What We Heard

Report on VIU’s Strategic Planning Conversations

Spring and Summer 2020

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Table of Contents

1 Executive Summary 5

2 Introduction 8

3 Broadening Access 10

3.1 VIU’s strengths 10

Wide range of programs close to home 10

Bridging and laddering programs 11

Affordability and financial support 12

Friendly application experience 13

Support for different abilities 13

Culture of inclusion 13

3.2 Opportunities for new thinking 14

Expanded population of non-traditional learners 14

Additional modes of delivery 15

More flexible scheduling and greater course availability 16

More attention to bridging and laddering 17

Strengthened emphasis on accessibility 18

4 Boosting Success 20

4.1 VIU’s strengths 20

Personal attention from supportive instructors 20

Helpful services for students and caring staff across the university 22

Strong peer community and support 23

Great teaching 25

High-impact practices 25

4.2 Opportunities for new thinking 26

Greater connection and belonging 26

More equitable access to high-impact opportunities 29

Strengthened transition to work 29

New pedagogy of mental health 29

5 Honouring Indigeneity 31

A note on terminology 31

5.1 VIU’s strengths 31

Genuine investment in relationships 32

Integrated practices, programs, services and mutual support 32

Eye-opening classroom and experiential learning for non-Indigenous students and employees 34

5.2 Opportunities for new thinking 35

More VIU employees brought into the conversation 35

More Indigenous content and approaches in the curriculum 36

Increased number of Indigenous employees 36

Smoother path for Indigenous students 37

Enhanced collaboration with Indigenous communities 38

6 Strengthening Community 40

6.1 VIU’s strengths 40

Student engagement in the community 40

Contribution to regional economies 41

Role as regional knowledge hub 42

Role as service provider and neighbour 42

Role as learning partner 43

6.2 Opportunities for new thinking 44

More experiential options in community 44

Greater link to regional employment opportunities 44

Greater role as a community hub 45

7 Building Knowledge 47

7.1 VIU’s strengths 47

Opportunities for students to engage in original work 47

A record of community-focused knowledge-building 49

Strong institutional support 50

A focus on knowledge-building as teaching 51

7.2 Opportunities for new thinking 52

More access to student knowledge-building opportunities 52

Greater community focus 52

Increased funding 53

New opportunities to build applied knowledge 53

8 Learning from the Pandemic 55

Transformation of personal connection 55

Reflections about learning online 56

Innovations in pedagogy, delivery, and partnerships 57

Benefits (and stresses) of working remotely 59

9 Next Steps 60

10 Process Design 61

Overview 61

Activities 62

# Executive Summary

VIU launched its strategic planning engagement process, **The Future We Want to See,** in March 2020. From March to July, we reached out to almost 30,000 people our region, on and off campus, and some 1,000 students, alumni, employees, and community members took part in (mostly virtual) presentations, surveys, meetings, World Cafés, and workshops.

This report highlights some of their stories and ideas, reflecting back to VIU’s communities the range of messages we heard during our conversations. These accounts are crucial input as VIU continues to build its five-year Strategic Plan.

Broadening Access

VIU is proud of its reputation as an open access university. Contributors shared stories of welcome for students who had not thought post-secondary education possible. Attracted by a wide range of offerings (including adult basic education and other bridging programs) and opportunities to build on their learning (“laddering”), students emphasized the range of meaningful measures VIU puts in place. Affordability and financial help (though modest), welcoming recruitment and admissions employees and easy application processes, support for students with differing abilities, and a culture of inclusion were all highlighted. At the same time, many potential students in our regions are still unable to access education. The lack of online options (prior to March) and limited course scheduling (few/none on weekends, evenings, or summers) were part of the reasons. Suggestions were to continue to offer face-to-face programs but also incorporate more online offerings to expand course availability and laddering, and to continue increasing accessibility on campus and in the classroom. At a time and in a community where working people may be VIU’s greatest source of new students, some of those ideas may need closer examination.

Boosting Success

In VIU’s conversations about "Boosting Success," the single strongest theme has been connection. Students, alumni, and employees overwhelmingly describe student success as moments of personalized support in and outside the classroom, including support lent by their peers. That connection builds confidence, enthusiasm, attachment, and deeper learning. For a largely commuter campus, connection is especially important to student success: fewer points of connection contributed to stories of isolation, lack of belonging, and mental health distress. Also key to student success, contributors explained, was the quality of instruction and the availability of high-impact learning experiences, especially those in the region’s communities. Many of the visions shared for VIU’s future had to do with building connection and deepening those experiences: strengthening the practice of outreach, enhancing high-impact learning opportunities, strengthening the transition to work, building a pedagogy of mental health, and providing deliberate spaces for students to strengthen their sense of belonging.

Honouring Indigeneity

VIU built an early reputation as a leader in welcoming and supporting Indigenous students and communities. Local First Nations and other Indigenous leaders have in turn contributed to the pedagogy/ways of knowing, curricula, classroom experience, and academic and personal support on all VIU’s campuses. We also know from the conversations on “Deepening Reconciliation” this spring that this culture of respect has been transformational for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and employees alike. More is still to be done, say contributors, including bringing more of the employee and student community into the conversation, integrating more Indigenous content and approaches in the curriculum, building the community of Indigenous employees, clearing the path for Indigenous students, and enhancing partnerships with Indigenous communities.

Strengthening Community

Community engagement is a point of pride at VIU, intensified today as the whole of our region plans its response to the pandemic and its profound impact on the workforce. Key strengths centre on student experiences in the community, VIU’s contribution to regional economies, as well as its roles as a regional knowledge hub, as a service provider and neighbour, and as a learning partner for community members. Visions for the future included ideas for extending community-based learning, building greater capacity to link programs, students and employers, and greater visibility for VIU in the communities it serves.

Building Knowledge

The engagement conversation began with a question about “Encouraging Discovery,” a phrase made deliberately broad to capture the range of VIU’s knowledge activities in research, scholarship, creative activity, inquiry, and applied problem-solving. Even though VIU is designated as a teaching-intensive university, research (and other knowledge building activities) are a big part of VIU students’ experience. Their stories focus on the institutional support that VIU gives to its undergraduate and graduate population to apply for grants, learn and deploy research methods, conduct original research, present at conferences, and be accepted for publication – for undergraduates especially, these are rare opportunities in other universities. That work happens not only with academic faculty and in VIU’s research institutes, it also happens in the applied subjects. Further, we know that the vast proportion of that knowledge work is based in the community: about the local ecology, economy, and society. Areas for new thinking include ways to extend the experience to an even greater proportion of VIU’s students, build additional supports, and create new opportunities for sharing knowledge across faculties and departments.

Learning from the Pandemic

The Strategic Planning engagement process was launched just two weeks before lockdown. In the conversations that followed, many of our students and employees spoke about the strengths and struggles of the new normal. We heard stories of the loss of personal connection as well as its inverse, a greater sense of community and contact. We heard stories from those who were flourishing in the learning format, and those who were finding the switch difficult. We also heard stories from instructors on the strains and surprises of teaching, and some of the innovative teaching practices they are beginning to adopt. Employees across the institution and at all campuses spoke about the strengths, challenges and surprises of working remotely. Calls for keeping some aspects of the pandemic response in place were made, including the investment in connection and community, the flexibility and accessibility of online learning, innovations in pedagogy, as well as the benefits of more flexible working arrangements.

# Introduction

What makes VIU great today? What is our community’s vision for the future?

VIU launched its strategic planning engagement process, **The Future We Want to See,** in March 2020. From March to July, we reached out to almost 30,000 members in our region and some 1,000 students, alumni, employees, and community members took part in (mostly-virtual) presentations, surveys, meetings, World Cafés, and workshops. This report highlights some of their stories and ideas,[[1]](#footnote-1) amplified by evidence from other sources, and describes a remarkably consistent assessment of VIU’s strengths and a collective vision for its future.

The account is organized around the five conversation starters that launched the engagement: stories where VIU made a difference in *Broadening Access*, *Boosting Success*, *Engaging Community*, *Encouraging Discovery*, and cross-cutting throughout, *Deepening Reconciliation*. Along the way, the wording of some of those headings shifted as the conversations evolved and other topics were raised – most importantly, the implications of the pandemic restrictions and the shift online.

It is important to note that the engagement process did *not* focus on what the President calls “table stakes” – the expectation of sound academic programming, effective pedagogy, meaningful student services, and well-managed budgets, infrastructure, HR, and IT systems. The conversations focused instead on the additional strengths that VIU contributes to the student experience, our niche.

What, then, did we hear? The VIU community has been sharing ideas about VIU’s strengths in five (slightly shifted) themes: *Broadening Access*, *Boosting Success, Honouring Indigeneity,* *Supporting Community*, and *Building Knowledge.* Each of these themes forms a short chapter in this report, detailing the strengths identified and concluding with a section for opportunities/areas where we may wish to build new strengths. An additional chapter reflects on lessons we have been learning during the pandemic shift online, and gathers thoughts on the innovations to be taken forward. A final pragmatic chapter concludes the account with a description of the engagement process that led to these reflections.

# Broadening Access

VIU is proud of its reputation as an open access university. Contributors shared stories of welcome for students who had not thought post-secondary education possible. Attracted by a wide range of offerings (including adult basic education and other bridging programs) and opportunities to build on their learning (“laddering”), students emphasized the range of meaningful measures VIU puts in place. Affordability and financial help (though modest), welcoming recruitment and admissions employees, support for students with differing abilities, and a culture of inclusion were all highlighted. At the same time, many potential students in our regions are still unable to access education. The lack of online options (prior to March) and limited course scheduling (few/none on weekends, evenings, or summers) were part of the reasons. Suggestions were to continue to offer face-to-face programs but also incorporate more online offerings to expand course availability and laddering, and to continue increasing accessibility on campus and in the classroom. At a time and in a community where working people may be VIU’s greatest source of new students, some of those ideas may need closer examination.

**Adult Basic Education**

"Making the choice to come to VIU in ABE has totally changed my life and my future. This decision is the best decision I have made for myself and for my family. The instructors are very helpful and very supportive – student Peter Moon

VIU’s ABE Program creates the perfect learning environment for the returning student. Before ABE, I never had instructors who were so invested in my education – student Josh Pearson

ABE helped me gain the confidence I need to pursue further education. Attending ABE math and English provided me with the foundation of a new perspective on studying. To anyone continuing their education, I recommend ABE before their degree of study (as a refresher) – student Frank Osawamick

## VIU’s strengths

VIU’s teams understand that the choice to continue to post-secondary study is difficult, and for some, deeply so. Our employees have done amazing things to reach out to potential learners and to ease the transition. The employees and students of VIU genuinely believe in the value of broadening access to education and they have much to celebrate.

### Wide range of programs close to home

VIU’s wide range of programming – from high school to graduate credentials, general interest courses and professional training, as well as specialized programs for students with developmental disabilities – means that most local students can study what they want, close to home, building on the skills they already have.

That broad menu is a clear draw for new students. In a survey of visiting high school students this past spring, students commented on the scope of VIU’s programming, mentioning in particular the arts, culinary, creative writing, 2-year engineering, trades, sciences, theatre, and business programs.[[2]](#footnote-2) The domestic recruitment team backs up these findings: Program availability is the most common topic raised by prospective high school students. For mature students, 50% of the inquiries are about Adult Basic Education options – a key aspect of VIU’s suite of offerings in a region where 10-15% did not finish high school.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Bridging and laddering**

Students are given the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the atmosphere of VIU and what it feels like to belong to the University, and envision themselves attending VIU as a University student, thanks to the Adult Basic Education (ABE) program offering course upgrades – World Café contributor

### Bridging and laddering programs

Key in that menu are VIU’s bridging programs that bring students to the level needed to continue in a post-secondary setting, and laddering, the practice of offering courses or credentials at one level that also count toward credentials at a higher level. Both are deliberately designed to encourage students to enter university and continue to build on their education.

**A culture of welcome**

I had a colleague with whom I worked in my previous job in the provincial government. At the time she was enrolled at VIU a decade ago, she was a single mother of two young girls and was in recovery for alcohol addiction. She started VIU very tentatively as a mature learner, and because of the support she received at VIU and the open access and very welcoming culture, she thrived. She was profiled on CBC radio for her story, which exemplified many students’ success at VIU. She found employment in our department and frequently SANG VIU's praise. Her story and positive reflections about VIU piqued my interest in an institution that lived its values – employee Dan Vandersluis, Nanaimo

Bridging programs include Adult Basic Education, the Aboriginal University Bridging Program, and the university preparation course Clemente,[[4]](#footnote-4) open to anyone with an interest in exploring higher education for the first time. Other programs also serve as bridges. WEST, VIU’s job training program for students with developmental disabilities, has graduated students who have gone on to complete their high school degrees and to continue on to academic and trades programs. Success in Professional Development and Training courses and certificates often leads students to enrol in others.

The most prominent laddering program is dual-credit – where university courses in partner School Districts also count toward high school credit, but there are others. Red Seal students can get 60 transferable credits in academic programs, for instance, and credits earned in the Certificate of Business Management are fully transferable to the Bachelor of Business Administration program. Laddering encourages students to complete their courses or programs and to continue on in their education.

**Money matters**

The emergency funds in Scholarships and Awards are lifesavers for many students – employee Laura Shanner, Nanaimo

The ability to apply for student loans (even a tiny one) to then be eligible to apply for scholarships/grants was very helpful – student, Nanaimo

At the onset of this pandemic, VIU was thoughtful of its student population’s financial burden ... a lot of international students were stressed out about finances, going home during the pandemic, and had questions whether they would still be able to continue their studies. But through the Emergency Bursary Fund, students were able to continue and finish their studies. We get a lot of positive feedback from students how they are impacted by this fund – employee Joemar Turingan, Nanaimo

### Affordability and financial support

Any post-secondary education is expensive: tuition, books, supplies and living costs make education out of reach for many, even at universities and in towns where those costs are comparatively low. In VIU’s 2014 study of students who were accepted to VIU but did not begin their studies, the main reasons were tuition and other costs, access to student loans, and availability of financial awards.[[5]](#footnote-5) The cost calculation also included opportunity cost: “the deterrent of forfeiting wages that participants could be earning if they did not go to school.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Similarly, in our 2020 survey of 78 high school visitors, 9 said they might not come to VIU for “money reasons.”

Help with the cost of university is thus a key element of VIU’s commitment to access. The tuition waiver for youth aging out of foster care is a deep point of pride for existing students and employees, as are the Mastercard Foundation EleV scholarships for Indigenous students, and the lesser-known scholarships for refugees (through WUSC), the tuition waiver for learners aged 65+, and other supports like free tutoring at all campuses. While VIU’s financial assistance is modest overall (the average scholarship, award, or bursary is less than $1,000), the institution has made efforts to make access to funding simpler by streamlining the process. As the pandemic struck, financial aid efforts went into overdrive.

