



Global Futures, Global Citizens and Enhancing the Student Experience: A Curtin Model

Farida Fozdar

Dean, Global Futures, Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia

*Correspondence: farida.fozdar@curtin.edu.au

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores a number of initiatives of Curtin University’s Faculty of Humanities designed to respond to the changing tertiary environment, new opportunities for improving the student experience, and a growing recognition of the need to graduate globally competent citizens. It describes two initiatives: a new graduate degree aimed at producing globally-aware, interdisciplinarily competent, real-world-ready graduates; and a pilot project implementing challenge-based learning focused on topics relevant to sustainability, indigenous knowledge, learning, and global futures. In 2022, the Faculty introduced four capability platforms with the goal of breaking down disciplinary silos. These platforms are designed to experiment with new methods of learning and to enhance engagement and research opportunities. In a related move, the Faculty introduced a new Master of Global Engagement in 2024, which employs an innovative stacked structure combining a new Graduate Certificate in Global Engagement with existing Graduate Certificates to provide greater disciplinary flexibility and more global perspectives. Each initiative incorporates digital integration in multidisciplinary curriculum design, along with a range of other pedagogical innovations. This paper outlines the initiatives, the rationale and impetus driving these innovations, and initial reflections on their success.

KEYWORDS: Challenge-based learning; global citizenship; real world; futures platforms; Australian Universities Accord

1. Introduction

The world is facing a range of crises globally, including international conflicts and geopolitical tensions, the rising cost of living and inequalities, climate change and food security, migration and refugee crises, human rights abuses, the social and ethical implications of advances in technology, ideological extremism, and more. Simultaneously, higher education is undergoing a significant transformation, influenced by globalisation, market forces, changing workplace demands, technological advances, funding reconfigurations, and evolving societal expectations, particularly around the function of universities [1]. Over the last decade or more, pedagogical and technological innovations have changed how education is approached. Rather than relying solely on the traditional ‘chalk and talk’ approach to engage with some of these global challenges, universities are becoming more responsive, breaking down disciplinary boundaries and broadening teaching styles to enable hands-on, real-world learning and industry

engagement. Online learning platforms were embraced, theoretically making education more accessible, allowing distance learning and flexible mixed-mode options to cater to the needs of an increasingly diverse student body. However, these platforms also reduced face-to-face interaction and the social dimension of the university experience. Hybrid models combining in-person and virtual classes emerged, supporting a range of learning styles and preferences, but also posing challenges in providing sufficient content and equivalent experiences in synchronous and asynchronous modes [2, 3]. The integration of digital technologies thus remains a challenge in this space.

Content and learning methods more closely tied to industry have also become common. Institutions have introduced or expanded work-integrated learning opportunities such as placements and internships, research collaborations, and industry partnerships, with the goal of graduating students with the capacity to integrate smoothly into the workforce. However, there is some concern that this approach panders to the capitalist profit motive, assumes the irrelevance of non-applied knowledge, fractures disciplinary cohesion, and destabilises the role of the university as a knowledge producer and distributor, rather than functioning as an apprenticeship model of tertiary training [4].

The Australian government recently released a vision for higher education that proposed a dramatic increase in the size and accessibility of universities, requiring institutions to reach a broader audience. The Australian Universities Accord Final Report aimed to reform the sector to better meet the needs of students, employers, and the broader community [5]. A key focus was on creating a more equitable and sustainable system, given the increasing transfer of costs to individual students and its reliance on international student fees; addressing challenges such as accessibility, affordability; and aligning educational outcomes with labour market demands. While the Accord recognised that international education made an important contribution to Australian tertiary education—economically, through regional and global impact, and by adding to local diversity and cultural richness, as well as providing avenues for soft diplomacy and international connections—it sought to fine-tune how it was being used as a migration pathway.

The mantra that graduates must be equipped with the skills necessary for success in an increasingly competitive job market, and therefore that universities must be innovative, agile, and responsive, has become standard, and appears throughout the document. In the context of rapidly developing technology, the Accord encourages universities to innovate in teaching and learning approaches, integrating new technologies and methodologies to enhance student engagement and outcomes. This challenge was particularly relevant in a post-COVID context, where students have proved reticent to return to campus despite strong indications that they were eager to resume on-campus engagement immediately following the lifting of lockdowns and restrictions [6]. Advances in digital methods have prompted modifications to curriculum design that seek to combine the benefits of both in-person and online learning, and the Australian government appears keen to promote this blended approach.

