



Australian Government  
Department of Education

# Consultation Paper: Implementing Suburban University Study Hubs

September 2023



## Introduction

The Australian Government is opening the door of opportunity for more Australians by acting on the five priority actions of the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report<sup>1</sup> (Interim Report). These changes will make a real difference to access and equity for under-represented groups at Australian universities and higher education institutions.

The Minister for Education, the Hon Jason Clare MP, announced the Suburban University Study Hubs Program as the Government's response to one of the five immediate actions. The [Interim Report](#) states that more and more jobs will require a university qualification in the years ahead. While 36 percent of the current Australian workforce has a university degree, the report estimates that this could jump to 55 percent by the middle of this century.

Almost one in two young Australians have a university degree, but not everywhere. Not in the outer suburbs. Not in the regions. In the decade ahead, more and more jobs will require a university qualification.

The Interim Report says that many of those Australians will need to come from the outer suburbs of our major cities and our regions. More people from under-represented groups need to participate to meet this need. This also means we are going to need more people to get those qualifications. More people getting degrees. More people in the workforce up-skilling and re-skilling and greater innovation in the way that we design and deliver higher education.

The Interim Report found that for many Australians, location affects their higher education opportunities, and people from outer metropolitan, and regional and remote areas often face challenges accessing higher education. Too often someone's postcode is a brick wall that stops Australians going to university. The cost of moving closer to a campus or a long commute is a major barrier to study.

The first priority action recommended by the Australian Universities Accord panel is to create more Regional University Centres (Regional University Study Hubs) and establish a similar model for the outer suburbs of our cities. This action brings higher education closer to students and delivers higher education in a way that is designed around students' needs and the student experience. The evidence is that where these hubs are, university participation goes up. They also support access to tertiary education for under-represented cohorts, including those first in family, from low socioeconomic status households and First Nations students.

The Government has committed <sup>2</sup> \$66.9 million to double the number of university study hubs, building on the 34 existing Regional University Study Hubs currently operating across the country. It will establish up to 20 additional Regional University Study Hubs and establish up to 14 Suburban University Study Hubs.

This Consultation paper seeks stakeholder feedback specifically on the establishment of Suburban University Study Hubs. The questions in the paper seek to encourage discussion and guide feedback.

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<sup>1</sup> The full Interim Report is available at: [www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/accord-interim-report](http://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/accord-interim-report)

<sup>2</sup> <https://ministers.education.gov.au/clare/improving-access-university-outer-suburbs-and-regions>

This paper is step one in active engagement on the Suburban University Study Hubs with communities, potential hub hosts, students, tertiary institutions, state and territory governments and other stakeholders. There will be further consultation and engagement leading to a competitive application process to establish Suburban University Study Hubs in areas with an identified need for additional higher education support.

Feedback on this paper will help to get the design of the new Suburban University Study Hubs right.

A separate approach will be taken to the Regional University Study Hubs, as an established program.

#### **Related Program: Regional University Study Hubs**

The Regional University Study Hubs Program takes an innovative approach to improve access to tertiary education for regional and remote students. Regional University Study Hubs are community-owned facilities in regional and remote locations that provide support to students studying at any Australian university or vocational education and training (VET) provider. Regional University Study Hubs provide the following facilities to students free of charge:

- **Infrastructure** including study spaces, break out areas, video conferencing, computer facilities and internet access.
- **Administrative and academic skills support services** such as developing writing and research skills and managing administrative processes.
- **Student support services** including pastoral support, study advice and help accessing provider student services.

Regional University Study Hubs also play a significant role supporting aspiration and building partnerships with education providers (schools, VET providers and universities) and local business and industry, which support the local economy and employment outcomes.

Regional University Study Hubs are not education providers. Rather they improve access and retention to tertiary education for regional and remote students by providing flexible support to those who choose to study locally via distance. A 2021 evaluation of the program found there was evidence Regional University Study Hubs have a positive impact on student retention and support access to tertiary education for under-represented groups, including those who are first in family, from low socioeconomic status households and First Nations students. They provide flexibility and improve access for those with caring responsibilities or work commitments to support mid-career changers and mature students.

In 2022, 39 percent of students supported by the Regional University Study Hubs program reported being first in their family to attend university, 11 percent identified as First Nations and 58 percent were over the age of 25.

Regional University Study Hubs are small scale facilities, often co-located with existing education infrastructure, for example TAFE campuses, public libraries, or other community infrastructure.

One of the strengths of the Regional University Study Hubs program is its place-based approach to establishing and operating each facility, allowing local communities to drive establishment and operations based on community need. Regional University Study Hubs use local knowledge to tailor their offerings to students and the community.

