

# ██████████ – *Suburban University Study Hubs Program:* consultation paper

## Overview

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the *Suburban University Study Hubs Program*. ██████████ supports the creation of Suburban University Study Hubs, which will enhance Higher Education access and participation from students from outer-metropolitan areas, and aligns with ██████████ ██████████ in the areas of improving student and staff diversity.

It is recommended that careful consideration should be given to:

1. Involving local communities in setting up the Suburban University Study Hubs.
2. Consultation with universities through peak bodies such as the Equity Practitioners in Higher Education (EPHEA<sup>1</sup>) and programs such as Higher Education Participation & Partnerships Programmes (HEPPP) in order to avoid duplication.
3. Ensuring the Hubs complement and offer a pathway to existing educational offerings, and do not limit the aspirations of local students to attend university located further away from where they live, or duplicate and limit the effectiveness of existing university outreach programs.
4. Using a data-driven approach, where possible.

## **Aim of the Proposed *Suburban University Study Hubs Program***

The success of a place-based approach for Suburban University Study Hubs can be best assured by ensuring it supports local needs. This would include understanding the diversity of the local student community that engages with the Hub, their specific needs, and the needs of the broader community. Ensuring the student voice in the design of each Hub is key to their success. Ideally operators and staff would be local and form part of the community where possible. Participatory community engagement is crucial in determining the specific needs and cultural contexts of each Hub. The place-based approach should apply learnings from similar models to support the design and activities of the Hubs.

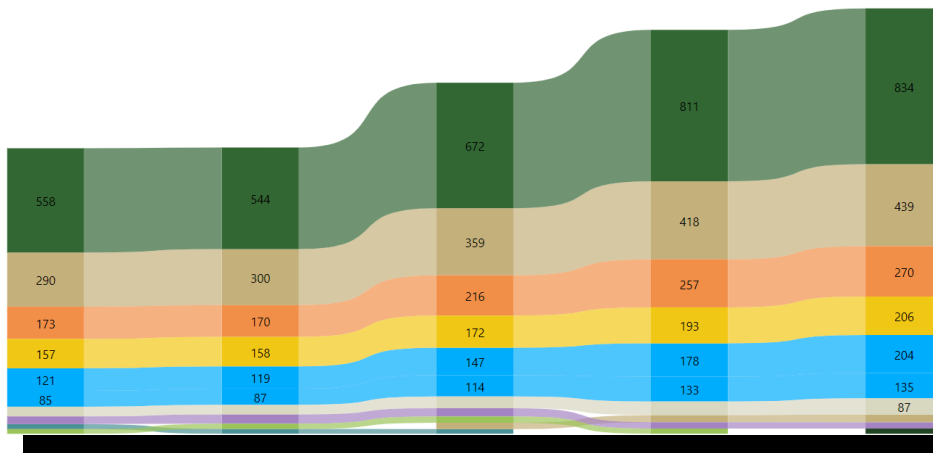
A data-driven approach (e.g., a demand gap analysis) to the establishment of the Hubs should be undertaken to identify Local Government Areas (LGAs) where there are lower levels of access to tertiary education. This could include surveying and better understanding the needs of current students, parents, LGA libraries, key NGOs such as The Smith Family, and engaging with university equity practitioners to develop an informed picture.

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<sup>1</sup> Given that EPHEA maps current outreach and partnerships for identified equity cohorts and lead the implementation of the Higher Education Participation.

Interrogating our student demographic data reveals that between [redacted] and [redacted], [redacted] undergraduate students from low socioeconomic background enrolled from a consistent range of LGAs from throughout the [redacted] area, with [redacted] featuring as the top LGA for [redacted] undergraduate enrolments across this period. Most of [redacted] undergraduate students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have consistently resided in a handful of LGAs in [redacted]. Taking a similar approach to understand the equity data<sup>2</sup> of all metropolitan universities will help inform the location for the Hubs.

Figure 1. Top ten metropolitan LGAs for [redacted] students from low SES background over the five years from [redacted] to [redacted]. (Source: [redacted] internal data)



Understanding what would build engagement and success in Suburban University Study Hubs from the perspective of potential users is critical. Learnings from the Regional University Study Hubs would add value, while noting that users of the Suburban Hubs would also attend their enrolled university campuses. Thus detailed consultation and ideally partnership with users would assist in informing the design and operation of the Hubs, embedding the varied equity needs of communities in the Hubs.

The Suburban University Study Hubs can widen participation and support, as well as extend further study opportunities, by ensuring they understand the site-specific needs of their proposed location, and by ensuring they are embedded as part of existing community functions. The infrastructure of Hubs should be inviting and supportive, providing great digital technology and support for its use as a key enabler to higher education success and overcoming digital disadvantage. The spaces should add value both for personal and group study. The Hubs' programming should provide support and workshops for specific skill building and enhancement needs as identified by students, such as improving numeracy and writing skills, as well as more general study skills. And the Hubs could also promote VET pathway programs into university, and provide workshops and accredited short courses to assist in transitioning, such as meeting the maths requirements for STEM programs.

Building communities of practice between university campuses and Suburban University Study Hubs can ensure the Hubs operate to support students engaging with any provider, while also offering strong connections with local providers, campuses and leaders. It is recommended that the Hubs work in tandem with university outreach programs and ensure that they provide a value-add service provision rather than an unnecessary duplication.