The Accord explicitly identified several concerns it seeks to address: volatility in demand, which makes planning difficult; the need to diversify international student markets to avoid overreliance on a few key countries; ensuring students who ultimately wish to migrate study courses linked to Australian skill shortages and are encouraged to study in regional locations outside major cities; and protecting the sector's reputation and ranking as a study destination by improving course quality and student experience.

These shifts highlight concerns about the quality of education, student engagement, and the long-term value of degrees in a rapidly changing economy. Universities responded by prioritising skills aligned with real-world applications, emphasising critical thinking, collaboration, and adaptability, while also providing opportunities for mobility and cross-cultural engagement. Simultaneously, greater focus is emerging on the mental health and well-being of students, as institutions recognise the pressures faced, often due to working while studying and the growing diversity from increased access for non-traditional cohorts.

The factors outlined have produced some innovative developments in the higher education sector, particularly in relation to increasingly urgent global challenges. The Accord report is likely to direct Australian universities in particular ways, although, since it has been released very recently, it remains to be seen how its goals will be implemented. Here, we outline several initiatives developed in the Faculty of Humanities at Curtin University's Perth campus, designed to engage students in multiple ways, produce globally aware graduates, and enhance the learning experience. In doing so, the initiatives begin to address issues identified in the Accord, with a focus on two areas: challenge-based learning and global engagement.

2. Learning for Global Engagement and Solving Real-World Challenges

Given some of the issues identified, which were part of a wider set of challenges and opportunities facing the tertiary sector worldwide, university education has begun to focus on global awareness and challenge-based applied learning. Global Citizenship Education (GCE) has become an explicit goal of some higher education institutions, prompted by economic, environmental, social, and cultural changes globally and locally [7]. Seen as a way to prepare young people for the contemporary globalized world, with a focus on universalistic values and responsibility to humanity, GCE seeks to develop both the consciousness and competencies necessary for global citizens. In GCE, issues such as sustainability, human rights, and social justice are situated within a discourse of global interconnection [7–9]. It is fundamentally multidisciplinary. This approach is informed by Martha Nussbaum's argument [10] that rather than being “taught that they are above all citizens of [their nation, students] should ... instead be taught that they are above all citizens of a world of human beings, and that...they have to share this world of human beings with the citizens of other countries.” Key to this approach are questions of social justice and equity, particularly those related to race and ethnicity [11].

In the context of Australian multiculturalism and the higher education environment of increasing ethnic diversity from local and international students, knowledge, skills, and competencies relevant to engaging globally are a necessary part of tertiary education. Such education assists students to “acquire the knowledge, skills, and values needed to function effectively within their cultural community, nation-state, and region and in the global community [and] to acquire the cosmopolitan perspectives and values needed to work for equality and social justice around the world” [12]. Education towards global citizenship creates students able to engage in ‘global dialogue’ and self-aware enough to recognize the value of others’ lives [13].

Another trend in higher education is the use of Challenge-Based Learning (CBL). CBL generally involves “the identification, analysis, and design of a solution to a sociotechnical problem. The learning experience is typically multidisciplinary ... and aims to find a collaboratively developed solution, which is environmentally, socially and economically sustainable” [14]. Although similar applied approaches have been around for decades, CBL

was popularized in 2008 by Apple and promoted as a new approach to classroom education for the 21st-century workplace. CBL is collaborative and hands-on, asking students “to work with peers, teachers, and experts in their communities and around the world to ask good questions, develop deeper subject area knowledge, accept and solve challenges, take action, and share their experience” [15]. Pedagogically, CBL draws from constructivist and socio-cultural learning theories, which view learners as actively constructing knowledge through experiences, interactions, and reflection. Students are placed in the role of active problem-solvers and encouraged to construct meaning through inquiry and collaboration. Socio-cultural theory recognises the value of social interaction and the relativity of cultural context in learning. Through multidisciplinary collaboration, CBL mirrors real-world scenarios where individuals work together to address complex challenges within diverse socio-cultural contexts.

CBL includes key features such as testing theory through addressing real problems in collaboration with ‘industry’ or other stakeholders such as community or government. The approach combines “multidisciplinary actors, technology-enhanced learning, multi-stakeholder collaboration and an authentic, real-world focus” [14]. It is said to foster “student transversal competencies, knowledge of sociotechnical problems, and collaboration with industry and community actors” [14]. Two recent reviews of CBL [15,16] found that benefits for students include industry networking, improved technical skills, opportunities to apply skills in real-world environments, multidisciplinary teamwork, problem-solving skills, deeper understanding of a body of knowledge, and innovative thinking. CBL also appears to raise students’ self-efficacy in their capacity to influence the world meaningfully. For academics and industry, although most studies have not measured benefits empirically, CBL is argued to improve research partnerships, teaching ability, and the potential development of commercial products.