## What is the aim of the Suburban University Study Hubs Program?

The Suburban University Study Hubs will build on the learnings of the successful Regional University Study Hubs Program, adapted for a metropolitan setting. They will provide convenient, wrap-around support for higher education and Vocational Education and Training (VET) students where this is locally relevant. This includes under-represented students such as those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, people living with disability, First Nations people, mature age students and those with work or caring responsibilities.

The Program aims to improve and support diversity, equity of access and participation. It will improve outcomes for students from outer metropolitan and peri-urban areas where university attainment is low and there is limited access to a university campus.

Suburban University Study Hubs will provide support free of charge to any tertiary student enrolled at any Australian provider. They must operate on a 'provider-agnostic' basis and will partner with a variety of organisations, including tertiary education providers and local industry, to improve education outcomes for students in the community. They will seek to extend and supplement existing tertiary education offerings and complement, not replace, the role of providers.

The aim is to widen participation and support lifelong learning. Suburban University Study Hubs will deliver a flexible, adaptive approach for students who typically face barriers in accessing learning opportunities.

Suburban University Study Hubs will also develop readiness and aspiration for tertiary level study in their communities. They will provide a visible presence for local people to see further study as a real option for them. This will ensure more Australians participate and succeed in tertiary education regardless of background or post code. Suburban University Study Hubs will collaborate with each other, and with providers, to share data and knowledge across different locations and innovative to achieve better outcomes. This will be supported by the department and others.

### **Consultation Questions**

1. How can a place-based approach be fostered, as part of the Suburban University Study Hubs program, that ensures the voice of local communities is integrated in their design and operation?
2. How can the Suburban University Study Hubs widen participation and support and extend further study opportunities, adding to existing or planned investments?
3. How can equity be embedded into the design of Suburban University Study Hubs?
4. Where multiple communities may co-exist within the same area (for example, ethnic, cultural, industry-based, etc.), how can Suburban University Study Hubs ensure they meet the needs of these different communities?
5. How can we ensure that Suburban University Study Hubs operate to support students engaging with any provider, while also ensuring strong connections with local providers, campuses and leaders?

## What barriers will the Suburban University Study Hubs address and what services will they provide?

Students living in outer metropolitan and peri-urban areas face barriers preventing them from travelling to campuses for study, and in some cases, additional barriers relating to inclusion and engagement in a typical campus environment.

The Suburban University Study Hubs will support students who may be studying in a variety of ways – internal (on campus), external (online) and multi-modal (a mix of on campus and online study). The Hubs will support these students by providing a local option for accessing convenient support, reducing barriers through in-person support and providing ICT equipment and local study spaces. Tailored wrap-around support will be based on local community and student need.

The Department of Education (the department) is interested to hear from stakeholders on the types of support needed for under-represented students in metropolitan areas.

Suburban University Study Hubs will have a strong role to play supporting emerging or latent aspiration for tertiary education in their local communities. This could include a role in supporting tertiary preparation (for example enabling or preparatory courses), connecting students with careers and course advice, engaging with other community organisations and local industry and highlighting local success stories all while maintaining a visible physical presence in the local community.

### **Consultation Questions**

6. What dedicated support services should Suburban University Study Hubs provide? Are there gaps in support for under-represented cohorts (for example, First Nations students, students with disability) Suburban University Study Hubs could address?
7. How can Suburban University Study Hubs provide a culturally safe environment for all students, that is relevant to them and their local context?
8. Are there examples (in Australia or internationally) of similar support services (in tertiary education or other sectors) that could inform the design of Suburban University Study Hubs?
9. Are there existing support mechanisms that could be leveraged and offered through the Suburban University Study Hubs? How could the Hubs provide a useful additional impact and avoid duplication of services?
10. How can Suburban University Study Hubs best communicate the supports they provide to local students and support aspiration in their local community?
11. What role could Suburban University Study Hubs play in supporting enabling/tertiary preparation courses for students from under-represented backgrounds?

## Where will the Suburban University Study Hubs be located?

Hubs will be located in areas classified as Major Cities of Australia (RA1) as per the Australian Statistical Geographic Standard (ASGS) Remoteness Areas<sup>3</sup>. They will be in outer metropolitan/peri-urban areas where access to university is limited, and university attainment is low.

Like the Regional University Study Hubs Program, Suburban University Study Hubs will be encouraged to co-locate with existing infrastructure, for example public libraries or TAFE campuses, or leverage other appropriate community infrastructure.

Consideration will be given to the geographic spread of Suburban University Study Hubs across Australia as part of any selection/assessment process.

### Further work to identify locations

To help identify locations with the greatest need for a Suburban University Study Hub, the department will undertake quantitative data analysis and research. Additional stakeholder engagement may also be undertaken to inform and/or test the findings of the quantitative data analysis and research.