<sup>2</sup> We also recommend consideration of the 2018 report by the Institute of Social Science Research "[Review of Identified Equity Groups](#)" to ensure a broad brush approach to defining equity groups, and hence their needs, is indeed fit for purpose.

## **Barriers associated with implementation of the *Suburban University Study Hubs Program* and provision of services**

### *Pre-access/access barriers to higher education*

Gaps in educational opportunity driven by Australia's unequal school system consistently translate to disparities in educational attainment based on students' backgrounds. Preconceived ideas about university access can present a significant barrier to access, which the Suburban University Study Hubs could help address. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds typically have less access to information about higher education in their immediate settings than their more privileged peers, including being able to explore career pathways that involve university study. The Hubs could be a visible space in the local community showcasing higher education programs and pathways for both VET and university, provide insights into how higher education study works, and offering career support.

Many universities offer pathways program to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds the opportunity to enrol at university with reduced ATAR requirements. The [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] addresses pre-access barriers by offering students in Years 10-12 a range of activities to support their high school academic attainment and understanding of university. The [REDACTED] provides information about [REDACTED] degrees and faculties, allows students to explore their learner identities via targeted learning experiences, and participation in [REDACTED]. In addition to offering visibility of higher education learning spaces, like higher education providers the Hubs could also consider offering year 12 study support, working with local schools.

Relevant to the specific rationale of the proposed Suburban University Study Hubs, there is consistent feedback from student surveys and calling campaigns that the travel required to attend [REDACTED] from the outer suburbs can strongly influence decisions to study elsewhere. For students from outer-metropolitan areas who do decide to attend [REDACTED], travel is an added burden to successful participation which the Hubs may help remedy. It has been noted that students attending Regional University Study Hubs, many of whom study online, can feel a stronger sense of belonging to the Regional Hub rather than their enrolled university. While the Suburban Hubs should not detract for students' sense of belonging to their university community, it is also acknowledging that students desire more flexibility in their studies, especially if they also have work commitments and/or carer responsibilities.

### *Reducing barriers to success*

While there is growing evidence that university students from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve comparable results to their more privileged peers, they may still face specific challenges in transitioning into university. There are numerous identified barriers after university access, which include: perceiving academic success as their own responsibility, not feeling confident about contacting their teachers, being unsure of what services are provided by academic support and where to find them, and not being able to find the academic support needed. Peer supported and student led programs, especially those co-designed by students, have positive impact. Local communities should be asked how they would like to engage with these services.

It is important that Suburban University Study Hubs provide a culturally safe environment for all students, as relevant to them and their local context. This will clearly need careful consideration and

co-design with the community, and staff diversity that mirrors that of the students would be an advantage.

Suburban University Study Hubs can best communicate the supports they provide to local students and enhance aspiration in their local community by ensuring that Hub operators and staff are local and part of the community where possible. Participatory community engagement to determine specific needs and cultural locale factors, driving placemaking development, ownership, belonging, and community led activities can assist in communicating the supports. Working with local schools will also help build aspiration and knowledge of the Hub's services, and partnering with local higher education equity practitioners will allow universities to keep their students informed.

Utilising an evidence base from the work of the current Country University Centres and Regional University Study Hubs by understanding their program evaluation would provide a model to inform the Suburban Hubs, with the understanding that specific place-based context would need to be considered.

### **Location, application, and funding**

It would be beneficial to locate the Hubs in areas where metropolitan universities do not often reach as part of their school and community outreach programs, or where distance is a factor in limiting student desire in enrolling at a metropolitan university. For example, some of these areas in the vicinity of Sydney could include the Central Coast, Campbelltown and Camden LGAs and the Illawarra region.

Proximity to both public transport and parking is key to the location of the Suburban University Study Hubs. Assuming the Hubs will be accessible during the evening, locating them in relatively activated areas that have extended hours to provide a level of security to the surrounds would be beneficial, e.g. near a library, gym, or restaurants. Access to childcare (ideally on site and free, or nearby and at very reduced cost) would be advantageous.

In considering and commenting on whether a single organisation should be allowed to operate multiple Suburban University Study Hubs, further clarification around the shape and number of proposed Suburban University Study Hubs is required before responding. That said, a participating organisation should demonstrate a willingness to truly engage in the proposed place for the Hubs and contribute to that place as evidence of their ability to establish and operate a Hub. Noting the success of Regional University Study Hubs which were developed for local communities by the local community, the Suburban University Study Hubs will likely benefit by following the same model.

In terms of partnerships, the Suburban University Study Hubs should partner with their students to determine what types of partnerships would benefit students. Effective incentives to promote partnership development are funded success metrics related to the programs of the partnerships.

### **Conclusion**

██████ is committed to ensuring that students from outer-metropolitan areas have access to and succeed at university and believe this to be an important goal for our sector and for Australia. We support the creation of Suburban University Study Hubs, which we see as having the potential to widen participation by equity groups to higher education through place-based local support for student living

in metropolitan areas. We would welcome any opportunity to work with you to achieve this important objective.

Should you wish to discuss any issue raised in this submission, please do not hesitate to contact our Deputy Vice-Chancellor, [REDACTED], on [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]