3. Challenges, Futures and Global Education

Curtin University’s Humanities Faculty recently developed a set of ‘capabilities platforms’ with a ‘futures’ focus. These were designed to bring together research, teaching, and engagement across the Faculty, to break down disciplinary boundaries and integrate technology across the curriculum. The platforms aim to collaboratively develop pioneering, strategic, and socially meaningful solutions to real-world problems, ultimately driving engaged learning and transformative change.

The four current platforms—Indigenous Futures, Learning Futures, Sustainable Futures, and Global Futures—work across disciplines within the Faculty to enable the research/teaching/engagement nexus to manifest in creative and impactful ways.

Among the tasks of the portfolios is the development of challenge-based learning (CBL) opportunities. These are unusual in a Humanities context, according to the literature reviews mentioned earlier, which note the predominance of STEM-focused CBL initiatives. Over the last two years, several CBL units or activities were piloted by the Futures platforms, drawing students from a wide range of disciplines (project management, physics, architecture, engineering, history, applied health, anthropology, sociology, media, game design, and more) to engage in short-term intensive hands-on learning. These activities, generally taught in six-day intensive blocks in a dedicated collaborative space, bring together academic and support staff as well as industry and community stakeholders, who share a range of disciplinary, technical, and lived experience knowledge with students. Students are assigned ‘industry’ (or

government or community)-generated challenges and work in interdisciplinary groups to address the issues, developing practical and workable solutions. Their final outputs, augmented by dedicated training in Adobe Acrobat and other tools, are presented at a showcase event. A Challenge Coordinator assists the Deans of the platforms in developing and implementing the challenges. Short videos have been produced about some of the challenges; however, URLs cannot be embedded in this paper. The challenges are being rolled out to Curtin’s international campuses.

Two CBLs for the Global Futures portfolio have been undertaken since 2024, one with a focus on K-Pop as a global cultural phenomenon, and another, *After War*, focused on post-conflict reconstruction.

The Global Futures *After War* unit was designed to challenge students to address both micro/immediate issues, and macro/longer-term issues in post-conflict situations. The challenge brought together academics, policy makers, practitioners, and those with lived experience – these included people who had worked with the UN, private resource companies, and other organisations in peacekeeping and reconstruction. Students were provided tools to build on theory and current practice to imagine scalable solutions to post-conflict displacement, and physical, mental, social, economic and political destruction, in a fictional country. Students were required to consider not only material logistics but also questions of equity, inclusion, and cultural preservation. They responded to ten challenges set in collaboration with industry experts. For example, one group designed cheap and accessible water purification systems, another a set of political reforms to reduce the likelihood of insurgencies, another a portable educational technology for use in remote areas, another proposed accessible housing solutions, another conceived a system to enable public contributions to support honesty in journalism, and another designed a community centre with programs to build resilience, skills and joy. For participants, the experience was both demanding and transformative. A key component was the multidisciplinary teams students were placed in, to tackle the layered complexities of rebuilding in post-conflict settings. The coordinator reported that ““*Students saw After War as an opportunity for remaking society—through sustainable initiatives, through recrafting economic systems to reduce inequalities, through ensuring that political systems reflect the will of the people and a voice for all, and through understanding global mechanisms of power that perpetuate conflict; as well as through promoting a free press, valuing human rights, healing psychological trauma and providing a space for joy, to build sustainable peace.*” .

In a related initiative aligned with Global Citizenship Education, Curtin Perth initiated a new stacked Master of Global Engagement. This program provides students with global awareness encompassing international relations, human rights, sustainability, and cross-cultural awareness. It is interdisciplinary and foregrounds Curtin’s graduate capabilities, particularly the expectation that graduates be globally engaged, responsive, and culturally competent to interact positively with local First Peoples and those from diverse cultures. The core of the degree consists of units on cultural awareness, global engagement, and just transformations, along with units focusing on key regions for the globe’s future: Asia and Africa. These were designed to foster a cosmopolitan, global citizen perspective on current issues and challenge parochial tendencies in Australian higher education.

The four units make up the Graduate Certificate in Global Engagement. For the Master’s degree, this is coupled with a Graduate Certificate in International Relations and a Graduate Certificate in Human Rights, creating a suite of three graduate certificates, which, together with

a small research component or overseas internship, constitute the Master's program. This innovative stacked multidisciplinary structure equips students with a range of globally oriented capabilities. Global Futures and Just Transformations explores what global futures might mean, for whom, and how, and what capacities and skills are needed to inhabit these futures ethically and sustainably in the present. The unit encourages students to critically engage with diverse values, beliefs, and worldviews, and to develop an understanding of everyday power and politics, social and ecological justice, reciprocal relations, and expressions of global citizenship. Students examine what societal transformation mean and why it is crucial for navigating equitable pathways in which all can flourish. The unit emphasizes sustainability and uses case studies from Global North and South contexts. Students consider the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and critically engage with concepts such as coloniality and imaginaries of the future. Alongside readings, videos, presentations, discussions, performances, hands-on activities, and games, students are encouraged to sustain hope as active change agents, including by writing their own manifesto for change.

