible and at the same time vibrant and active without 'overcrowding' an already busy city.	Reflect the diversity and interests of our community in developments. Create spaces which are accessible and that clearly show who they are for and their intended use. Create vibrancy in the city in collaboration with the city community.
People centred	Communities must be brought along on the journey to a city campus model – successfully changing the model will depend on community ownership and leadership. Collaboration and communication with students, businesses and community are critical.	Be strategic and thorough with communication and engagement. Build partnerships and coalitions with public- and private-sector organisations and the broader community. Allow communities to utilise their own assets and lead urban-green space solutions. Finance positions to coordinate people-centred green spaces.
Link in with broader processes and networks	The Hobart City Council-led mid-town redevelopment process has involved focused consultation on how to improve the socio-spatial elements of the mid-town precinct. There is a dynamic sustainable community gardening and urban greening movement in Tasmania.	Link accommodation with green space development that draws on expertise and experience; these include linking in with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • existing urban greening movements in Hobart • current mid-town redevelopment processes.