For high school students and mature learners alike, the ability to undertake paid work while studying is a factor in pursuing education. Recruiters are routinely asked about prospective students’ ability to work while pursuing a normal course load and about options for working on campus. Prior to the pandemic, some 200 students at VIU had on-campus work-op jobs last year, and 52 had research work opportunities the year before.[[7]](#footnote-7)

### Friendly application experience

Another access bridge is the friendliness of our teams: VIU has go-the-extra-mile recruitment and admissions staff in both domestic and international departments. We heard stories of employees across the university making special efforts to encourage students to apply, and kudos for the admissions and recruiting teams for resolving problems with transferring credits, sorting out pre-requisites, obtaining paperwork, managing visa fees or deposits, and even finding last minute accommodations or sorting out problems at the airport arrivals counter. As one newly registered international student wrote:

**Help applying**

When I applied to VIU, they were incredibly understanding and supportive of helping me get all the relevant information to ensure my application could be fully considered. This made the whole process incredibly manageable and the International team were super supportive especially in understanding my visa processes and information required for that – student Liz Whittaker, Nanaimo

I am fortunate that I get to play a role in this for students every day. I see students that come with a dream that have not finished high school or not completed the appropriate perquisites for meeting their goal. Together we create a plan and map out a pathway to get where they want to go – employee Jennifer Merner, Nanaimo

Allowing the waiving of some educational requirements to mature and well directed students has allowed such students to succeed at VIU whereas they would not have been allowed to enter, let alone succeed elsewhere – employee David Babich, Nanaimo

I am a recovering drug addict who was intermittently homeless for a number of years. I was surprised at how easy it was to enrol and take classes at VIU – student Kyle Blackwood, Nanaimo

I'm excited to join VIU as an international student. I feel welcome to access any and all academic resources necessary for my success. There exists an inclusive, caring community at VIU that will give me a chance to thrive and belong – student Rayan Zeineddine, Nanaimo

### Support for different abilities

Another bridge to access – and continuing support once studying – is VIU’s support system for students with a range of abilities.

WEST takes pride of place. The cutting-edge Workplace Essential Skills and Training Program specializes in real-world work training for students with developmental differences, and families have even moved to Nanaimo (some from out of province) to attend. The university has also put into place supports for students of differing abilities, including dedicated Accessibility Services and the Cooperative Entrepreneur Training Certificate Program, an entrepreneurial program targeted to students with developmental barriers. We are keenly aware that many adult learners have multiple barriers that make access and retention difficult.

Other measures across the university are also making an impact in accessibility: an increase in wheelchair access, more accessible washrooms, new accessibility maps, exam accommodation practices, free access to the Kurzweil accessibility test, and more. Those measures are mentioned by students and employees alike: “Prioritizing access and accessibility makes us more of an inclusive campus, inviting for everyone, and shows that we care about our students” – employee Brandon Dallamore, Nanaimo.

### Culture of inclusion

Many of these stories also speak to a broad culture of inclusion at VIU, one that aspires to respect diversity in culture, race, sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as diversity in thought and perspectives. Students, faculty, and community members alike spoke about instances where VIU created a safe environment for working and learning:

I met with a mature student who was deeply moved that one of our texts addressed same-sex relationships. He said he had never expected to see his own experiences reflected in curriculum. ... VIU provided curriculum that functioned as both a mirror for people to see themselves belonging here and a window to engage a broader world (the latter very important for local students who have had few opportunities for broader cultural contacts). I think VIU can function well as a cultural contact zone – employee Terri Doughty, Nanaimo

One of the coolest things about teaching ESL classes is seeing how students learn so much more than English. ... Somehow learning a new language triggers new ways of thinking and interacting with the world – employee Suzy Nachtsheim, Nanaimo

In these examples and more, VIU has walked the talk on inclusion.

## Opportunities for new thinking

All of these strengths also present opportunities for new thinking. In areas where we are strong, how can we be stronger? In the last part of every chapter, some of the VIU community’s ideas are presented for going that extra mile.

### Expanded population of non-traditional learners

Traditional university and college students – recent high school graduates – have been in decreasing supply in VIU’s region, as they are all across BC.[[8]](#footnote-8) Moreover, of that smaller population, fewer in our region go on to post-secondary than elsewhere in BC, 47% rather than 52% (for the subset of Indigenous high school students, however, the reverse is true: 48% go on to further study, more than BC’s 41% average.)[[9]](#footnote-9)

Of those who continue their studies, the good news is that most choose VIU: in one study, we found that 61% pick our university over another post-secondary institution; for Indigenous youth, the percentage is greater: fully 73% choose VIU.[[10]](#footnote-10) The impact of that choice, we hope, is generational: 1 in 3 students who attend VIU are the first in their family to attend post-secondary education.

Today’s VIU not only welcomes high school leavers, but also mature learners with a range of life experiences. Almost half of students registered in 2018-19, for instance, were older than 25.[[11]](#footnote-11) Indeed, we know that the unmet need for training for workers in our region is high – in Nanaimo, for instance, fully 39% of 25-64 year olds do not have a postsecondary certificate, diploma, or degree.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**Kids in Care tuition waiver**

VIU is a leader in implementing the first tuition waiver program in Canada for students who were/are in the foster care system, and having a dedicated peer support navigator to guide students through the process. VIU was nationally recognized with a formal announcement by John Horgan and Minister Mark at the Nanaimo campus, and VIU's first peer support navigator gave an empathic speech about her journey from foster care to becoming the first in her family to graduate from university – employee Chai Marfisi, Nanaimo

It is this population of older workers where the potential demand may be greatest. In 2014, VIU’s Office of University Planning and Analysis asked why many of those who wanted to attend VIU were simply not able. They were far more likely than other students to be male, Aboriginal, first-generation students, local (both in-province and Mid-Vancouver Island Region), mature, and with some previous university or college experience.[[13]](#footnote-13)

For that population, the obstacles were partly the timing and format of training, a finding aligned to wider research that emphasizes the importance of course availability at times and in formats convenient to mature students.[[14]](#footnote-14) Likewise, this population is also more likely to drop-out once they do register. Research shows that retention of working students, mature students, and those with other obligations needs extra support, especially in the classroom.[[15]](#footnote-15)

### Additional modes of delivery

Demands for additional modes of delivery – online and hybrid, in addition to in-person-only – have been heard at VIU and across higher education long before the pandemic struck. A 2016 environmental scan by VIU’s Student Affairs team highlights more than a decade of findings on rising student demand for greater flexibility in learning and a greater number of whole or partial programs offered online, in non-standard formats, and at more convenient hours.[[16]](#footnote-16) In the VIU community, these calls are longstanding; in community consultations led by VIU ten years ago, the issue was raised by mayors and councillors across the region, and in community conversations in Deep Bay-Milner, Parksville, Powell River, Ucluelet and more.

The strategic planning engagement this year also raised the need for more flexible course delivery. Following the campus-wide switch to virtual learning in March 2020, the opportunity is on the table for maintaining that option for existing and new populations of students, including non-traditional local and remote learners. We already know that the new model works for many learners, both local and international:

**New formats and schedules**

VIU needs to offer more courses and programming in the evenings and weekend to allow mature learners greater opportunity to attend post-secondary while working – employee survey contributor

As an adult student who is trying to balance work and school, I’d love to see more evening and weekend classes offered through all four class sessions, as well as a class calendar posted earlier than it currently is. … The additional class times would make it easier for people like me to take more classes/finish a degree sooner. The earlier the course calendar is published, the easier it is for students to map out their degree requirements and plan around the availability of courses – student Jeff Sheppard, Nanaimo

*More accessibility – access for students of all socio-economic backgrounds – online, later hours, daytime hours, weekends. Right this moment, do we have access for the working single mom returning to school to provide a better life for her child and she needs evening classes to complete her program in a reasonable time frame? We don’t have that right now. What about a blended online/in person format for working individuals? Not all of our students are right out of high school with tuition saved and have the privilege of attending Mon-Thurs, during the day – employee Kristine Monk, Nanaimo*

The English Language Centre is offering all classes in synchronous delivery. This means that instructors teach their class … at times that reach their students – anywhere from 5:30 in the morning to 10:00 at night. The response from students has been extremely positive. I think we can keep this model of online delivery going forward. Classes are engaging and effective – employee Norma MacSween, Nanaimo

### More flexible scheduling and greater course availability

We also know that VIU’s pre-pandemic course timetable and calendar does not serve all students and may even deter registration. The 2014 Office of University Planning and Analysis study reported that restricted course scheduling (including a lack of evening classes) and long wait lists were identified as reasons for not registering. Examples from that study included:

* I have been trying for several semesters to enroll in an evening class. There never seems to be any upper level creative writing classes in the evening … or classes that fit around my day-job.
* All the courses I wanted to take were not offered at night. I’ll have to [choose] another unit that has the ability to do this.
* I didn’t register because I couldn’t get enough classes to make it worth my while to move down to Nanaimo for the semester. I can try again next year and apply earlier.
* The classes I wanted to take were all booked out, this is the reason why I [have] withdrawn my registration!
* I have a full-time career and at this time I cannot make the course offerings work with my schedule.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Other studies make similar points. The 2013-14 and 2014-15 student experience surveys showed that 42% of students were dissatisfied with scheduling and the availability of classes for completion and the variety of course offerings, among other concerns.[[18]](#footnote-18) In a similar vein, a 2018 Student Affairs study reported student complaints about not being able to complete their program within four years because some upper-level courses were available only every two years, other courses in the calendar weren’t scheduled (making it hard for students to plan), there was a lack of integration between the calendar and the timetable, and there were limits on the number of international students in particular classes.[[19]](#footnote-19) All these factors combined to lengthening students’ ability to graduate.

**WEST**

The Workplace Essential Skills and Training Program is a program designed to assist students with cognitive and developmental issues. This program is AMAZING and innovative. The instructors in this program are insanely dedicated and the results are clear. Building community gardens and working in teams allows these students to gain confidence and learn skills that will enable them to get jobs in certain areas. To integrate these individuals into the broader community is worthwhile and inclusive. The contact with others helps the students gain confidence. This program is always in demand. I often meet up with the students when they sell coffee or crafts or vegetables. The students are thrilled and excited about their program. Sometimes, students are hired before the program is over. Their inclusion in the university context helps others learn about disabilities and become more tolerant and open minded – employee Sabrina Fox, Nanaimo

### More attention to bridging and laddering

We heard ideas across our campuses to increase our bridging efforts and to create more opportunities for laddering.

An open access university has bridging as its first responsibility. VIU has a record for meeting students where they are in their learning and accompanying them in their progress. That commitment shows up in formal bridging programs like ABE, but also in informal bridging that VIU offers to any student who starts university. It is here where more could be done.

Students in academic programs need writing and research skills, for instance, but all students new to university life need to navigate a foreign institution and its norms (terminology, schedules, expectations), and build skills in participating in learning environments, asking questions, raising opposing points of view in a respectful way, and seeking help. Some students may need additional support in life skills (managing time, finding accommodation and food, dealing with conflict), or in securing academic accommodation and support for disabilities. For students from Indigenous or rural and remote communities, foster homes, correctional institutions, or from countries other than Canada, the cultural shift is even greater.

Currently, some of those supports are available in Student Affairs, International Education, or the Office of Aboriginal Education and Engagement, but much of the transition support happens in the classroom,[[20]](#footnote-20) as the examples in the next chapter illustrate. We heard stories from instructors about students who were poorly prepared academically or in other ways to begin their university path, and many drop out.

Could we do more? We already have in place six Foundations for Success offerings that are meant to be taken alongside university courses, but perhaps other things could be done? Other universities offer short pre-university preparation courses (like Trent’s *The Bridge* program) or term-long programs for all students. Contributors have also suggested adopting the Navigator model (now supporting Indigenous students) for all students, or building mentorship or buddy systems beginning before students arrive on their first day.

Once students are prepared and launched into their post-secondary experience, what can VIU do to deepen the experience? One idea is to increase the pathways to further education by adding to our laddering options. Today, while some certificates count towards diplomas, and some diplomas toward degrees, the overall picture is spotty.

In addition to continued work on dual-credit with regional school boards, contributors suggested that more certificate and diploma programs be made eligible for laddering into bachelor and master degrees, that more of Professional Development and Training courses be eligible for credit in a credentialed program (when the courses are similar), and that courses offered in Indigenous communities similarly also count as next steps toward further education. As of June, 2020, fully 28% of VIU students—3,806 people – were in courses that do not lead to a credential.[[21]](#footnote-21) Even when the 1,000 or so ElderCollege students are removed from that total, the number of un-laddered experiences is high. Once students begin their higher education journey, VIU needs to do whatever it can to encourage them to continue.

### Strengthened emphasis on accessibility

We also heard from contributors that VIU can go much further in championing accessibility.

VIU’s programs for adults with cognitive disabilities are well-regarded. Could VIU take a leadership role in advancing education for our most vulnerable community members?

VIU’s progress in improving the physical accessibility of its Nanaimo campus is a source of pride for all members of the university community. What else can VIU do to enable easy navigation for people with mobility or other impairments, and how can we improve other support to students with various abilities and learning differences, especially as we consider more delivery options online?

Finally, what can VIU do to increase financial access for students? What financial support, job opportunities, childcare services, food services or more can we think about to ensure that students from lower incomes can thrive at university?

Many of these reflections on broadening access are tightly linked with the stories about boosting student success described in the next section. The emphasis on access and inclusion for students to enter post-secondary education continues after they arrive.

# Boosting Success

In VIU’s conversations about "Boosting Success," the single strongest theme has been connection. Students, alumni, and employees overwhelmingly describe student success as moments of personalized support in and outside the classroom, including support lent by their peers. That connection builds confidence, enthusiasm, attachment, and deeper learning. For a largely commuter campus, connection is especially important to student success: fewer points of connection contributed to stories of isolation, lack of belonging, and mental health distress. Also key to student success, contributors explained, was the quality of instruction and the availability of high-impact learning experiences, especially those in the region’s communities. Many of the visions shared for VIU’s future had to do with building connection and deepening those experiences: strengthening the practice of outreach, enhancing high-impact learning opportunities, strengthening the transition to work, building a pedagogy of mental health, and providing deliberate spaces for students to strengthen their sense of belonging.

## VIU’s strengths

The practice of deliberate personal connection with and among students is perhaps VIU’s greatest strength. For students to learn, to thrive emotionally, to persevere in their studies, they need social contact and support from instructors,[[22]](#footnote-22) other employees, and from each other. Deepened through strong instruction in the classroom and heightened by high-impact learning opportunities, that sense of connection is making a difference.