Another key unit, Engaging Cultural Diversity, explores what it means to live and work in increasingly diverse environments. While Australia exemplifies such diversity, graduates may come from or work in any part of the world. The unit highlights opportunities and challenges arising from national, indigenous, religious, ethnic, and other forms of diversity. Students are provided with tools to engage positively with cultural diversity in multicultural societies and global workplaces. They explore the meaning of culture and its influence on identities, worldviews, beliefs, practices, and communication styles. The unit also raises awareness of students' own cultural embeddedness and understanding of structural barriers to social inclusion and equity, effective cross-cultural communication, and the effects of racism.

Topics include Globalisation, Culture, Racism, Nationalism, Multiculturalism, Interculturalism, First Nations, Business/Productive Diversity, and Anti-Racism. Students consider intersections of marginality, including gender, sexualities, and class, explore solutions, including policy options, and develop skills to navigate multicultural and global contexts. The learning toolkit includes lectures, workshops, case studies, guest lectures, videos, and hands-on activities. Assessments require group work to create videos about culture shock, evaluation of existing programs, or development of new cultural awareness or anti-racism initiatives. The unit was designed to develop 'intercultural confidence' in students [12], extending Byram's notion of intercultural competence [13]. It also responds to Fozdar and Volet's added a dimension of self-efficacy—confidence and enthusiasm to bridge cultural divides—deriving from the knowledge, disposition, and skills identified by Byram.

The unit Engaging Africa recognizes the growing importance of this region to international relations, trade, production, and migration. It provides students with contextual knowledge and practical skills to critically engage with Africa and its diverse countries and peoples. Students examine key aspects of African socio-political history, including pre-colonial societies, the slave trade, colonialism, and post-colonial relations between Africa and the world system, and explore contemporary state–society relations, the global African diaspora, and regional institutions such as the African Union. The unit trains students to think critically about how positionality—including power relations, relative lack of literacy on Africa, and the influence of external media/political representations and stereotypes—shapes ideologies, methods, and outcomes of international and intercultural engagement. It draws on concepts such as Pan-Africanism and African agency and insights from African scholars and

policymakers to deepen students' understanding of global–Africa relations. The unit enhances students' competence to engage with a dynamic continent representing nearly a quarter of humanity.

The fourth unit, *Engaging Asia*, recognizes the significance of Asia in the Asian century. Students develop a broad understanding of the Asian region in a global context. By focusing on key contemporary issues, students reflect on how imperialism and its legacies, Orientalism, development economics, heritage politics, and popular culture such as K-Pop influence how Asian countries negotiate regionally and globally, including with Australia. Selected case studies enable students to engage with Asian perspectives and gain problem-solving skills for professional contexts where Asia-literacy is essential.

While these four units primarily use small-group workshop formats, they incorporate elements of Challenge-Based Learning. Assessments include writing a manifesto for the future, participating in excursions to engage contemporary issues (e.g., visiting a campus pro-Gaza protest encampment to understand perspectives and lived experiences, or an art exhibition on intercultural cross-fertilization), producing digital media such as videos, and evaluating or designing social interventions, or analysing news stories weekly to explore real-world applications of their developing political, social, and cultural knowledge. This Graduate Certificate will be included in new Master's options under consideration in the Faculty of Business and Law, such as the MBA, and elsewhere across the university. It offers students opportunities to develop globally relevant skills and knowledge beyond their disciplines, particularly benefiting business professionals operating in transnational environments where understanding cultural diversity, sustainability, and familiarity with Asia and Africa provides a valuable applied skill set.

4. Discussion And Initial Evaluation

This paper outlined key features of the contemporary higher education environment in Australia. It then discussed moves toward global citizenship education (GCE) and challenge-based learning (CBL) as innovative content and learning approaches that are useful for addressing this evolving context. Finally, it described a pilot project applying these approaches in the context of Humanities teaching at Curtin University, Perth. To conclude, some advantages and limitations are identified.

Some evidence has been provided on how the CBL and GCE approaches can be used in the Humanities to deliver human-focused, multifaceted, social solutions to global problems. While sufficient data for a comprehensive evaluation are not yet available, preliminary observations, anecdotes, and internal evaluation data are shared.

