



The Country Universities Centre

**Submission to the Universities
Accord Interim Report**

September 2023



Australian Universities Accord Panel
c/- Accord Secretariat
Department of Education
GPO Box 9880
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Professor Mary O’Kane and Panel members,

Not all equity issues in higher education can or should be solved by universities.

The CUC welcomes the Panel’s acknowledgment in the Interim Report of the positive role the CUC and community-led solutions play in widening access to higher education and driving parity of participation. It is encouraging to see Priority Action 1 of the Interim Report focused on expanding the Regional University Centre program (now Regional Study Hubs Program), and the Government’s subsequent \$66.9 million investment to establish 20 new regional and 14 metropolitan Centres. These new Centres will make a demonstrable impact on widening participation and further embed the successful community-led model to drive parity of participation in higher education no matter where one lives.

While these 20 new regional centres are a significant positive investment, the CUC is currently supporting over 40 regional communities who are building the foundations to establish their own community-led CUC. The Panel should be aware there is significantly greater community demand for Centres in regional Australia than Regional Study Hub funding opportunities.

Since the interim report there has been much comment from the sector on the CUC and Regional Study Hubs Program more broadly. Many in the sector understand it’s a positive concept but have little knowledge of the nuance or how the CUC operates and are misrepresenting the model in the discourse around the Accord. While the CUC appears to be a simple concept, it requires deeply complex and nuanced execution that we have honed over 10 years alongside 23 different communities. The CUC extends an invitation to the Accord Panel and University executives to visit a Centre, walk with us and spend time experiencing how we work to more accurately understand how the Centres operate and the local variability in each community.

The CUC identifies the need for long-term planning of a national coordinated approach to community-led higher education through the Universities Accord. This will support the sustainable growth of the Regional Study Hub program, manage the significant community demand across Australia to establish a community-led Centre, and generate a greater understanding of the program throughout the higher education sector. Centres funded by the Regional Study Hubs program can play a key role in achieving the goals of the Accord, but they need to be included in broader strategies of the sector.

The CUC has unique experience working alongside 23 diverse communities to establish Centres that are tailored to their local needs. We would welcome the opportunity to collaborate with the Universities Accord Panel, or Tertiary Education Commission, to develop a sustainable long-term national strategy for establishing new Centres and deepening the operations of existing Centres to meet community needs across Australia and the ambition of the Accord Panel.

***Recommendation:** The Universities Accord develop a long-term Regional Study Hubs strategy, in collaboration with the CUC, to meet community demand for establishing Centres and solidify their role in the Australian higher education sector.*

***Recommendation:** Universities and governments need greater understanding of the CUC model/Regional Study Hubs funding and the nuance of how it operates. The CUC can provide this through study tours to Centres and welcomes interested parties to explore our model in-person.*

Driving parity of participation.

The ambitious Accord equity targets for parity of participation require equally ambitious, scalable, and proven solutions. The CUC community-led model is one of these solutions; it is already driving parity of participation for equity cohorts and has demonstrated its scalability through the affiliated network of Centres currently operating.

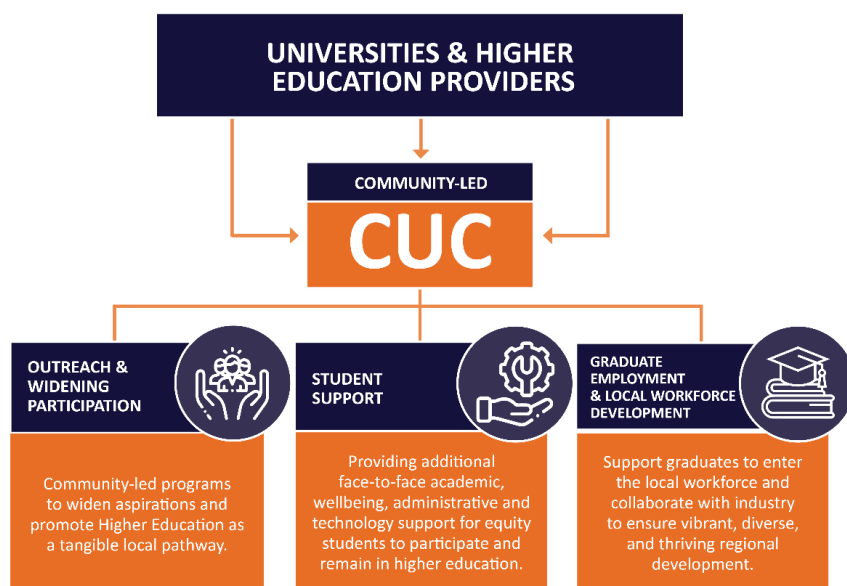
Across CUC communities the demographics of students studying with the local Centre are often reflective of the broader community. The proportion of students from equity groups in a CUC are either approaching or in some locations exceeding parity for their community. For example, in Kempsey NSW where CUC Macleay Valley is located, 12.9% of people in the community identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander while 15% of students registered with the Centre identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (compared to 1.9% nationally). The CUC model drives parity of participation by design as it empowers each Centre to develop a tailored local approach and for people to study any degree from any university in their community rather than a one-size-fits all model; for First Nations people this provides an option to study on Country. The CUC model has proven itself to be scalable to regional communities from populations with as few people as 500, up to communities of over 30,000, while being tailored to local circumstances.