### Personal attention from supportive instructors

By far, the strongest success theme raised by VIU’s students is the impact of personalized support. More than 150 mentions of meaningful connection with instructors were flagged during this engagement period, but the stories are longstanding. The 2013-14 and 2014-15 student experience surveys, for instance, showed that more than 80% of students indicated that instructors encouraged participation, were accessible, had a positive influence on their progress and looked out for students’ best interests. Research shows that students who feel that faculty genuinely care about them have higher retention rates.[[23]](#footnote-23)

**Small classes and close community**

VIU’s small class sizes helped me make my decision regarding which university to attend because I didn’t just want to be a number. I cared about building a relationship with my professors and learning in a comfortable environment where I was not afraid to ask questions or share my opinions – alum Alexis Gardner, Nanaimo

I now attend a much larger university, but frequently find myself missing VIU's close-knit community – alum Kathleen Kerr-Donohue, Nanaimo

This spring, we heard powerful stories of personalized attention, encouragement to apply for grants or jobs, time spent counselling through difficult personal situations, introductions to networks of employers, and reassurance to persevere through challenges in the classroom. Instructors’ ability to provide that personal attention is facilitated by small class sizes: VIU’s class size averages 19 students,[[24]](#footnote-24) for example, compared to 79 in UBC’s lower level courses.[[25]](#footnote-25) While small classes don’t guarantee connection, they make that outreach easier.

The impact of that personal effort on student success was drawn out in many testimonials. For example, students described the role of their instructors in helping them to succeed academically.

**Meaningful supports**

Most of my success I owe to the Writing Centre, the library, and to the international support team. The teachers there knew how hard I had worked and they helped me even outside of their schedule. That meant the world to me – student Maria Arias Borja, Nanaimo

The support services available at the university are amazing. Counselling for emotional support, cultural connection for Aboriginals and international students, access to technical support, and a vast library. It does not matter your physical limitation or ethnicity, everyone is welcome to attend any event or service – student Rona Billie, Nanaimo

Building relationships with professors and having their support and guidance in pursuing the future I wanted has been instrumental to my success this far. The personalized approach to education helped make my learning specific to my goals, therefore setting me up to achieve them – alum Rory Marshall, Nanaimo

The professors have a vested interest in seeing their students succeed. This is seen on multiple occasions where professors have spent the time to give me constructive feedback and then actively help me to improve. The time they spent to listen and help me in my studies has made me feel valued as an individual. I am proud to be at a school that cares about the success of their students – student Breann MacDougall, Cowichan

The testimonials also spoke of the importance of instructors in motivating students to persevere in completing their studies.

**Personal connection**

It was tough, but still my experience at VIU was one of the best I have had. ... Those close relationships extended to the professors as well. I can’t express enough how much they want to help you succeed – alum Nik Ramsay, Nanaimo

I had more than one major life obstacle and struggled along the way, but with an abundance of kindness and patience from awesome teachers like Alison who goes out of her way just to make sure her students are doing ok, with school and personally – student Elizabeth Chase, Powell River

When I first transferred to VIU, I immediately connected with one of the professors in my faculty. She introduced me to everyone, offered me moral support, and encouraged me to get involved. … She saw potential in me and gave me the resources to achieve high levels of success in my academic career – student Jocelyn Fournier, Nanaimo

The level of openness, consideration, and accommodation I observed from my instructors was very surprising. I had never had my instructors be so understanding of student's mental health, schedules, or troubling situations – student Billie Reath-Lang, Nanaimo

–- continued

One morning I woke up to turn my alarm off and there I sat at the edge of my bed wondering could I do this? [My instructor] would not give up on me even when I already had, she was my biggest support in the class and honestly she's the reason I am going to further my education. It is because of her I discovered my love to learn – alum Janice Sampson, Nanaimo

I think having smaller classes and professors who actually know you individually really motivates you to do your best and can accommodate for you based on specific needs – student Madison Naswell, Nanaimo

Stories also highlighted the role of instructors in helping students build confidence and well-being.

I just want to acknowledge that although VIU is small, it truly is a community. My time at VIU was full of a lot of personal struggle, but I truly feel if I was at any other school, I would not have been given the support I was by VIU. VIU was a family to me, they were a home away from home. I am very grateful for my time and experiences spent at VIU and I highly encourage all students to attend this great facility – alum Kaitlyn Lee, Nanaimo

Students also spoke about the role of instructors helping them prepare for their next steps.

My psych class was the first time I felt supported both in and out of class. A faculty member talked to me about pathways to a degree and afterwards. The prof understood students’ uncertainty about the future and shared useful knowledge about resources and community connections that made a difference – student McKenzie Hutchison, Nanaimo

These and other stories illustrate the culture built at VIU around student-centred care, part of the Academic Plan’s focus on student learning, engagement and success. Indeed, they also illustrate the niche that VIU has built that few other organizations are able to emulate.

### Helpful services for students and caring staff across the university

The stories of personal attention are not restricted to VIU’s instructional teams. The policies, services, and behaviour of teams across the institution have also made a difference.

We heard kudos for the range of student supports offered at VIU. We noted praise for the writing centre, the library (there was a *lot* of appreciation for the library), and the Peer-Supported Learning program. For International students, we heard additional praise for English as a Second Language support in developing writing and reading skills and help with decoding assignments. The data from other studies reinforce the importance of those supports. A VIU literature review of research at other universities demonstrates the links between the use of on campus services, student engagement levels, academic persistence, and retention.[[26]](#footnote-26)

**Personal connection**

(continued)

What comes to my mind is my own experience as a pregnant student and then as a new mom back at school with a newborn. The care, attention, and support I received from my profs, admin, and fellow students was a testament the sense of community that VIU fosters. The small class sizes, the instructors taking time to know their students and support their individual needs, all of that contributes to making VIU what it is – alum Caroline Roach, Nanaimo

The positive stories were not limited to instructors and student support staff. Accounts were shared about other employees going above and beyond to show kindness (many mentions were made of the role of the Nanaimo cafeteria staff, for instance), find ways to simplify processes, intervene with government social services, and seek financial help. Employees from every part of the institution have helped students find accommodation at the last minute, deal with grief and assault, shop for an interview outfit, pick up the tab at the cafeteria, identify counselling help, find work-arounds in processes or paperwork, find bus passes, communicate with family members, and more.

**Financial innovations**

*VIU’s Security Team with the assistance from the Financial Aid team and the Student Union coordinated a student bike program with the Bikes For Kids Program. As VIU has bike thefts on campus, some of the students were left without transportation to school. The Bike Program can be used by students in financial need or when a bike is stolen on campus – employee Mark Egan, Nanaimo*

*The VIU Student Free Store, 12 years running now out of the Welcome Centre, provides necessary household items, including furniture, school supplies, clothing, etc. All items are donated from the VIU community for students – employee Jolene Edmunds, Nanaimo*

### Strong peer community and support

The stories are not just about VIU’s employees: students are crucial for building support and connection with each other. When students have an opportunity to connect with others, their experience at VIU blooms.

In our conversations this spring, those opportunities arose out of life in residence and participation in a range of university clubs, including University Christian Ministries, the Business Student Association (and other faculty student associations), the MBA games, Rotaract, WUSC, Model United Nations, and more. Some of those groups are organized by students with support by the VIU Student Union, and others are sponsored directly by the university. The university also organizes opportunities for student engagement through the Peer-Supported Learning group, the Office of Co-Curricular Engagement and Learning (including its programs like the Vancouver Island Leadership Conference), partnership with the private radio station CHLY,[[27]](#footnote-27) and the ‘su’luqw’a’ Community Cousins. One of the students who participated in our workshops had even decided to come to VIU entirely *because* of the appeal of VIU’s extra-curricular life.

A striking commonality in student interviews was the importance of having been invited by someone else to participate. Residence advisors encouraged first-years to apply for the job in their second year. Profs suggested students apply for competitions, seek grant funding, and submit their research or poetry for publication. Student leaders invited new students at Rock VIU to volunteer for student jobs. Club members reached out to friends to ask them to come to a meeting. The act of invitation in all these stories enabled the transformational experience that followed.

**Invitations to succeed**

I had approached a student in my Automotive class to see if she would be interested in competing in the upcoming skills competition in Nanaimo. She was very insecure at the time and told me that she didn’t want to compete. A couple of days before the competition, she had a change of heart and decided that she wanted to compete after all. Last minute arrangements were made, and she ended up coming home from the competition with a bronze medal ... I was very proud of her ... and know she was very proud of herself! – employee Ron DePape, Powell River

When I taught at the High School at VIU, I had a student who was cruising at a 'C'. We chatted about that and I mentioned that he could get a higher mark if he chose to as he was clever. He told me that he'd never been told that. ... He has gone on to become a Canadian citizen and to become a pilot – employee Margot Croft, Nanaimo

Another strong theme was the link between extra-curricular activity and learning. Not only do peers support each other through their personal and classroom experiences, peers are generating learning through their own activity. Here is one such example:

My time at VIU has been an incredible journey for me because I had the amazing experience to be Vice-chairman of the MBA games which helped me to apply everything I learned in my MBA classes to real life. This has not only helped me to grow as an individual but also to help me to understand business acumen in Canada and also to make incredible connections with the community and with universities across Canada. Co-curricular activities matter because it helps you to transform from a student to a professional – student Dominik, Nanaimo[[28]](#footnote-28)

One of the most rewarding activities I've had the opportunity to partake in at VIU was joining the WUSC committee. … Through this committee I have met incredible people, have learnt about new cultures and have developed an interest in forced migration – student Jocelyne Fournier, Nanaimo

Another strength of peer-led activities on campus is deeper impact. When peers support each other, the difference is sometimes greater than when offered by employees. For example, VIU’s Student Affairs team has found that student wellness programmers are especially effective in promoting mental health, and we have seen remarkable strides in learning improvement through the Peer-Supported Learning program.[[29]](#footnote-29)

### Great teaching

**Importance of recognition**

I felt really successful when after my first year I got a letter from the faculty saying that because of my grades I was on the honours list. I have never received something like that in my life. In fact, I struggled a lot early in life when I was in school. … That letter made me feel for the first time in my life that I could achieve anything – student Maria Arias Borja, Nanaimo

One of my biggest achievements during my time at VIU was receiving the President’s Scholarship for Continuing Students for the Faculty of Management in my second year of my degree. This moment was a great validation of my hard work and dedication to my studies and it helped motivate me in my final years, as my grades actually improved – student Alexis Bouma, Nanaimo

I think one of the things I am most proud of so far in my student career would be achieving the Dean’s List in each year of my studies so far. ... It is nice to see the hard work pay off through academic recognition – student Lauren Robillard, Nanaimo

Some highlights for me were winning the emerging scholar award in my second year of studies. It was a way of validating the work that I was putting in which helped me realize that I was on the right path for me – student Shelby Hollas-Arnett, Nanaimo

Throughout the conversations with students, many praised VIU for the quality of teaching. We know that VIU students rate their instructors’ skills highly. The survey data gathered by the Ministry of Advanced Education asks students about their experiences. In 2019, 91-94% of students and alumni across our programs gave the quality of instruction positive marks.[[30]](#footnote-30) Many of our contributors concurred:

The education I have had at VIU is unparalleled. The faculty has been extremely supportive of my many projects and ideas. The training I have received has allowed me to discover what career I want to pursue after my time as a student at VIU ends, and I am thankful for the many encouraging professors who are invested in my continued success. I have so much to thank the university for, and I will forever be a very proud VIU student – student Samuelle Simard-Provençal, Nanaimo

A further aspect motivating learning at VIU is recognition – another part of the positive teaching practice at VIU. Students regularly highlighted the importance of awards, Deans’ lists, and scholarship in encouraging and enabling their success.

### High-impact practices

We also noted strong votes of support for many of the high-impact learning opportunities at VIU. Opportunity for hands-on learning in and outside the classroom are deeply valued by VIU students, and VIU’s record is stronger than elsewhere in the province and beyond:

* 68% of senior undergraduate students participated in two or more high impact practices at VIU, compared to 53% of BC students and 52% of Canadian students.
* 72% of our senior students participated in Service Learning, a course that includes a community-based project, 25 percentage points higher than Canada and BC .
* 28% participated in a Learning Community, a formal program where groups of students take two or more classes together, 10 percentage points higher than Canada and 8 percentage points higher than BC.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Research shows that these high impact practices make a difference to student success. Opportunities to experience service learning; belong to learning communities (where the same group of students study together); undertake research with faculty; participate in an internship/field experience; study abroad; and undertake a culminating senior experience all make a difference to the student experience. Surveys such as the National Survey of Student Engagement have measured strong connections between high-impact practices and retention, deep learning, and personal gains.[[32]](#footnote-32)

**High Impact Practices**

Going on exchange to Australia at the University of Canberra for one semester was the highlight of my degree. Having the opportunity to learn in another country at another university was such an incredible experience. Australia is also such an interesting country to live in and explore. From kangaroos on campus, the hiking in the outback and swimming at all the beautiful beaches. And what made the experience such a highlight was the friends I made while on exchange and who I got to study with, live with and explore with – alum Emily Grey

## Opportunities for new thinking

Many of those stories of connection also suggest ways in which VIU could go further.

### Greater connection and belonging

**Networking**

Small classes meant that my teachers assisted me in ways that meant I passed (extra help). The chair of my first certificate program referred me for a job interview when a local business called asking for referrals. I got the job (fulltime WITH benefits and pension... life changing) –survey contributor

The most valuable takeaway from my VIU program was the networking opportunities. The VIU horticulture program has developed great rapport within the community…. I'm excited to have graduated and joined into this supportive industry – alum Bianca van der Stoel, Nanaimo

When you are an international student, in a country for the first time, your social capital is very limited, therefore networking becomes incredibly important. I feel that my course has helped to nurture this, through the connections of our teaching team and also through meeting other non-teaching staff within the university – student Liz Whittaker, Nanaimo

We heard that VIU students attribute their success to the connection with their instructors and their peers, and we know from research that this sense of connection is an important driver for retention, well-being, and academic success everywhere.[[33]](#footnote-33) We also know that not all students are living that experience, however.

The 2013-14 Student Experience survey at VIU found that 37% reported a poor overall social experience.[[34]](#footnote-34) In comparison with other institutions, there has been consistentlylower satisfaction with the social experience at VIU.[[35]](#footnote-35) “In my first year I would sometimes go a whole day without talking to anybody,” reported student Kayla Passmore. In our conversations this spring, many ideas were shared for increasing that sense of belonging.

Part of the task belongs in the classroom. Recommendations focused on upping VIU’s recognized practice of personalized attention. Instructors were asked to consider individualized check-ins, for instance, even for those who seem to be doing well:

If VIU professors can encourage an individual dialogue to make sure that they don’t quit, that would be beneficial. If students are doing well, professors may think that everything is working well for everyone. But that’s not always the case, and they need to be sensitive to that. Students get discouraged when grades start to drop and may just quit altogether. Stories may be different, some may be going through health issues, some may be going through financial struggles, family issues, a myriad of things – World Café contributor

Professors should be following up with students, individually, and understand how they are handling the courses/university – World Café contributor

Another recommendation focused on outreach to part-time or working students for whom connection is especially hard to build. One VIU study pointed out that leavers – people who dropped out before completing their program – were more likely to be part-time and working, both factors that limit connection with the broader student experience.[[36]](#footnote-36) For part-time students – who make up 45% of VIU’s student body[[37]](#footnote-37) – outreach from faculty inside the classroom is especially important.[[38]](#footnote-38)

A further suggested area of focus was outside the classroom: ideas to improve the quality of campus life, including the availability of extra-curricular activity and the growth of campus spirit. As one instructor writes, “A huge issue is loneliness and alienation. We need some ways for students to connect with one another that is not entirely driven by the VIU academic agenda” – employee Sabrina Fox, Nanaimo.

