

# **Australian Catholic University**

## **Feedback to the Department of Education**

### ***Consultation Paper: Implementing Suburban University Study Hubs***

**September 2023**

## **Feedback on the Consultation Paper: Implementing Suburban University Study Hubs**

Australian Catholic University (ACU) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the federal Department of Education on the establishment of Suburban University Study Hubs (hereafter “suburban study hubs”) in Australia.

ACU acknowledges the Federal Government’s proposal to double the number of university study hubs across Australia, including by extending and adapting the Regional University Centres (RUCs) (now “Regional University Study Hubs”) model for implementation in outer suburban areas. ACU notes this initiative will deliver on recommendations made by the Australian Universities Accord Panel (“the Panel”) in its Interim Report to:

*Extend visible, local access to tertiary education by creating further Regional University Centres (RUCs) and establish a similar concept for suburban/metropolitan locations.<sup>1</sup>*

For many Australians, geography can be a significant barrier to accessing – or indeed aspiring to – higher education, particularly for individuals from outer metropolitan, and regional and remote areas. Such individuals are more likely to be members of groups that are already under-represented in higher education, including those who have limited exposure to, or visibility of, universities.

Indeed, research indicates that distance is associated with university expectations and university entrance, and has a larger impact on young people from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds.<sup>2</sup>

In its Interim Report, the Panel observed that RUCs have proven effective in improving student participation and outcomes in regional and remote areas.<sup>3</sup> The establishment of additional study hubs across Australia, rolled out (and adapted) across both regional and outer-suburban settings, has the potential to build on existing successes in this area.

Study hubs can provide students with the flexibility and space to pursue their studies in an accessible and supportive learning environment, especially assisting those who find regular travel to a university campus or major education centre difficult.

At the same time, ACU would emphasise that study hubs should not be viewed as substitutes for university campuses, nor should they serve to disincentivise the maintenance or establishment of new campuses in areas of demand.

While study hubs have their benefits, they also have their limitations. They cannot provide students with the vibrant student experience of a traditional campus. This also includes access to the full range of facilities and services (including in-person and tailored support services) that may be available at a university campus. In some fields of study, the need for students to access specialist equipment and cutting-edge technology, which may only be available on-campus, will continue to be an issue that needs to be addressed through broader student supports.

Nevertheless, ACU recognises the benefits study hubs can deliver to students and offers some recommendations to help guide the establishment of the new suburban study hubs. This feedback particularly relates to the prospective locations of the hubs and their facilities.

ACU notes that the process of identifying potential locations for the suburban study hubs will be informed by scoping work, including quantitative data analysis and research to be undertaken by the Department of Education. ACU recommends that demographic research and forward planning, which particularly considers where there might be growing demand for hubs in the future, should be integrated into this work.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Universities Accord Panel. (2023). *Australian Universities Accord: Interim Report*, at 7.

<sup>2</sup> Parker, Jerrim, Anders and Astell-Burt. (2016). Does Living Closer to a University Increase Educational Attainment? A Longitudinal Study of Aspirations, University Entry, and Elite University Enrolment of Australian Youth. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 45(6), 1156–1175. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-015-0386-x>

<sup>3</sup> Australian Universities Accord Panel, *supra* note 1, at 6.

Importantly, ACU recommends new study hubs be located within communities that do not have a university campus within a 20 kilometre radius. This aligns with Australians' average commuting distance.<sup>4</sup>

Such an approach should help to narrow down suitable locations in which to establish the new suburban study hubs, recognising that only a finite number (up to 14) of these hubs will be established across the country under the current initiative.

Furthermore, ACU recommends co-locating the hubs with other community services wherever possible. For example, this might include being located alongside services such as Centrelink, public libraries, medical centres, shopping centres, and public transport. Locating the hubs near places that students, or prospective students, regularly visit would likely encourage greater usage of the hubs and make it more convenient for individuals to use the facilities on a regular basis. Situating the hubs next to public transport routes will particularly aid students to access the services.

Where possible, existing infrastructure should be utilised to establish the new hubs. In this respect, where TAFEs or other vocational education and training (VET) providers are operating campuses in the relevant community, consideration should be given to potential co-location.

This could serve to minimise establishment costs for the new suburban study hubs, and importantly, would support the Federal Government's objectives to:

- strengthen students' pathways into higher education; and
- better integrate the tertiary education system through closer linkages between VET and higher education providers.

As the Consultation Paper recognises, the suburban study hubs will have a "strong role to play in supporting emerging or latent aspiration for tertiary education in their local communities."<sup>5</sup>

Finally, with respect to the aims and facilities of the hubs, ACU supports the government's proposal, as articulated in the Consultation Paper, to "adapt" the RUC model for metropolitan settings. ACU considers this is the right approach. Each new suburban study hub should be designed to meet the needs of the particular community it serves. This also appropriately aligns with the Australian Universities Accord Panel's view that study hubs should be established "based on the specific needs of each local community and have tailored wraparound support to help students succeed."<sup>6</sup>

To this end, once potential locations are identified, ACU would recommend consulting with the local communities concerned, higher education providers, and prospective students, to identify (or verify) the services and facilities that are most needed at each prospective hub location. In the event that a university operates a hub, it will also be important to ensure that students from all universities are provided equal access to its services. As identified in the Consultation Paper, the new hubs must operate on a "provider-agnostic" basis and support any tertiary student enrolled at any Australian provider.

Fundamentally, there is an imperative to ensure all students are able to access the facilities and support they need to both pursue and succeed in higher education, particularly as more Australians enter higher education, and an increasing number of jobs are expected to require a university qualification into the future.

The establishment of additional study hubs across Australia, extending to outer-suburban settings, is a significant initiative and will form an important part of the suite of student support mechanisms and services that are in place to facilitate higher education participation and student success in Australia.

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<sup>4</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2018). *Census of Population and Housing: Commuting to Work*. Cat. No. 2071.0.55.001.; Parker, Jerrim, Anders and Astell-Burt, *supra* note 2.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Education. (2023). *Consultation Paper: Implementing Suburban University Study Hubs*, at 4.

<sup>6</sup> Australian Universities Accord Panel, *supra* note 1, at 6.