Students involved in the Global Futures challenge and the Global Engagement postgraduate offerings demonstrated several benefits. They developed critical thinking and problem-solving skills, engaged in self-directed learning, and designed creative solutions to real-world problems [14, 15]. Students benefited from industry networking and from developing connections with peers from different disciplines, relationships they would not necessarily have otherwise had the opportunity to form. They were also challenged by diverse learning styles and enjoyed developing concrete solutions to practical problems.

Their use of digital technologies, including presentation and communication software, which were seamlessly integrated into the learning and teaching process, mirrored real-world

work situations. This enabled students to understand how these technologies could be applied in everyday contexts [14, 15].

Students enjoyed the content and format of the intensive Global Futures challenge, with one saying *“It was a powerful eye-opener for both myself and my team, We had to think not just about the physical structures, but about the emotional, political, and cultural structures that must be rebuilt too.”* Students particularly the hands on approaches to learning, with one saying *“The field trip to the Art of Peace exhibition was a highlight for me. It showed how creativity can be used to send an important message. I hadn’t been exposed to many of the ideas in the unit before and it really changed the way I think. I can see how I can use these ideas and the experience of working with others to build solutions in my future career.”*

Students expressed interest in more opportunities to engage with ‘industry,’ including government departments, NGOs, consulates, and for-profit organisations, linking their learning with real-world experience and job-ready skills development [14, 15].

Although numbers were initially small in the Graduate Certificate in Global Engagement units, They are growing, and individual unit evaluation metrics show students overwhelmingly agree that the units were well-organized, that instructors were enthusiastic about sharing their knowledge, genuinely care about students’ learning outcomes, communicate effectively, and provide constructive feedback. In terms of dispositional transformation, many students in both the Graduate Certificate and Futures challenges reported fundamental changes in their awareness of global and local issues, appreciation of other disciplines, and personal sense of self-efficacy and pride in their achievements, alongside their engagement with real-world problems [18, 19].

These initiatives are taken up by a significant proportion of international students as well as local students, enhancing the vibrancy of the groups and the diversity of solutions proposed. This represents GCE in practice. International students appreciate the opportunity to connect with local students in an intensive environment distinct from typical classroom experiences. For both groups, this allows students to interact in ways that traditional forms of higher education have often failed to facilitate [18, 19].

However, for the Global Engagement postgraduate offerings, the predominance of international over domestic students limits opportunities for local Australian students to develop global awareness. It is anticipated that this will change as the program became more widely known. Another issue is the range of learning styles exhibited by international students. Some struggle to adjust to the challenge-based approach and the less didactic teaching style that requires active participation. Some are less prepared to critically engage with readings and ideas, perhaps due to differing educational socialization in their countries of origin. Consequently, additional guidance is occasionally necessary, potentially reducing the intended effect of this approach.

Coordinators have observed wide variation in students’ abilities, with some excelling and others finding the expected level of knowledge, skills, and self-direction challenging. This creates dilemmas about how to pitch readings and other content. The diversity of disciplinary backgrounds further compounds the challenge-based unit, with students from science-based programs sometimes struggling. Nevertheless, most students adapt, appreciating the novel learning style and the different perspectives offered. One coordinator noted that after several weeks, students “now get it that this is a unit where we go together on a journey of discovery. It is growing on them, and they became more adventurous and playful.”

Another challenge of CBL is that, while innovative and student-centered, this approach is highly resource-intensive, particularly regarding staff time required to engage industry, work with partners, use technology innovatively, manage the uncertainty of processes and outcomes, and creatively recreate real-world scenarios in a classroom setting. A related resourcing issue concerned whether generalizing the curriculum over time is feasible or valuable – should each challenge address a new/current real-world issue, or should topics be consolidated over several years? In a context of increasing demand and constrained funding, the long-term viability of these approaches remains uncertain [14, 15].

5. Conclusion

As noted, these initiatives are part of a broader movement to develop cross-cutting interdisciplinary capabilities among students, enhance the student experience for both domestic and international cohorts, and maintain educational standards in line with the Australian Universities Accord review. They provide learning in an accessible and inclusive manner that values diverse experiences and perspectives, while offering opportunities for collaborative, applied knowledge creation across domestic and international students. Extending these initiatives across the university, its global campuses, and other institutions and disciplines worldwide could provide further opportunities for students. These programs aim to produce globally competent and ethically responsible citizens. More importantly, these initiatives are likely to be transformational, and potentially world-changing.

Competing Interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Data Availability

All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article. Additional information can be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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