We know that campus life is factored into prospective students’ decision-making. Our survey of high school students this spring emphasized the weight they give to extra-curricular life. Our domestic recruitment team is commonly asked about the gym, clubs, and non-academic activities; for some prospective students, the high calibre of the Mariners’ teams is an additional draw. Our international recruitment team likewise tells us that International students also put a premium on lifestyle and entertainment.

Yet the reality is that that there aren’t very many activities on campus after 4:00 pm, during the weekends, or during the summer, in part because only 500+ of our 14,000+ students live on campus, in part because of a large part-time student contingent, and in part because of restricted course scheduling during the week and over the three terms.

One idea offered to increase campus spirit and reduce isolation involves investments in physical space. Both employees and students spoke about the limited physical space for gathering outside of the library and cafeteria on the Nanaimo campus, and for providing a gathering space for Indigenous students at the Cowichan campus.

* Use spaces to gather and promote cohesiveness, kindness, and environments where we actually look and talk to each other – employee survey contributor
* Physical spaces to facilitate human connection and positive interactions would be so beneficial for creating social bonds and support – student Kayla Passmore, Nanaimo
* I would love to see more environments for students to connect. this could mean events, workshops, hub spaces. ... Students need places to reflect and interact with one another. Another one that I would like to see is a greater connection to the first nations community. more cultural events and opportunities for First Nations students such as I to connect with community and culture – student Seth Recalma, Nanaimo

The goal would be to echo the success of the Nanaimo library renovation. The 2006 library addition and renovation project “changed the library from a single/solo reading and study space and transformed it to a social learning commons. … Student utilization dramatically increased because of that space transformation, some three to four times what it was in 2006” – employee Craig Hanson, Nanaimo.

Another social connection gap is identified for graduate students. The bulk of extra-curricular activities and supports (including orientation) is focused on undergraduates.

There's no community of graduate students which is very different from my previous experience as a graduate student at a different university. I realized that VIU is smaller and there are fewer people, but there is no graduate student association, no place that graduate students can go to interact. As a mature student new to Nanaimo, first-time living on the island, this sense of a community was definitely lacking – student Colin Pybus, Nanaimo

I was desperate to get involved in the community to meet people, Canadian people. … It was hard to find a friend to drink coffee with. It was hard to be able to play a sport when you didn't know anyone and don't have a team. ... There has to be a way to engage more people. I spent a lot of time at VIU but most of the time I was by myself – student Maria Arias Borja, Nanaimo

### More equitable access to high-impact opportunities

While high-impact practices (HIPs) are valued highly by our students, and VIU ranks more highly than other universities, many of our students have not yet had the opportunity. In 2018, some 41% of first years had experienced one of HIPs, and 68% of fourth-year students had. More than 30% of undergrads had no such experience, and we do not have data from our other programs.[[39]](#footnote-39)

How can VIU expand access to these meaningful experiences to more people who study at VIU?

### Strengthened transition to work

In many of our conversations, we heard stories of support by instructors and others to connect students to work after graduation. The Work Integrated Learning team, responsible for co-op, internships, and similar opportunities, is a key part of the picture, but many others play a role in helping students to make a connection. The Indigenous Intern Leadership Program, for instance, finds places for Indigenous students in two-year post-graduation internships across BC.

Suggestions for increasing access to employment include the expansion of VIU’s career services centre, extending services to alums, enhancing outreach to community employers (including alumni businesses), and formalizing cooperation with employers in the development of program priorities.

### New pedagogy of mental health

We also heard from students about measures that instructors could put in place to promote and protect mental health. They reported:

Students feel more confident and less stressed out when professors at VIU are flexible with deadlines and allow discussing projects due dates if students are overwhelmed and unable to meet the original deadlines. This helps build trust between the students and professors and gives students the opportunity to perform better – World Café contributor

Allowing students flexibility in managing due dates allowed for less stress and feeling like the professors cared about their contributions. Managing the competing demand of different classes, [would be easier if] students are given liberty and control over assignments/projects – World Café contributor

These suggestions are supported by evidence of effective mental health practices. Research shows that common course designs can trigger poor mental health: timed assignments or exams, participation grades, team assignments, assignment deadlines, lack of flexibility on assignment design, unnecessary textbooks or additional reading lists, unclear learning outcomes or course schedules, as well as activities (field trips, etc.), or content that is not accessible.[[40]](#footnote-40) The good news is that some of those more positive practices were more widely applied post-lockdown: more flexibility around due dates, more autonomous learning, and fewer timed exams, for example.

I like the emphasis that's been put on mental health lately as people's stress levels got higher when this all started. I think our staff and students' mental health is just as important as physical health, all the time, not just during a pandemic. Creating safe spaces for people to talk about their struggles and relaying supports that are available is a great practice that we should continue when this is all over – employee Maddy Thomas, Nanaimo

As VIU recognizes its strengths in building connection with students and considers ways to deepen that experience, it has also been learning from its growing relationships with Indigenous communities and students, the focus of the next chapter. Here, more areas of growth are worth consideration.

# Honouring Indigeneity

VIU built an early reputation as a leader in welcoming and supporting Indigenous students and communities. Local First Nations and other Indigenous leaders have in turn contributed to the pedagogy/ways of knowing, curricula, classroom experience, and academic and personal support on all VIU’s campuses. We also know from the conversations on “Deepening Reconciliation” this spring that this culture of respect has been transformational for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and employees alike. More is still to be done, say respondents, including bringing more of the employee and student community into the conversation, integrating more Indigenous content and approaches in the curriculum, building the community of Indigenous employees, clearing the path for Indigenous students, and enhancing partnerships with Indigenous communities.

### A note on terminology

The conversations this spring started around the goal of “Deepening Reconciliation,” but for some of our participants, including Indigenous respondents, the term did not capture what was most important in the relationship. The shift to the phrase “Honouring Indigeneity” is meant to capture VIU’s broad commitments under the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, as well as the aspirations in VIU’s ongoing relationships with Indigenous students and communities.

## VIU’s strengths

Today, VIU’s commitment to building a relationship with Indigenous communities is enshrined in the Academic Plan. It sets out goals for community engagement, including enhancing “the participation of Indigenous communities in all aspects of the University, including in-community program delivery.”[[41]](#footnote-41) The inclusion of that commitment in 2017 made a measurable difference to raising awareness of Indigenous peoples and history on campus, improving services for Indigenous students and communities, and strengthening the relationship between VIU and Indigenous nations and organizations. While more is to be done, the impact is tangible.

**Food and familiarity**

A First Nations student approached me in the cafeteria and was at a loss on what to eat. At the time we were working on a few menu items to introduce at dinner time that catered more towards First Nations students. I was happy to be able to talk about the meals we were introducing, including items like Bison Meatloaf, additional salmon dishes, and the introduction of Bannock. This student came back each night for dinner and was extremely excited to continue to try more and more items. They began to trust me more as the weeks went by and I was able to open them up to more options. I believe a major portion of a sense of community on campus comes through food and we have a great opportunity to support students through offering local familiar dishes – employee Michael Taylor, Nanaimo

### Genuine investment in relationships

VIU and First Nation and other Indigenous communities have been working to build meaningful relationships of trust. Today, those relationships are strong:

VIU has good relations with the local Indigenous communities, that higher relationship with the senior management and senior leadership allows them to trust the university with their community, their family. Students come to VIU with the understanding that their communities are being respected and that they’re welcome here – World Café contributor

Indigenous community partners who joined the conversations this spring spoke about VIU’s commitment to building strong relationships, the flexible and culturally-appropriate support of the Office of Aboriginal Education and Engagement (OAEE), the responsiveness of the Professional Development Training team in Cowichan, and more. VIU’s longstanding investment in relationship-building is valued.

### Integrated practices, programs, services and mutual support

Through those relationships, VIU and partner communities have collaborated to integrate a range of Indigenous practices, programs and services throughout the institution and to build joint initiatives off-campus. Some Elders recounted that they feel genuinely part of the institution, and that many non-Indigenous students and employees are willing to learn about Indigenous peoples and their history. Many respondents spoke of the special role of Elders in supporting Indigenous students through their journey.

Here are some of the key initiatives now underway:

Practices on campuses

* Permanent consultation mechanism through Hwulmuxw Mustimuxw Siiem, VIU’s First Nations Advisory Council
* Prominent role by ten Elders as faculty members and leaders in VIU ceremonies
* Active equity, diversity, and inclusion policies and practices across VIU, including for Indigenous students and employees
* Widespread use of territorial acknowledgement in VIU classrooms, events, and communications

Programs and Initiatives

**The importance of Elders**

I feel like for the first time the two worlds I walk in connected. My Elders from home were a part of the program, and guided us while we began to learn about the history of our people. Thinking back, having positive influences such as Elders impacts what happens inside and outside the classrooms, personal and academic, both in Nanaimo and Cowichan. I had the opportunity to sit and have lunch or tea with the two in Nanaimo. After my grandma passed, I completed one course of the summer semester, Land is Life. I think that was the beginning to my healing journey, alongside with Grandpa Ray and Aunty Florence – alum Clarissa Peter, Cowichan

* Offering of Indigenous/Xwulmuxw Studies Bachelor degree
* Aboriginal University Bridging Program
* Integration of Indigenous ways of knowing in some other programs and classes, including teaching by Elders and other Indigenous knowledge holders
* Offering of community co-designed courses in First Nations communities, such as the Stewardship Technicians Training Program launched in cooperation with multi-Nation Coastal First Nations and again with the Nanwakolas Council.
* Development of courses and certifications for First Nations locally and across Canada (National Aboriginal Land Management, for example, and the First Nations Housing Manager program).
* VIUSU student-run campaigns, including the Moose Hide and Reconciliation through Education initiatives

Student Services

* Dedicated Office of Aboriginal Education and Engagement
* Services of Elders as counsellors
* Dedicated Gathering Place, Shq'apthut, phase one on the Nanaimo campus
* 'su'luqw'a' Community Cousins peer support program
* Academic Navigators on each campus dedicated to academic and student support for Indigenous students
* Availability of Mastercard EleV scholarships for some Indigenous students

**Mutual cooperation**

* Installation ceremony for VIU’s President hosted by the Snuneymuxw First Nations
* VIU support to the Snuneymuxw First Nation as host for the (cancelled) 2020 Tribal Journeys event

Students and employees both highlighted the importance of many of those initiatives, and especially the importance of Elders on campus:

The Elders at both campuses have always been available for one-to-one conversations, which helped me to feel supported and at peace when settling into the island. Being five provinces away from family, they were able to impart their words of wisdom, that resonate on a very deep level, and for that I am grateful – student Erin Smith, Nanaimo

We also read testimonials about the impact of the Community Cousins program and Indigenous celebrations and events:

Throughout my time at VIU, I was proud to be a ‘su’luqw’a’ Community Cousin. This Aboriginal student mentorship program provided me with an invaluable opportunity to connect with my Métis heritage, experience traditional teachings on Snuneymuxw land, engage in cultural activities, and connect with other Indigenous VIU students. I also had the opportunity to act as a mentor for my fellow Indigenous students. ‘su’luqw’a’ Community Cousin Aboriginal Mentorship Program allowed me to take a break from my studies and focus on the importance of connection and culture. I raise my hands to the incredible work that goes into this program – alum Rebecca Watmough, Nanaimo

**Employee experiences**

I was a participant in a group facilitated by Sharon and Sylvia about building truth and understanding. It was a small intimate group that created a safe place for stories, sharing, understandings and teaching. I came away with an incredible amount of knowledge and appreciation of Indigenous history, culture and people – employee Jennifer Merner, Nanaimo

Throughout my studies I am ashamed to admit that I never learned about indigenous history in Canada. … Since being here at the university I have proudly registered and joined different social activities organized by staff and students. I have had opportunities never presented to me before, such as bannock lunches and learning circles, where I could listen to indigenous youth, staff and Elders express themselves openly. … I hope VIU continues to provide the spaces where we can participate in opportunities to learn – employee Marika Grabowski, Nanaimo

### Eye-opening classroom and experiential learning for non-Indigenous students and employees

This integration of Indigenous programming has made a difference for the whole of the VIU community, not only Indigenous students and employees. We heard moving stories from non-Indigenous members of our community about their shift in understanding. In the classroom, we heard stories like these:

In our first semester, we explored different Indigenous cultures, languages, and teachings across British Columbia and it opened my eyes to holistic learning and challenged the perspective of the knowledge I had learned up until that point. We spent a lot of time gaining understanding around place-based learning and spent a great amount of time with Cowichan Elders, listening to their place-based knowledge and wisdom. I was introduced to many controversial, challenging topics throughout this program, and they have caused me to grow immensely as a person and educator – alum Katie Hanson, Cowichan

I feel honoured to have learnt about indigenous culture. Something I knew nothing about, but now feel has been the richest part of my learning experience at VIU – international student Liz Whittaker, Nanaimo

Outside of the classroom, VIU has made other experiences available to learn about Indigenous realities. Respondents mentioned participating in circles with residential school survivors, bannock and soup speaker meetings, the paddling-and-discussion day organized by Centre for Innovation in Education and Learning (CIEL), the installation of the Nanaimo totemers poles, as well as President Saucier's installation ceremony at the Snuneymuxw Longhouse. Among these, perhaps the most transformative has been the KAIROS Blanket Exercise:

During orientation we were invited to participate in a blanket exercise. It was a simple activity involving our group standing on several blankets while a facilitator read about Indigenous history and slowly removed blankets. I cannot fully explain how powerful this was. It was more than just a history lesson – student Trina Forrest, Nanaimo

Being a part of a blanket exercise, the Indigenous peoples’ true story of how the world was separated and Europeans devastated their lives. I had the honor of participating in two at VIU. They have an amazing effect on everyone participating. … I grew up hearing many of the teachings, but to see classmates who had no idea what happened was a true gift, impacted me seeing their eyes opened to the truth – student Elizabeth Chase, Powell River

The challenge of VIU is to build on these powerful experiences to do even more.

## Opportunities for new thinking

While much has been achieved, it is clear from our conversations that there are distances still to travel. Respondents spoke about the need to bring still more members of the VIU community into the conversation and more Indigenous content into the curriculum, increase the number of Indigenous employees at VIU, rethink the learning experience, engage more deeply with Indigenous communities, and to work more to clear the path for Indigenous students to succeed.

### More VIU employees brought into the conversation

While we heard many stories of respect, learning, and transformation for non-Indigenous students and employees alike, there were also accounts from students and employees alike that showed a lack of understanding in our campus communities.

A range of ideas were suggested to bring more people into the conversation. We do know that a highly successful learning experience is the blanket exercise; today, some 2,000 VIU students and employees have taken up the invitation. One idea is to extend the availability of that experience to increase awareness still further.