This work will draw on information that might indicate the need for and/or demand for a Suburban University Study Hub, like the numbers of potential school leavers or mature students, accessibility of existing tertiary education options (such as distance by public transport, internet quality) and local infrastructure.

This work will help map areas with highest need for a Suburban University Study Hub. The outcomes of this analysis and consultation will inform program guidelines.

#### **Consultation Questions**

12. What factors should be considered when selecting locations for Suburban University Study Hubs?
13. What other types of social infrastructure should be located in close proximity to Suburban University Study Hubs to maximise their success? (e.g., childcare services)
14. How can Suburban University Study Hubs complement, rather than replace, the innovative solutions being implemented by education providers to support students in outer metropolitan and peri-urban areas?

## Who can apply?

Operators of Suburban University Study Hubs must focus on supporting student needs, regardless of where students are enrolled, not the needs of individual institutions or organisations.

Suburban University Study Hubs will be required to provide consistent levels of service, including facilities and support, free of charge to any tertiary student enrolled at an Australian provider.

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<sup>3</sup> Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS): <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/standards/australian-statistical-geography-standard-asgs-edition-3/jul2021-jun2026/remoteness-structure/remoteness-areas>



Potential operators for delivery of the program could include:

- **Community-led organisations:** a new or existing community-based organisation (including First Nations led organisations) leads establishment and operation of the Suburban University Study Hub.
- **University or TAFE/VET providers:** a single institution leads establishment and operates a Hub, working collaboratively with other providers and the community to ensure students have access to appropriate support, regardless of their institution.
- **Joint venture or consortium:** a combination of university, VET providers and/or community organisations partner to establish and operate the Suburban University Study Hub.

Organisations that already offer similar or complementary support services may be eligible to apply for funding to expand those services. This would need to be in line with the objectives of the program and where it will clearly expand access, particularly for under-represented students.

Geographic spread of sites, and the level of local community engagement at each location will be a consideration in the selection/assessment process.

Potential operators will need to demonstrate engagement with local community at the proposed site, as well as how their operating model will meet the needs of local students. It is expected that operators will need to also be able to demonstrate their ability and/or experience to support students from under-represented backgrounds.

#### **Consultation Questions**

15. What skills, services and attributes should an organisation be able to demonstrate as evidence of their ability to establish and operate a Suburban University Study Hub?
16. What governance mechanisms should be in place to ensure each Suburban University Study Hub is operating effectively and meeting the needs of the local community?
17. Should a single organisation be eligible to operate multiple hubs? If so, how could local community drive and engagement be built into the Suburban University Study Hub operating model?
18. How could the Suburban University Study Hubs encourage collaboration between hubs and education providers (including universities and VET)?

## How will locations and operators be selected?

### Application Process

The application process will be informed by outcomes of consultation and further scoping work. Sites and operators for Suburban University Study Hubs will be selected through a competitive application process undertaken by the Department of Education.

Guidelines, with clearly defined eligibility and assessment criteria, will support the application process, based on feedback received on this Consultation Paper and other scoping work.

## What will the Suburban University Study Hubs Program fund?

The department will establish Conditions of Grant with each Suburban University Study Hub operator for a period of 3-4 years.

It is proposed that successful applicants seek other contributions to support their operations, which may include financial and non-financial support. Progress toward establishing these contributions would be considered in the application process.

The Program will provide funding towards fit-out costs to upgrade existing infrastructure (capital works) to ensure the proposed site is fit for purpose. The program will not fund large-scale capital works, and operators cannot use funding to build new infrastructure or purchase property/land.

Ongoing operational funding will support staffing and operational costs (e.g. rent, utilities, learning resources). As the primary role of the Suburban University Study Hub is to support students undertaking study at any Australian institution, grant funding cannot be used for activities that are the responsibility of education institutions (for example, providing lectures or tutorials for a course the student is enrolled in).

Based on the Regional University Study Hubs Program, Suburban University Study Hubs may be eligible to apply for a dedicated stream of partnerships funding. This can be used to establish or support partnerships (for example, with educational institutions (including universities), State and local Governments and/or local industry for the benefit of the Suburban University Study Hub's students).

### **Consultation Questions**

19. How can Suburban University Study Hubs encourage and support partnerships that benefit students? What incentives would be most effective to promote partnership development?
20. What learnings are there from existing initiatives, and/or are there new ideas that could support the design and development of the Suburban University Study Hubs, noting that they are intended to be different from institution specific study centres/hubs.

## How to provide feedback and timeline for consultation

Feedback is due by **11:59pm (Australian Eastern Daylight Time) Monday 2 October 2023**. Written submissions can be made [here](#).