If parity of participation and scalability of models to achieve this are the goal of the Universities Accord, then the CUC, through Regional Study Hubs funding, will be the most effective and fastest mechanism to achieve these targets in regional Australia.

***Recommendation:** Further investment in CUC/Regional Study Hubs is the fastest and most cost-effective route to parity of higher education participation in regional Australia.*

Leveraging existing investment in the Regional Study Hubs Program

The Australian Government has made a significant investment in the Regional Study Hubs (formerly Regional University Centre Program) and this investment can be better utilised. The interim report has illuminated the CUC and Regional Study Hubs to the sector, however there are broad misconceptions about the CUC that have emerged in subsequent commentary from universities, government, and stakeholders. Much of the narrative since the interim report has been focused on student support however CUC operations are broader than this with Centres acting as the interface between higher education and the local community. The holistic approach for communities has driven the success of Centres through widening participation, student support and graduate outcomes as indicated below:



These three elements are the key to the CUC success in driving parity of participation for equity cohorts in regional communities and should be incorporated into the discourse on Regional Study Hubs and role they can play in the higher education sector.

Recommendation: The Panel should consider that CUC/Regional Study Hubs are the interface between higher education and the community and can be utilised more broadly as a lever for widening participation in the sector.

Establishing a National Office of Social Mobility

To meet the broader vision and goals of the Universities Accord Panel, and best utilise the Commonwealth’s investment in Regional Study Hubs, a National Office for Social Mobility (NOSM) should be established.

The NOSM will:

1. Lead a national approach to career advice and widening participation that empowers communities and equity groups to create their own approaches to drive parity of tertiary education participation across Australia.
2. Coordinate a national pathway and admissions scheme.
3. Lead a national scheme to address placement poverty and financial inclusion of students in the higher education sector.
4. Act as the interface between industry and education to drive industry to engage in WIL that will prepare people from equity cohorts for the high-value jobs of the future.

While National in focus, the structure of the NOSM will allow local adaptation and partnership creation that is reflexive to context – much like the CUC model. Local NOSM staff are independent but could work out of, and alongside:

- University Campuses
- Regional Study Hubs

- Metropolitan Study Hubs
- TAFE/Vocational providers
- Community Centres

This provides a close relationship with educational institutions yet retains independence to meet the strategic goals of the NOSM through locally nuanced execution. This would complement and expand the offerings of the CUC and leverage the significant investment the Australian Government has made in the Regional Study Hubs Program while better incorporating vocational providers in this work.

The National Office of Social Mobility can utilise this existing Commonwealth investment in CUC/Regional Study Hubs as bases for local staff who can expand the impact of the Centre to lead further WP, careers advice, industry WIL that meets the needs of the local community and students and drives the targets of the Universities Accord.

The Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP) is currently taking this approach, which draws on the CUC/Regional Study Hubs to develop locally led outreach and widening participation activities in partnership with universities. It has allowed consistent widening participation activities to occur in small regional communities rather than one-off visits from universities. Universities are a key component of this work; however, they are positioned to be partners for activities rather than drivers.

The RPPPP is demonstrating that regional communities can have greater access to sustained widening participation activities that are community-led and do it in a more cost-effective way than universities. This concept can be translated and expanded to include other priorities in the NOSM model and will also work where there are universities and other educational infrastructure.

The RPPPP model is an example that the NOSM model could utilise to drive social mobility outcomes and the vision of the Universities Accord through existing Commonwealth investments. It can drive community-led approaches to WP, admissions and pathways, financial support schemes, and WIL with industry.

Further information on the model and establishment of the National Office for Social Mobility can be found in a stand-alone submission that has been made to the Accord Panel.

Recommendation: Establish the National Office for Social Mobility.

Building the evidence base for Regional Study Hubs

The NSW Government and Commonwealth Government have evaluated the CUC; however, there is significant knowledge that sits within CUC Centres that can be shared as best-practice and enable the higher education sector to understand why the CUC concept has been successful. The CUC is currently developing practitioner research into why the CUC model has been so effective and these learnings can then be shared and translated to different community contexts for future success of emerging Centres across Australia. There is currently no funding or support to build an evidence base on Regional Study Hubs and the limited research conducted has been undertaken by university academics rather than practitioners from the study hubs.

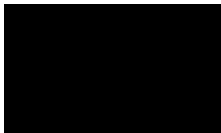
To remedy this, a NCSEHE Equity Fellowship should be allocated each year to practitioners and researchers from within the community-run CUCs/Study Hubs to investigate the role they play and

impact on the sector, rather than university practitioners investigating the model. This will build the capacity of the entire Regional Study Hub network and establish an evidence base of best practice for Centres to be embedded in the Australian higher education landscape.

Recommendation: The NCSEHE establish an Equity Fellowship for Regional Study Hub practitioners to broaden the evidence-base and share best-practice across the sector.

Thank you for the opportunity to make a short submission to the Universities Accord. The Panel are very welcome to visit any of the CUCs across Queensland, NSW and Victoria to learn about how we operate. The CUC community-led model can ensure that no matter where you live, or what background you come from, lifelong learning through access to higher education opportunities and face-to-face support are available across regional Australia.

Kind Regards,



Chris Ronan

CEO