Other ideas focused on the importance of training and guidance for all employees. For some instructors, the challenge is a lack of awareness or familiarity, rather than a lack of commitment. One idea suggested was to develop pathways for instructors (workshops, perhaps) where they can build relationships with First Nation community members and find a way to incorporate local knowledge into current teachings. Some work is already underway in this area – co-teaching with Elders, for instance – but more could be done.

### More Indigenous content and approaches in the curriculum

Thinking what leadership might look like in the future, respondents offered many recommendations.

Ideas included integrating Indigenous curriculum and case studies in every credential that we offer, including the history of residential schools and the 60’s scoop. Other suggestions focused on greater adoption of Indigenous approaches to learning, and help for instructors in understanding what that means in practice. Key elements raised in focus groups led by the Office of Aboriginal Education and Engagement earlier last year embrace the importance of incorporating Indigenous systems such as reciprocity in teaching and learning and other culturally relevant learning practices.[[42]](#footnote-42) The call to re-think learning practices and move towards a decolonialized educational experience, some suggested, means working with communities in designing programs and curricula, shaping how courses are taught, and re-defining success (for example, avoiding pass vs fail assessments), and more. Many of those measures to build a culturally safe university are part of the OAEE plan for the next four years.

### Increased number of Indigenous employees

Another suggestion is to increase the numbers of Indigenous employees. The OAEE-led focus groups last year emphasized the importance to students of seeing more Indigenous people in roles at all levels of the university. Currently, Indigenous people make up 8.5% of the population of the region[[43]](#footnote-43) and 10% of students.[[44]](#footnote-44)

This recommendation fits with calls from many of our respondents to increase the diversity of employees, especially teaching staff, to reflect the diversity of the community.

### Smoother path for Indigenous students

Elders at VIU spoke about the need to do more to clear the path for students: helping them to build confidence, deal with financial obstacles, and meet the sometimes competing demands of community and university. Those messages are reinforced by participants in the OAEE focus groups earlier this year:

Students tell us they need to know that a culturally relevant home away from home that includes safe cultural gathering spaces and Elders exists at the university, especially at regional campuses. They also need university faculty, staff, and current students to know they will not find it on their own. Everyone in the university community (faculty, supports, and staff as well as peer mentors) must wrap love around the learner in the form of encouragement, friendship, spiritual and other healing opportunities, learning supports, cultural practices, ongoing family-style meals (especially during the first three weeks of the semester), and social activities etc. to create an even greater sense of family within the university.[[45]](#footnote-45)

**Technology barriers**

There is a huge barrier for Indigenous students to get into residence at VIU. … Some remote communities lack internet access. While students are bombarded with e-mails informing them to register for residence, some Indigenous students are missing out because their community does not have access. … Humbling experience to learn that sometimes what you’re doing is great for one population but harmful to another. If staff/faculty are made aware of these challenges/barriers, they can change their approach and methods to better suit the population in need – World Café contributor

Those student accounts demonstrated the need for course load options and flexibility for complex life circumstances (overcrowded housing, lack of childcare, unsupportive family, etc.), as well as tangible supports for childcare, transportation, and affordable and appropriate housing. Students also requested tools and resources to combat racism so they can face it head on at the individual level rather than going through a university process. Those efforts are added to an ongoing need to address invisible illnesses such as anxiety, depression, and trauma so that students feel understood, supported, and inspired to find healing within their new community.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Other path-clearing ideas addressed recruitment (having Community Cousins do more visits to schools), technology (increasing broadband access), outreach (more summer camps), and increased focus on urban and off-reserve Indigenous people. Another idea is to enhance the opportunities for students to engage with their home or neighbouring communities as part of their university life:

I would like to see a greater connection to the First Nations culture and community. In my culture, respect for all was taught through stories and my own First Nations culture so I think sharing the very same might open the eyes of ignorance to so many issues. I would love to see more cultural events and opportunities for indigenous and non-indigenous students on campus to connect with community and culture. I believe that the next step in reconciliation is what a very wise woman by the name of Charlene Bearhead had said once. The next step in reconciliation is “reconcili-action.” And what that means to me might not mean the same for other Indigenous people but what I would love to see is a greater integration of Indigenous culture and teachings on campus. To learn and to care about the land you stand on is one of the greatest feats of respect and reconciliation I can think of – student Seth Recalma, Nanaimo

### Enhanced collaboration with Indigenous communities

A final set of suggestions looks to building on existing and new partnerships to strengthen the Indigenous educational experience on and off campus.

For programs offered at VIU campuses, a number of institution-level challenges are being examined. In a February workshop with community members this year *on Wise Practices,* First Nations community members raised issues over lack of funding and resources, inflexible academic processes, and the need for different kinds of student support.[[47]](#footnote-47) Addressing many of those obstacles is also part of the OAEE workplan for the coming years.

For programs offered in communities, many initiatives are on the table. VIU and First Nations have funding proposals in the works to sponsor new community-led training building on the success of the eco-tourism and stewardship programs. In our conversations, First Nations also mentioned interest in co-developing courses for sustainable economic development, culturally-informed mental health services, ecological data analysis, internet service business development, eco-tourism, and post-treaty governance capacity, among other topics.

Another ambition is to revisit the credit profile of off-campus programming to see if more of it can count toward a further credential. As part of the university’s goals of broadening access to a full post-secondary experience, it needs to build ladders to further education wherever it can.

The stories of successful relationship-building between VIU and Indigenous communities are powerful starting points for continuing the voyage toward Truth and Reconciliation and meeting VIU’s commitments under the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Those stories are also part of our responsibility to serve the whole of the region’s communities, the subject of the next chapter.

# Strengthening Community

Community engagement is a point of pride at VIU, intensified today as the whole of our region plans its response to the pandemic and its profound impact on the workforce. Key strengths centre on student experiences in the community, VIU’s contribution to regional economies, as well as its roles as a regional knowledge hub, as a service provider and neighbour, and as a learning partner for community members. Visions for the future included ideas for extending community-based experiential learning, building greater capacity to link programs, students and employers, and greater visibility for VIU in the communities it serves.

## VIU’s strengths

What are the most positive outcomes of VIU’s role in its communities? For one, we know that student experiences in community – including in research and service work – have been deeply meaningful in their personal learning. For members of the community, VIU’s larger role as a player in building local economies may be our most important contribution, particularly now as small and large communities alike are struggling to deal with COVID-19 and support economic recovery.

### Student engagement in the community

VIU offers a range of opportunities for students to work in the community: 72% of our senior students participated in a course that includes a community-based project, 25 percentage points higher than Canada and BC.[[48]](#footnote-48) The construction program has teamed up with Habitat for Humanity to build homes in the Malahat First Nation, and the MBA program and Trades and Applied Technology faculty are working with the Maritime Foundation in Ladysmith to build a recruitment plan for volunteers. The WEST program depends on some 90 community job training placements for its students, as does the MBA Internship program for its own.

Among these community learning opportunities, the Inside-Out Program earned special mention. This prison education program

**Inside-Out**

Being in the Inside-Out program, one night we were talking about trauma, and the mood of the class was reasonably low. Still, one of the Inside students who hadn't ever spoken in the class spoke up and said that having this program and having students come to the prison is making the change in the world, slowly but surely – student Dasha Russell, Nanaimo

*When I came to NCC, I was hoping to be part of the Inside-Out* program because it was a university program. I'd never been to any university courses before. I really felt it was an opportunity for me to get to see the other side of the criminal justice system and hopefully some of my input would help change perceptions about people on the inside – inmate Randy Smith

brings together criminology students in the final years of their study with incarcerated men at the Nanaimo Correctional Centre to undertake university-level study:

The Inside-Out educational program has been operating at the Nanaimo Correctional Centre for a number of years now with the support of faculty and executive from VIU. The impact is best described through the successes of the NCC residents who realize that education is in fact an option for them, with some continuing on following release – Nanaimo Correctional Centre Warden Teri DuTemple

For many students and members of our communities, this kind of community-engaged learning is life changing.

### Contribution to regional economies

VIU also has an important role in the region as a driver of community economic growth.

VIU provides trained graduates for the local workforce, and in some fields has strong cooperative ties with employers. The Regional District of Nanaimo, for instance, has hired several employees straight from VIU over the years, including summer students, casual and full-time entry level staff, particularly in the areas of planning, recreation and human resources.

VIU is also a significant employer and contributor to the economy. The University and its students drive roughly 10% of the regional economy, the largest economic driver in the region.[[49]](#footnote-49) In Nanaimo, where VIU is the third largest employer,[[50]](#footnote-50) this impact has led to the expansion of airport, bus, ferry, and taxi service, as well as the student rental market.

VIU is also an anchor for local students to study (and stay) at home. VIU is seen as a bulwark against out-migration: many spoke about the importance of providing local training in fields that allow students to continue to stay at home after they graduate, and to build the businesses and services needed in the region.

### Role as regional knowledge hub

**International student impact**

Encouraging foreign students to come has also been very beneficial to the community and I hope that this will continue post-COVID – community member Dorothee Kieser, Nanaimo

Having a strong foreign student body is important as those students bring their diverse backgrounds to enhance both the University and the neighbouring communities such as mine – community member Lee Teal, Qualicum Beach

Hosting international students has been a fantastic cultural experience for our whole family. We love that hosting our international students gives our children in-house exposure to other cultures. Every night at the dinner table we get to know our students and their culture. At the same time, we get to share our Canadian culture with them — community members, the Watson Family

VIU has a further role as a regional knowledge hub. As the next chapter discusses in more depth, many of VIU’s instructors and research institutes are engaged with community members in joint research on community-identified problems. For example, the Regional District of Nanaimo notes that “The community-based research that is taking place out of the Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Region Research Institute is producing tangible results and connections within the communities, in a practical rather than solely conceptual way” – Ian Thorpe, Chair, Regional District of Nanaimo.

VIU takes on thought leadership in other ways, as well. It has been a promoter, on campus and off, of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. It is seeking to increase the sustainability of its campuses and green awareness of its students and employees. It is an active proponent of the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It is also a major driver for cross-cultural and international awareness in Nanaimo through the presence of more than 2,500 international students living on campus, with local families, and in the wider community.

### Role as service provider and neighbour

VIU also provides a range of services to its communities, driven by a desire to create real-life working experiences for students, contribute to the wellbeing of the region, and open the door to others to consider post-secondary education. Some community services are directly related to VIU’s training programs, such as salon services, auto repair, the Hygiene and Dental Assistant outreach program, childcare services, the Recreation Prescription program in local elementary schools, the Centre for Outreach and Community Care, as well as all the programs within the Faculty of Health and Human Services.

Other service examples include VIU’s role as a recognized leader in promoting Canada Learning Bond and RESP savings for families through sign up events in partnership with the federal government, Rotary Clubs and local banks. Other neighbourly services include:

* Psychological First Aid training
* Low-cost summer sports camps for children in Nanaimo
* Recycled sewing cooperative, Powell River
* Coaching in the community for Special Olympics
* VIU participation in Dragonboat races
* Shed Your Threads sports equipment donation campaign in Nanaimo
* Logistics and volunteer support to the Snuneymuxw First Nations, host of the (cancelled) 2020 Tribal Journeys, Nanaimo
* Work by the student-led Awareness of Climate Change through Education and Research (ACER) to raise awareness of the social impacts of climate change and support responsible solutions.

**ElderCollege**

A star in the crown of VIU has to be the establishment of the Elder College. The appeal of this organization to enquiring minds is evident by the increasing enrolment, an enrolment enhanced by the offering of financial assistance to those in need. In Elder College it can be said that VIU did a really great job of broadening access – community member Allan Winks, Nanaimo

It’s important to always be thinking about the ElderCollege audience – grandchildren are often perspective VIU students as a result of positive experiences in ElderCollege – World Café contributor

Partnerships with ElderCollege helps broaden the student base to retiring and elderly students and not just young adults. This helps broaden education to older students, and also offers ways for older students to share their knowledge with their families and make a contribution to their communities – World Café contributor

* Annual Women's March that brings together people from across Nanaimo's community organizations and across demographics.

Still other services are offered to the community on a low-cost fee-recovery basis, including access to the cafeteria, fine dining, conference services and summer dorm rentals.

### Role as learning partner

VIU also offers a range of opportunities for community members to experience the university outside of a formal credential program.

The most prominent of these opportunities is ElderCollege, a program of non-credit general interest courses taught by volunteers. Also part of the lifelong learning portfolio are Love of Learning (for people wishing to audit regular university credits), GrandKids University (a two-day university-familiarization program for children and their grandparents), and Adventures in Mind (guided education trips abroad).

Most of these programs are geared to older students, driven by the growing demographic of retirees in the region. The number of VIU students 65+ and older has grown 14% over the past five years,[[51]](#footnote-51) making up a full 8 percent[[52]](#footnote-52) of the total student body today. World Café participants spoke of these lifelong learning programs as a key part of community engagement. Indeed, one World Café participant even reported they chose Nanaimo as a retirement destination *because* of the university.

VIU’s professional training programs are another type of community outreach. These revenue-generating short courses are offered to local businesses and organizations to build the skills of their existing teams. These courses – including laboratory procedures, Microsoft Excel, and air brakes – don’t ladder to a qualification, but do contribute to the local economies’ skills base.

## Opportunities for new thinking

**Experience in community**

I remember organizing and facilitating a public forum on a city-wide topic. ... The mayor, city councillors, city staff, key stakeholders, and the general public were all at the same table to discuss community issues. It was a powerful moment where I realized that what I learned in the classroom as a student of community planning had very real-world implications – alum Aaron Dixon, Nanaimo

I owe so much of my success so far to my experience in the PHED degree program. Having opportunities to work with children from different socioeconomic backgrounds and differing abilities, it has given me the experience to effectively reach students in my current practicum placements – alum Shelby Hollas-Arnett, Nanaimo

Building on those strengths, are there areas where new thinking is needed? A number of ideas were raised to strengthen opportunities for experiential learning, to sharpen our focus on regional economic growth and job demands, and to extend learning options in the community.

### More experiential options in community

Students and community members both spoke about the need for more experience in the community.

Enhanced partnerships, internships, placements, co-ops, and exchange programs at the local, national and global level with other universities, industry, the business sector, non-profit organizations, science and environmental organizations, as well as government, will further enable students, staff and faculty to develop opportunities for academic enrichment, service learning, professional development, workforce connections and collaborative research possibilities – Ian Thorpe, Chair, Regional District of Nanaimo

Respondents asked us to make a commitment that students will be able to participate in some form of community project or research while at VIU, and to make community involvement the main criterion in granting internal research awards.

### Greater link to regional employment opportunities

Commentators also pointed to the need to better match VIU programs with the needs of the community and local workforce.

VIU already has in place measures to align programming to workforce demand as well as student demand: the 2020 Summative Program Assessment asks faculties to take a hard look at the labour market. Yet some contributors argue the challenge to align programming needs to happen at the outset, not after programs are underway. As one employee suggests, we need to make the community the curriculum.

I believe that offering further education along with degree and diploma programs to local students is an important step in helping keep our talent local and in our communities – Ian Anderson, CEO, Mid-Island Coop

[Invest in] successful communication with business partners [to create] mutual benefits for supporting VIU projects that enhance campus / student success / program expansions i.e. Science / Engineering Programs – community member John Hessels, Lewkowich Engineering Associates

**Community hub**

[In the future, I would like to see that] VIU has reached out to communities across Vancouver Island and brought them to campus, giving students the chance to grow community connections while still attending classes. This will give students a sense of place and community even if they are commuter students or have busy lives outside of class – employee survey contributor

[I would like a] cultural place I could come to where I could come and enjoy a book. [Now] everything is closed after 7pm. No one around, café closed, pub closed. Could there be a free shuttle linking the university and town or free parking to encourage people to use the facilities? – community member and World Café contributor

[I would like to see] more interaction between VIU faculty and students and the community of Parksville, [when] we have truly become part of the VIU "campus." For example, the museum [will have] become a "lab" and research centre for students and faculty using our great archival collection. Parksville residents [will] identify with and support VIU as "our university," wearing our VIU hoodies and hats everywhere we go, and the majority of high school graduates from PQB [will] make VIU their first choice for post-secondary, taking classes o line, locally and at the Nanaimo campus – community member Ron Woodward, Parksville

These comments also strengthen the suggestion reported earlier in this report to rethink the scope of career services VIU offers, beginning with the identification of regional needs.

### Greater role as a community hub

Respondents also spoke about the need to raise the visibility and impact of VIU, particularly in Nanaimo, through a deliberate strategy to make VIU a community hub.

People spoke of expanding the walls of the campus to include the community, moving away from a “campus model” to a “neighbourhood model” of learning services. They spoke of increasing community access to training/learning events, social and cultural opportunities, and recreation facilities.

[In the future, I would like to see VIU as] a destination for the surrounding community – both for Nanaimo and the Central Island region. People will want to come to VIU out of interest for social events, theatre, food, exercise, enjoyment, tours, to study or learn and more. Campus will be a vibrant place to go any day of the week, and any time of day! – employee Drew Taylor

I hope to see a further evolution of our work and classroom spaces into more community-focused hubs that serve multiple purposes (health, social connections, collaborating, etc.) –employee Leslie Burgoyne, Nanaimo

Others spoke of a need to integrate the university better in the community, including greater visibility in downtown Nanaimo and elsewhere.

[I would like to see] more student participation in downtown Nanaimo. Make it a real part of the University Campus - Have a shuttle service and encourage business to cater for students – Lee Rowley, Herold Engineering

I would love to see VIU programs in spaces in the community, like downtown Nanaimo. I would love to go to a restaurant/ test kitchen run by culinary in the Old City – employee Danielle Johnsrude, Nanaimo

These recommendations to build on VIU’s community engagement practice speak both to the importance of community experience to students, but also to the importance of the university to its communities’ cultural life and economies. As we see in the following chapter on Building Knowledge, that community connection is also the crucial part of VIU’s niche in creating meaningful scholarship, research, creative activity, and applied learning for its students.

# Building Knowledge

The engagement conversation began with a question about “Encouraging Discovery,” a phrase made deliberately broad to capture the range of VIU’s knowledge activities in research, scholarship, creative activity, inquiry, and applied problem-solving. Even though VIU is designated as a teaching-intensive university, research (and other knowledge building activities) are a big part of VIU students’ experience. Their stories focus on the institutional support that VIU gives to its undergraduate and graduate population to apply for grants, learn and deploy research methods, conduct original research, present at conferences, and be accepted for publication – for undergraduates especially, these are rare opportunities in other universities. That work happens not only with academic faculty and in VIU’s research institutes, it also happens in the applied subjects. Further, we know that the vast proportion of that knowledge work is based in the community: about the local ecology, economy, and society. Areas for new thinking include ways to extend the experience to an even greater proportion of VIU’s students, build additional supports, and create new opportunities for sharing knowledge across faculties and departments.

## VIU’s strengths

VIU has built a niche in student-focused and community-based knowledge building work (encompassing scholarship, research, creative activity and applied research across its programs). Even though designated and funded by the province as a teaching-intensive (vs research-focused) university, VIU has been hitting above its weight.

### Opportunities for students to engage in original work

Perhaps VIU’s most remarkable knowledge-building strength is the opportunity that students have at VIU, undergraduate and graduate alike, to undertake original research (as well as other knowledge work), apply for grants, make presentations in academic settings, and see their work published in peer-reviewed journals.

For instance, in 2018-19, SRCA provided more than 1,600 student research engagement experiences across our campuses. VIU supports student research by funding independent student projects (REACH Awards); by requiring many internally funded faculty projects to include student training (VIURAC); and by providing paid research experience positions (Research Work-Ops). During the 2019-20 fiscal year, SRCA provided travel and conference funding to more than 90 students and the CREATE student conference received submissions from more than 400 students representing eight faculties. In the first half of 2019, projects supported by the Regional Initiatives fund involved more than two dozen students.

**Student awards**

My biggest accomplishment was receiving the REACH award to pursue research that I had started during the VIU Ghana Research and Study Field School. This grant inspired me to complete my research project, submit it to present at a national conference, and even return to Ghana after graduation to share my results – student Jocelyne Fournier, Nanaimo

I think one of my greatest accomplishments during my student career has been receiving the prestigious NSERC Undergraduate Student Research Award. … The experience was incredibly rewarding and I was able to present my research at the end of summer to other award holders and supervisors and as well as a poster that will be presented at a conference in the near future! – student Amanda Friesen, Nanaimo

This focus on student-led investigation is a recognized strength. VIU undergraduates get more of an opportunity to engage in research than they would at a research institution. Indeed, other institutions reach out to VIU for advice on supporting undergraduate research, including VIU’s CREATE research conference model. VIU graduate students – more than 1,000, more numerous than at other teaching intensive universities in BC – are also more likely to have experiences in original research and publication.

The impact on students is life-changing. It creates motivation for new career paths:

[A highlight] would definitely be having the opportunity to conduct my own research project, complete with my own thesis and experimentation! This project was my first taste of research and it really opened my eyes to something I can really see myself doing in the future. I do not think I would be able to participate in my own research at an undergrad level at any other university – student Amanda Friesen, Nanaimo

**Student publications**

I think the most impressive thing I have done was have my research accepted into the British undergraduate research conference at the University of Leeds and the National undergraduate research conference in Montana in the states. It just shows that if you are passionate and have the grit, you can do anything – student Dasha Russell, Nanaimo

I am also proud of my presentations at a half dozen conferences, publishing in the Sophia undergraduate journal twice, and winning the Michael L. Warsh Law Corporation Award for research – international alum Michael Caditz, Nanaimo

It builds confidence:

I was incredibly nervous about going to my first conference. I was uneasy and felt rather inadequate as a second-year student in a room of professors, researchers, graduate students and business owners. I thought I had nothing to offer. My insecurities began to dissipate when I realized how closely connected and friendly this big group of strangers were with one another. ... I shed my fears and felt free to speak with members from every corner of the industry – student Georgia Banister, Nanaimo

It strengthens academic performance:

I have performed significantly better academically post conference than I had prior to attending the summit. The conference shone light into the some of the serious issues our country faces, and I found it to be very beneficial to talk so openly about issues that are normally swept under the rug. A new level of awareness was achieved, and I have been able to share it with my peers since returning – student Griffin Douglas, Nanaimo

**Student conferences**

A key experience that contributed to my learning experience was the encouragement to attend the CREATE Conference, and to pursue funding to attend the North American Garden Tourism Conference. Presenting at the CREATE Conference was vital – it is the first of many presentations for me, and this was a low-pressure, valuable practice experience. … The networking from that conference turned into a part-time contract I'm currently working, and a future meeting with a key Horticulture leader in Vancouver – alum Bianca van der Stoel, Nanaimo

Some of the opportunities I had throughout my time at VIU include being selected to present my work at the Couch Stone Sociology Symposium, attend a workshop in Montreal for the Samuel Centre of Social Connectedness. … All of these opportunities have been extremely inspiring for me in many ways, and I feel extremely grateful that I attended a university that really cared about students’ success and involvement – alum Alexis Gardner, Nanaimo

And it prepares students for a future of further study:

Being around this wealth of knowledge and research [Society for American Archaeology Annual Conference] has inspired me to continue my research in my master's degree, as well as keep our project going after I have left Vancouver Island University. Thank you so much for helping me gain this incredible life and academic experience – student Melissa Ayling, Nanaimo

### A record of community-focused knowledge-building

Another area of strength is VIU’s contribution to knowledge about the region in which we live, part of VIU’s role as a regional knowledge hub.

Arising from VIU’s commitment to community, this local focus has become a defining feature. All of VIU’s research chairs, for instance, are focused on local issues and their work has direct application to priorities in the region. VIU’s Regional Initiatives Fund is another example: it supports community partners in accessing VIU instructors and students to solve community problems. Many other initiatives are similarly built around local social, environmental, and ecological issues.

The focus on community shows up in the classroom as well as in VIU’s labs, projects, and institutes. Examples include the Community Action Projects conducted by post-baccalaureate degree students in VIU’s Education program to respond to needs expressed by schools and/or local communities.[[53]](#footnote-53) CBAIR, the Community-Based Applied Interdisciplinary Research course, is another example. Sponsored by multiple departments, the course provides small student teams with an opportunity to apply inquiry skills to real-world problems in the community.

My group did an analysis of the Good Food Box program for Nanaimo Foodshare. It was great to put the research skills I had learned in previous courses to a real-world project. We successfully planned the research process from start to end, and finished off the year by presenting at the CREATE conference during VIU’s Research Week – something I definitely thought I never would have done back in my first year of university! – student Lauren Robillard, Nanaimo

**Research with the Regional District of Nanaimo**

The Regional District of Nanaimo Drinking Water Watershed Protection program is currently engaged with VIU's Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Region Research Institute (MABRRI) on a 5-Year Wetland Research Partnership. …. Our Technical Advisory Committee identified wetland mapping, monitoring and policy as a data gap in the region, and we engaged VIU MABRRI to assist.

The Drinking Water Watershed Protection program has also partnered with VIU's Coastal Hydrology and Climate Change Research Lab on snowpack monitoring within the region.

VIU’s Resource Management Program students conduct an annual monitoring of water quality and benthic invertebrates in the DFO side channel at Englishman River Regional Park and count spawning salmon. … In addition to providing site access, the RDN Parks Department assists in paying for laboratory costs to evaluate samples.

The Tamaga Program (VIU Horticulture, partnered with a university in Japan) has made use of large wild ginger colonies in the Douglas Fir plantations at Nanaimo Regional Parks to carry out wild plant propagation training over the course of several years.

VIU’s Tourism/Recreation Management Department is a partner with PLAY Oceanside, a community group focused on the promotion of physical literacy.

CBAIR, through its unique structure and partnership with community organisations, cemented my passion for research, enabled me to capitalise on the interdisciplinary nature of my major, and helped me realise my passion for working with the community – student Felicia Fischer, Nanaimo

Moreover, much of VIU’s community-centred knowledge work is funded by the community. In 2020, some 11 out of 37 research funders were Island businesses, organizations, and municipalities.[[54]](#footnote-54) One example is the Regional Initiatives Fund,[[55]](#footnote-55) an initiative undertaken in partnership with the Province of British Columbia and the Real Estate Foundation of BC to enable communities of Vancouver Island to collaborate on projects with meaningful student involvement in community-based applied research.

### Strong institutional support

Making that student and community work possible is a strong support structure, even in the absence of core provincial research funding.

The office of Scholarship, Research and Creative Activity is the centre for much of that support. The office helps instructors and students across the university apply for external grants (including an admirable success record in attracting federal tri-agency funding), seek internal funding, and present their work at internal and external conferences.

Another part of the enabling structure is the network of VIU research institutes. The university has 14 research centres, 4 research labs, and a major research endeavour in the Canadian Letters and Images Project that all allow students and faculty to come together around shared research themes.

The Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Region Research Institute is one VIU’s most active institutes. Focused on research and community engagement initiatives primarily within the UNESCO-designated Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Region, MABRRI employs VIU graduates and student research assistants in environmental monitoring, wetland mapping, forest plant phenology, and more.

VIU’s Applied Environmental Research Labs is another example: the Labs led innovations in chemistry long before VIU offered a chemistry major; students even took chemistry courses just so that they could work there. The World Leisure Centre of Excellence in Sustainable Leisure Management brings together scholars to share innovative ideas, engage in dialogue and collaborate in research and teaching. The Deep Bay Marine Field Station in Deep Bay, another centre, is a marine research facility focused on shellﬁsh aquaculture, sustainable development and marine conservation – all key to the local economy.

**Undergrad opportunities**

History students have several opportunities at VIU — due to our small class sizes — that are unavailable to undergraduates at other institutions. For example, VIU History's Canadian Letters and Images Project – founded by Dr. Stephen Davies – employs many of our students as paid researchers who work with letters, diaries, photos, etc. from Canadian soldiers who served in various military conflicts over the past century or more. Led by Dr. Cheryl Krasnick Warsh, Dr. Cathryn Spence, and Dr. Katharine Rollwagen, VIU History is also now the North American editorial base for the international journal Gender & History, and two VIU students per year work as editorial assistants on the publication. Again, these sorts of opportunities would only be available to grad students at most other universities. It is these type of unique to VIU initiatives that need to be both celebrated and further promoted – employee Timothy Lewis, Nanaimo

### A focus on knowledge-building as teaching

Another attribute is the approach to research and other knowledge-building as *part of* teaching rather than an activity *distinct from* teaching, the usual university model.

Part of the rationale is pragmatic: VIU instructors regularly teach 7- 8 courses a year rather than the 2-3 more commonly taught in research-intensive institutions, and the levels of funding available are not enough to backfill teaching hours, establish expensive labs, undertake distant field-work, or hire large research teams. A more important reason, however, is linked to VIU’s mission.

As a teaching university with a breadth of academic and vocational programming, knowledge-building is deliberately promoted as part of all learners’ experience, just those in academic fields. Learning to ask and answer one’s own questions pushes the boundaries of knowledge for all students.

Every single discipline does something that qualiﬁes as “research” or “research skill building.” … Consider research in the context of a student engaged in investigation and discovery. This process requires a number of skills that varies across disciplines, but can loosely be categorized as recognizing an issue, ﬁguring out what has been done, ﬁguring out what could be done, establishing a plan, executing the plan, and sharing the results. If a student is asked to write a poem, create a cake, or observe cells in situ – they are all learning and executing research skills pertinent to their discipline. What we need to do a better job at is to intentionally make both faculty and students aware of the skills they are teaching and learning. We not only teach research, we teach via researching. ... This is not about silo’ing research skills to research classes and research projects, it is about recognizing that research is part of pretty well everything – employee Kendra Stiwich, Nanaimo

VIU has thus developed a broad interpretation of research and other kinds of knowledge work. The name of the support office, for example – Scholarship, Research, and Creative Activity – was designed to deliberately capture the breadth of study at VIU, including interdisciplinary approaches. This ecumenical emphasis on multi-disciplinary knowledge-building is another part of VIU’s strength, and further evidence of its lived efforts toward inclusion.

## Opportunities for new thinking

These descriptions of VIU’s strengths in turn suggest areas for new thinking and next steps: ways to extend the experience to more students, provide additional institutional support, and amplify the opportunities in VIU’s vocational programs.

### More access to student knowledge-building opportunities

We know that 1,600 students were involved in SRCA-supported activities in 2018-19, some 21% of the full-time equivalent student body. We heard that more opportunities to engage was important.

One driver is that knowledge-building work is one of the key high-impact experiences we know enriches the student learning experience. Another is that research experience at university better prepares our students for the workforce and for further study. We are aware that not all of our students feel prepared when they move on to further study: of the 27% of our students who went on to further study in the last three years, 75% felt somewhat or very well prepared – a much lower number than the 92% who felt the same province-wide.[[56]](#footnote-56) Research also better prepares our students for the workforce:

In the second half of my undergrad, I obtained valuable research experience through VIU work-op positions in the Applied Environmental Research Labs (AERL). When I graduated, I already had two years of research experience, which was a tremendous advantage to starting my career – alum Hannah McSorley, Nanaimo

### Greater community focus

We also heard ideas for increasing our work in communities, and for making existing work more visible. Part of that demand comes from community members themselves:

When research opportunities do come about, support them aggressively, as they can be a long term economic driver – Lee Rowley, Herold Engineering

Present sector-specific [research-driven] trends to employers and community not-for-profits, and host “dialogue” conversations about the implications. We don't have the capacity to do this kind of research – Brenda Fowler, Executive Director, People For a Healthy Community on Gabriola

Part of the driver is also philosophical, arising out of VIU’s existing community engagement commitments and a recognition that publicly-funded research belongs to the public. VIU is a member of the Community-Based Research Centre and the Vancouver Island Community Research Alliance, and applies best practice in community research methods.

### Increased funding

For employees, levels of funding make up the biggest gap in support.

Funding is important on its own – to pay for student researchers, supplies, and travel – but it is also seen as a sign of recognition of the value of the work. While the goal is to support teaching *through* research, some instructors spoke of research that happened *on top of* teaching hours. We “need to figure out mechanisms for compensating consistently and recognizing the value in research” reported one World Café contributor, urging new thinking about the allocation of teaching time, research time, service/administration time, and financial resources to support it all.

### New opportunities to build applied knowledge

Other ideas were brought to the table about amplifying knowledge-building work in VIU’s vocational programs through applied research and innovation.

Participants argued that VIU has a great deal of applied research it could surface and expand. One World Café contributor explained that the Trades and Applied Technology Faculty has been working closely with SRCA to see how VIU can better share the knowledge being created in the faculty. They were inspired by success stories such as the college in the Okanagan that worked with industry to identify the problem, develop options, and then implement a solution. At VIU, similar ideas for growing interdisciplinary partnerships with local employers are being floated, such as the idea of teaming Trades and Applied Technology with the Engineering program and with industry, or working with the Faculty of Education to work on local problems.

[In the future, I would like to see that] more applied research is conducted, and more awareness exists by communities of the research VIU is doing and the opportunities that exist for community members, organizations and businesses to co-create with VIU – employee survey respondent

Another idea focused on the idea of the campus itself as a living lab for knowledge-building. Students, instructors, and the campus operations teams have a shared interest in exploring ways to improve campus sustainability (waste, energy, local procurement, etc.), physical accessibility, marketing of community services (event venues, food services, salon services, auto repair, etc.), process efficiencies, and more.

VIU’s record and ambitions for knowledge-building are part of its ethos of inclusion (of students and of disciplines) and of community engagement. As we turn to consider the impact of the pandemic lockdown on the way we work, that ethic remains front and centre.

# Learning from the Pandemic

**Taking care of mental health**

Opportunities for VIU coming out of this pandemic could include continuing giving students more acknowledgment and time for their mental health, struggles and stresses. Ex: extended deadlines, longer office hour periods, etc. Recognizing that students can be just as stressed year-round than as in this pandemic, and mental health should be taken very seriously – student Kayla Passmore, Nanaimo

*Recognition for mental health and personal struggles have been huge. The kind of caring and empathy that professors have shown has given my learning a more personal feel. Online classes can be very valuable for some but for others can be very challenging given the lack of personal connections. I have had a lot more one-on-one time with my professors to make sure that I am on the right track. The shift to virtual is promising even though daunting. It’s allowed us to take down the barrier of having to actually make time in your day to hop in your car and drive to meet your professor at the university. Since the switch to virtual meetings, it has been a lot easier for me to connect with colleagues, professors, and friends – student Seth Recalma, Nanaimo*

The Strategic Planning engagement process was launched just two weeks before lockdown. In the conversations that followed, many of our students and employees spoke about the strengths and struggles of the new normal. We heard stories of the loss of personal connection as well as its inverse, a greater sense of community and contact. We heard stories from those who were flourishing in the learning format, and those who were finding the switch difficult. We also heard stories from instructors on the strains and surprises of teaching, and some of the innovative teaching practices they are beginning to adopt. Employees across the institution and at all campuses spoke about the strengths, challenges and surprises of working remotely. Calls for keeping some aspects of the pandemic response in place were made, including the investment in connection and community, the flexibility and accessibility of online learning, innovations in pedagogy, as well as the benefits of more flexible working arrangements.

### Transformation of personal connection

The theme of connection – and loss of connection – was woven through most of our post-pandemic conversations. Students mourned the loss of in-person contact with friends and the in-class experience with classmates and instructors. At the same time, many reported that they were spending *more* time connecting with other students in online meetings, and that they had *more* access to instructors and to student service teams who were actively seeking to support them through the transition. Some of those initiatives many thought are worth continuing in the future.

The key element has been personal communication and demonstration of concern for student well-being. Students pointed out the caring attitude they experienced: outreach to individual students to check in on their mental health, greater flexibility with assignments, more communication, and more personalized evaluation options – all elements that contribute to student well-being. Ancillary Services even provided free lunches every Wednesday to students in isolation in student housing.

VIU’s ability … to keep students engaged during this time is something I definitely think we should keep moving forward. Showing students/staff that there are people around them willing to support and make a change even with a global crisis happening gives those struggling a sense of security. This feeling of community and engagement will only get stronger, helping everyone keep a positive attitude – student Payton Berrrigan, Nanaimo

**Rethinking pedagogy**

Through this pandemic we’ve seen the unique opportunity for new hybrid learning opportunities. While online learning has the potential to be flexible to the lifestyle needs of adult learners and workers, it also poses the challenge of supporting diverse learning styles, application and connection which are important for adult learners. One positive result is that classrooms have had to get creative and reverse learning models away from a teacher centred approach, giving students more freedom, responsibility and leadership over their own education and sharing their experience in return with the class. There is opportunity to take this further and look at more ways to reduce barriers to education that many people face, through more wrap around services, flexible intake and delivery processes, as well as incorporating more multicultural, indigenous, learner-centred and popular education styles – employee Amanda Aust, Cowichan

Another unexpected benefit has been the focus on mental health. The COVID-generated focus on alternate formats created greater openness to strategies for accommodating students who were struggling or had a disability that affected their learning.

Some students even saw the switch as an opportunity to grow and reinvent themselves. They welcomed the time to decelerate, reconnect, and reflect: “This is the break I never asked for but needed” said one student. Students also spoke about building resilience, adaptability, self-discipline, communication skills (in doing team projects, for example), patience and gratitude.

### Reflections about learning online

Academically, the switch online presented both opportunities for improved learning as well as genuine roadblocks. Some of our respondents *liked* the move online; others were clearly struggling.

I may be an odd one out, but I like the online format for a lot of things. I like that I can work through the material at my own pace, in my own hours. I can rewind lecture videos and audio, so I can go over concepts until I understand them at my own pace. I hope that this introduction to virtual means will encourage profs to record their lectures for face-to-face lectures after this is over – student Savannah, Nanaimo

For all students, but especially those in Powell River and Cowichan, the switch opened up a much larger choice of courses to pursue. The new format also solved practical scheduling problems:

Many students work or take courses in programs with conflicting schedules. Overall, this experience has highlighted a need for improved access to materials in an online format. Better asynchronous learning options could help these students manage their course loads more effectively – student Mac Barrera, Nanaimo

Aside from the academic impact, working from home has brought practical and personal benefits to many students. Some spoke about the importance of greater flexibility, more time in the day, and a welcome pause in commuting, especially for those who travel a long distance to campus.

**Increasing access**

Going forward: this is an opportunity to retain the positive aspects of remote course delivery. The Academic and Career Preparation faculty already had online and blended opportunities, but will continue to offer a more flexible modality that allows increased remote access and allows students to flex in and out of face-to-face classes as their circumstances changes – employee Rita Alton, Nanaimo

Some people in the community are very excited that we are now offering most classes online. When a friend heard about this, she was very happy and said that she could now sign up for courses – employee Gillian Northwood, Nanaimo

We have provided an opportunity through online programs for students to get the pre-requisites for their program from home. This not only allows them to save money, and get full acceptance into their programs before coming to Canada, but also enhances their application for the study permit. For example, Dental Hygiene applicants require a lot of pre-requisites that they could complete online from home before applying to the program. Students that require some Grade 12 courses could do them online with us and then apply to undergrad programs – employee Karen Blackman, Nanaimo

Not everyone, of course, welcomed the change. Hands-on learners and those in busy households or dorm rooms found the format made concentrating difficult: “I really don't like doing lectures on Zoom. I have trouble keeping engaged; it's different when you're sitting in front of someone but it feels the same as when you're watching a TV show on Netflix or YouTube videos,” said one Nanaimo student.

And of course, for programs with experiential learning components, the challenge is even greater. For courses held in First Nations communities or those with a land-based learning approach, the inability to create in-person experiences is especially limiting.

### Innovations in pedagogy, delivery, and partnerships

The move to the virtual classroom has also triggered fundamental re-thinking of how we offer courses and programs.

**Refreshed pedagogy.** The first piece is the learning experience itself. For VIU’s instructors, the switch online has been exhausting but has opened up new ways of teaching that are enriching their practice.

It really personalized the learning for a lot of people. Many were accommodated. However this was pretty exhausting to maintain ... the level of support. But it also allowed us to humanize our teaching and reach out in unprecedented ways – employee Vicki Nygaard, Nanaimo

Instructors spoke of flipped classrooms, greater scope for student independence and initiative, rethinking of learning outcomes and assessment methods, and more. Building on conversations about decolonizing the curriculum, others also spoke about incorporating more multicultural, Indigenous, learner-centred and popular education styles.

The current teaching situation has forced me to re-consider conventional methods and models of delivery. Developing new ways to explore the course concepts has certainly been challenging, but it has been enlightening and mostly rewarding. I will be developing new units that work to the strengths of our students in an online environment – employee Mike Muir, Nanaimo

**New partnerships**

[In the future, VIU could be] building stronger and collaborative relationships with universities inside and outside of Canada (i.e., dual degrees) so that a more diverse range of courses, programs and opportunities are available – alum survey contributor

[In the future, VIU] could disrupt higher education and create opportunities to partner with other universities in the areas of research, teaching and community development initiatives. Cross course registration with other institutions where there are relative strengths is one of many examples. This has worked in the greater Boston area and internationally. We could experiment with it here and it could over time be institutionalized – employee Robin McLay, Nanaimo

In the future I would like to see collaborations with foreign institutions allowing delivery of VIU programs abroad without the need for international students to travel to Canada. This can be done using a combination of VIU faculty and faculty from the partner institution– employee Bruce Condie, Nanaimo

These new practices have been supported by VIU’s Centre for Innovation and Excellence in Learning (CIEL). In the first four months after lockdown, 1,523 people attended CIEL sessions, a *3000%* increase over the same period the preceding year.

Broader access. Another fundamental change is the possibility of broadening access to non-traditional learners in our communities, as well as learners living in First Nations, rural or remote communities, and even new populations of international students.

That revised thinking on access is apparent not only in VIU’s virtual classrooms, but also in the many units that serve students in other ways:

What we are doing well right now is meeting students where they are at. By that I mean offering opportunities to engage students where they are (either on certain social media platforms the students are using instead of email) and “face to face” online. I believe it is making us even more “student-centred” and is super exciting to see! Some opportunities that this has highlighted for us is we currently work in a traditional 9-5 day and that is not necessarily the hours that a student engages with University. How can we be more accessible to students? Can we be available later in the evenings, or earlier in the mornings, different time zones, for working students, etc. – employee Brittany Parker, Nanaimo

Being able to reach people in remote communities and out of province through Zoom has been a positive thing. It is also good that we can hold events and include as many people as possible even if we can't be together. Putting together Semelshun this spring was a true team effort and we had 80 participants, some from Alberta, some grandparents. It was so lovely to see everyone and honour our grads' hard work. I hope that we can continue to work as a team and include as many people as possible, no matter where they are – employee Kim Warkentine, Nanaimo

With the conversation on broader access online comes the need to address other barriers, including limited or no broadband (hence the need to reduce file sizes and permit asynchronous learning), limited access to computers/other devices, and a range of obstacles at home (space, noise, family support).

New partnerships. A third area for new thinking is the possibility of partnering in delivering a wider menu of services. The in-person model of personalized attention is VIU’s hallmark, but the shift online has generated ideas about cooperation with other universities. If we don’t offer a particular course program that is important to our students and the region’s economy, can we partner with others to make a hybrid version available online? Can we make VIU even more relevant to the regions this way?

**Working from home**

*The ability to attend meetings virtually for Senate has been great for all involved. We've had greater participation attendance than ever before as prior to COVID we did not allow for virtual attendance. There is something to be said for the "feel of the room" and the conversation flow is somewhat different, however virtual meetings have also allowed for people to participate who may have not been comfortable to do so face-to-face in a such a large group – employee Kyla Bruce, Nanaimo*

International Marketing is coming together as a team in different ways, while our local and global teams are all working from home. Often our global reps are on the road in their regions, attending in-person fairs and meeting with agents. Now we are working together more to provide service to prospective students. We're speaking more frequently and working together on virtual fairs and webinars. It has positively impacted our level of online service and idea sharing as a more cohesive team, and I hope to take that forward – employee Leanne Spasnik, Nanaimo

### Benefits (and stresses) of working remotely

Not only has the lockdown triggered changes in how we teach and learn, it has also challenged assumptions about the way we work. Many employees working remotely enjoyed the increased flexibility of working at home (although not all wanted to work from home all the time), aspiring perhaps to a blended schedule in the future. Many were grateful for the pause in commuting and noticed lowered fatigue and increased productivity.

Employees also noticed a change in the quality of the work itself: better participation in meetings, greater efforts by managers and colleagues to support each other (and have fun, including super villain masks and sock puppets), more efficient paperwork processes, and even new voices around our decision-making tables.

As VIU heads into a fall of continued learning and working from home, the challenge is to build on VIU’s strengths but learn from the (unplanned) transformation process that the university community is undergoing:

I would like to see a truly blended and flexible community. I would love to commute less, maintain the lower CO2 impact and environmental damage that remote delivery enables, including individual management of work-life balance. But I want to bring these back into the incredibly valuable in-person community. A vision like this will require big investments in decentralizing teaching and learning technologies, including funding for technology at home and continuing support for teachers and students and administrators to use the technology. But I don't think there are downsides in trying to bring more of what we're doing now back into what we used to do – employee Toni Smith, Nanaimo

As VIU is starting to reflect on the impact of the pandemic, even as students and employees continue to adapt, the moment for thinking about our future is ripe. The fundamental disruption of what and how we serve our students and communities may be opening up innovative practices we need to pursue in the future.

# Next Steps

These stories of strength and this menu of ideas represent only some of the many hundreds of accounts shared from March-July 2020 by VIU’s on-campus and off-campus communities. They are assembled here to illustrate the range of transformational experiences underway at VIU and the ambitions those communities have for its future. They embody the lived values and mission of the institution and hint at its vision for the future

This report informed the draft five-year Strategic Plan for VIU shared in the autumn of 2020.

# Process Design

This last chapter describes the process that generated the stories, reviewed the evidence, and analyzed the themes presented in this report.

### Overview

Approaches. The community engagement method used this spring is based on Appreciative Inquiry and Design Thinking. Appreciative Inquiry is an approach to planning that focuses on institutional strengths rather than weaknesses. Taking an appreciative approach doesn't mean we ignore the things that aren't working – those are important! – but it does mean that we devote most of our energy on what is working. The approach shapes the number of people invited to participate (as many as possible), the tone of the activities (positive, strengths-based), the nature of communication (efforts to share the stories widely across VIU’s communities), and the process for decision-making (iterative and broad-based).

The tone and inclusiveness of appreciative Inquiry is well matched to the user focus central to Design Thinking. The goal of Design Thinking is to improve goods or services from the point of view of the user (in our case, our students). It is a step-by-step method of seeking to better understand the student experience, to pinpoint areas of focus, to generate innovative ideas, and then to prototype and test those ideas to make sure we are making a difference.

Process. Both approaches focus first on discovery: seeking a deep understanding of the experience and ambitions of our users. In our process, this step has involved primary and secondary qualitative and quantitative data gathering (in person and online through surveys, interviews, postcards, and workshops), systematic analysis with the NVIVO qualitative analysis software tool, and – next steps – facilitated and iterative discussion about evolving ideas presented in a draft plan.

Governance. The governance of the initiative has been led by the President and the process has been supported by an Advisory Group of nine members of the VIU community, including two from VIU’s Student Union. Approval of the final plan is the responsibility of the Board of Governors, and they will contribute to building of the plan along the way.

Team. The working level team has been led by Alison Van Rooy, Senior Advisor for Strategic Planning and Institutional Initiatives, and supported (until the March 13 pandemic pause) by a core group of eight VIU graduate students.

### Activities

Awareness-raising

* A website was built with an explanation of the full process, explanatory videos (including a launch video by the President), two survey links, a blog, and resources for teams wishing to undertake their own consultations.[[57]](#footnote-57)
* Information about the engagement process was sent by email from University Relations to all employees and all students in March, and was included in messages from the president and in regular issues of VIU Digest. Messages were also sent to all VIU Alumni, Milner Gardens and Woodland members and volunteers, and to community members, mayors and municipal counsellors, MPs and MLAs, First Nations leaders and more. In all, more than 28,510 messages were sent (the final tally is expected to top 30,000).
* World Café events were advertised on the VIU Events page and social media pages/accounts, and updates about the engagement were regularly posted on VIU’s social media platforms.
* Posters were positioned across the three campuses.

New data collection

* Meetings were held with members of the senior management team to solicit advice on discussion areas and process design.
* In-depth student empathy interviews were undertaken by graduate student interviewers of 14 current students to identify key themes for questionnaire and workshop designs.
* World Café discussions on 10 and 12 March were held in Nanaimo, followed by later Zoom sessions in Powell River and Cowichan. Other In-person and online team workshops were held in academic and operational units across the university, and with student and community groups. There were in total 40 World Cafés and workshops.
* Ballot boxes with questionnaire forms were positioned across the three campuses.
* Questionnaires included an online survey of participants in grades 10, 11, and 12 following the February 2020 Discovery Days event in Nanaimo. An online questionnaire for students, alumni, and employees was produced, alongside additional questionnaires for community members, donors/supporters, and First Nations leaders.
* In all, 1028 people participated in one way or another: 258 attended presentations; 238 completed surveys; and 526 attended World Cafés and workshops. The majority of participants were employees: 14% were students, Alum, and VIUSU employees; 21% were community members, and 65% were employees.

Existing data review

In addition to the resources referenced in the main document, these sources were consulted.

* VIU community consultation notes, 2010
* Student and alum testimonials, 2019 and 2020
* Student research experience testimonials, 2019
* Co-Curricular Record CCR Talks series, various dates
* Input shared for the 2019 People Plan, 2018
* Input shared for the 2017 update to the Academic Plan, 2019
* Background documents and studies prepared for the 2017-22 Scholarship, Research, and Creative Activity Plan
* Background documents and studies prepared for the 2018-21 Student Affairs Plan
* Data studies and surveys by the Office of University Planning and Analysis, including the 2013 and 2014 VIU Student Experience surveys and the 2015 and 2017 community studies.
* VIU and BC university data on enrolment, retention, student engagement, and transfers.
* Comparator policy, plans, and metrics for other Canadian universities.
* Regional economic, labour, and school data.
* Environmental Scans prepared by the regional school boards.
* Existing VIU strategic planning documents, including the Academic Plan, the People Plan, the Scholarship, Research and Creative Plan, the Library Plan, the Student Affairs Strategic Plan, the Aboriginal Education Plan, the Campus Master Plan, and more.

Analysis

* Text (written or transcribed) was generated from the interviews and other primary and secondary sources with appropriate consent and privacy measures in place.
* Qualitative data analysis of text-based material was undertaken with Nvivo software and categorized by theme where available.

1. While only some of contributors’ stories and ideas could be highlighted in this report, all contributions were read, analyzed, and stored securely. We will continue to draw from the whole of our communities’ contributions as future plans are developed. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Note that the list of programs mentioned might reflect the tours offered on the day rather than prior research into VIU’s course offerings. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Statistics Canada, *Focus on Geography Series,* 2016 census data, available at https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/as-sa/fogs-spg/Facts-cd-eng.cfm?LANG=Eng&GK=CD&GC=5921&TOPIC=10. The cities of Nanaimo and Parksville’s rate was 9.9%, Duncan’s was 15.4%, and Powell River was 11.9%. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. VIU, *VIU’s Clemente Course Breaks Down Barriers*, 31 August 2016, online at: https://news.viu.ca/vius-clemente-course-breaks-down-barriers. The Clemente Course is a university level course open to anyone who wishes to pursue higher education but had not found an opportunity to do so. It offers a doorway into secondary education to people who struggle with challenges such as mental health issues, poverty and disability. The course fees, child care, books, bus passes and snacks are all provided by VIU.  [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. VIU, Office of University Planning and Analysis, *Why Do Students Admitted To Vancouver Island University Not Register? A Mixed Methods Study,* December 2014, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. VIU, Office of University Planning and Analysis, *Why Do Students Admitted To Vancouver Island University Not Register? A Mixed Methods Study,* December 2014, p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. VIU, Scholarship, Research and Creative Activity, 2018-19 *Student Research Matters Here: Stats and Stories,* poster. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. VIU, Office of University Planning and Analysis, *Student Transitions Project – Vancouver Island University, Frequently Asked Questions,* February 2019, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Office of University Planning and Analysis, *Student Transitions Project 2019 First Annual Transitions (2020-02-26),* data for 2018-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Office of University Planning and Analysis, *Student Transitions Project 2019 First Annual Transitions (2020-02-26),* data for 2018-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Office of University Planning and Analysis, data online at https://adm.viu.ca/university-planning-analysis/facts-online-enrolment. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Statistics Canada, *Census Profile, 2016 Census, Nanaimo [Census agglomeration], British Columbia and British Columbia [Province],* available at: https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CMACA&Code1=938&Geo2=PR&Code2=59&SearchText=Nanaimo&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&B1=All&GeoLevel=PR&GeoCode=938&TABID=1&type=0. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. VIU, Office of University Planning and Analysis*, Why Do Students Admitted To Vancouver Island University Not Register? A Mixed Methods Study,* December 2014, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. VIU, Office of University Planning and Analysis, *Enhancing Student Retention at Vancouver Island University,* Final Draft, September 2013, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. VIU, Office of University Planning and Analysis, *Enhancing Student Retention at Vancouver Island University,* Final Draft, September 2013, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. VIU, Student Affairs, *Student Affairs Strategic Framework Environmental Scan And Consultation Report,* 2018, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. VIU, Office of University Planning and Analysis, *Why Do Students Admitted To Vancouver Island University Not Register? A Mixed Methods Study,* December 2014, p. 26-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. VIU, Office of University Planning and Analysis*, Student Experience Survey Results 2013-14* and VIU, Office of University Planning and Analysis, *2014-15 Survey Summary.* [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. VIU, Student Affairs*, Student Affairs Strategic Framework Environmental Scan And Consultation Report,* 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. There is an important exception: VIU’s Adult Basic Education program, *Foundations for Success,* offers six courses focused on university learning skills. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Data from VIU, Office of University Planning and Analysis, OUPS Fp5yr at June 01, 2020. Non-credit offerings include ElderCollege, Adventures in Learning, Lifelong Learning, forklift training, community education courses, driver training, etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. “Instructors” is used throughout this report to refer to all teaching staff, regardless of program. “Employees” is used to refer to all people employed at VIU; distinctions are not otherwise made between teaching and non-teaching positions. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. VIU, Office of University Planning and Analysis, *Enhancing Student Retention at Vancouver Island University,* Final Draft, September 2013, p. 14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Five year average course intake by Faculty, 2015-16 to 2019-20. Office of University Planning and Analysis, data at 1 June 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See page 11 in P Wylie, “The University of British Columbia’s international student initiative: Implications for provincial public higher education,” *Critical Education,* 11(2), 1-20. Retrieved from: http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/criticaled/article/view/186462. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. VIU, Office of University Planning and Analysis, *Enhancing Student Retention at Vancouver Island University,* Final Draft, September 2013, p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See details at https://research.viu.ca/files/video/chly-student-involvement. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Dominik describes his experience in the *Co-Curricular Record Talks* series here: https://youtu.be/RRxi0-w97sA. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. VIU, *Keep Calm and Study On with PSL,* brochure available at: https://services.viu.ca/sites/default/files/general/psl\_faculty\_brochure.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. VIU, Institutional Accountability Performance Report, 2019-20, soon available here: https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/post-secondary-education/institution-resources-administration/accountability-framework?keyword=iapr. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. National Survey of Student Engagement, data held by VIU’s Office of University Planning and Analysis. Some data also available here: *NSEE 2018 Snapshot: Vancouver Island University,* available at: https://adm.viu.ca/sites/default/files/copy\_of\_nsse18\_snapshot\_viu\_2.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. G.D. Kuh, *High impact practices. What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*, Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, available at: https://provost.tufts.edu/celt/files/High-Impact-Ed-Practices1.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. VIU, Office of University Planning and Analysis, *Enhancing Student Retention at Vancouver Island University,* Final Draft, September 2013, p. 14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. VIU, Office of University Planning and Analysis, *2013-14 VIU Student Experience Survey Summary Results*. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. VIU, Student Affairs, *Student Affairs Strategic Framework Environmental Scan And Consultation Report*, 2018, p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. VIU, Office of University Planning and Analysis, *Enhancing Student Retention at Vancouver Island University*, Final Draft, September 2013, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. As of June1, 2020, there had been 13,483 students registered for the 2019-20 academic year. 6,095 were part-time. Office of University Planning and Analysis data. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. VIU, Office of University Planning and Analysis, *Enhancing Student Retention at Vancouver Island University,* Final Draft, September 2013, p. 14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. National Survey of Student Engagement, *NSSE 2018: Multi-year Report, Vancouver Island University.* [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Sophia Palahicky, Kyla McLeod, and Frederic Fovet, *Mental Health in Higher Ed: Exploring the relevance of UDL from a multidisciplinary perspective*, presentation at the Third Pan-Canadian Conference on UDL Royal Roads University, October 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. VIU, *Academic Plan: Promoting and Celebrating Access to Excellence,* 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Heather Burke, *A Year in the Life of EleV: Learning Through Story*, Office of Aboriginal Education and Engagement, 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. StatsCan, *Census Profile, 2016 Census, Vancouver Island and Coast [Economic region], British Columbia and British Columbia [Province],* online at: https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=ER&Code1=5910&Geo2=PR&Code2=59&SearchText=Vancouver%20Island%20and%20Coast&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&B1=All&GeoLevel=PR&GeoCode=5910&TABID=1&type=0. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. VIU, Office of University Planning and Analysis, *Facts Online – Enrolment,* available at: https://adm.viu.ca/university-planning-analysis/facts-online-enrolment. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Heather Burke, *A Year in the Life of EleV: Learning Through Story*, Office of Aboriginal Education and Engagement, 2020, p. 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Heather Burke, *A Year in the Life of EleV: Learning Through Story*, Office of Aboriginal Education and Engagement, 2020, p. 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. *Wise Practices for Relational Land Based Learning (RLBL), Summary of Workshop*, Office of Aboriginal Education and Engagement, 25 February 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. National Survey of Student Engagement, *NSSE 2018: Multi-year Report, Vancouver Island University.* [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. EMSI, *Business and Commerce Impact: The Economic Value of Vancouver Island University,* February 2018, 2016-17 data. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Nanaimo, *City of Nanaimo Community Profile 2020*, page 20, available at: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57ab61a51b631bb0ce757ca9/t/5eb08d0b33f8ff54cd4371b1/1588628748471/2020+Community+Profile.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. In 2015-16, 946 students over the age of 65 were enrolled; in 2019-20, the number was 1,076. Office of University Planning and Analysis data. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. As of June1, 2020, there had been 13,483 students registered for the 2019-20 academic year; 1,076 were 65 years old and older. Office of University Planning and Analysis data. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. See example of CAP projects here: https://wordpress.viu.ca/pb6education/past-cap-projects. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Scholarship, Research and Creative Activity office, Romeo database, 25 May 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. For more information, see: https://research.viu.ca/regional-initiatives-fund. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. BC Statistics, [Education Dashboard](http://www2.bcstats.gov.bc.ca/Dashboard/), average of 2015-2017 graduates [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. See https://gov.viu.ca/strategic-planning. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)