



Charles Sturt
University

Consultation on Implementing Suburban University Study Hubs

2 October 2023

Office of the Vice-Chancellor
Charles Sturt University

Charles Sturt University - TEQSA Provider Identification: PRV12018 (Australian University). CRICOS Provider: 00005F.



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Ben Rimmer
Deputy Secretary, Higher Education, Research and International
Department of Education
GPO Box 9880
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Dear Mr Rimmer

Consultation Paper Implementing Suburban University Study Hubs

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the Australian Government's plans to establish new Regional and Suburban University Study Hubs in support of its goal to increase higher education participation and attainment across the country.

As a university that has long been instrumental in providing higher education to previously under-served communities, Charles Sturt supports the Government's goal, and as one of Australia's largest and most experienced providers of online education – and one with sector-leading employment outcomes for our graduates – we look forward to helping even more people realise their personal and professional aspirations through higher education.

We have no doubt there will be demand for Charles Sturt University's courses at the Suburban University Study Hubs as our own data shows that in the most recent academic session around 3,300 undergraduate and 2,300 postgraduate students in online courses (22.1 per cent and 15.5 per cent of online enrolments, respectively) were based in major city suburban and outer urban areas like Sydney's Blue Mountains, the outer east of Melbourne, and the southern regions of Perth. Charles Sturt also has considerable experience in supporting students from low SES, First Nations and disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed at university. The University's *Retention@Charles Sturt* program was recognised in the 2022 Australian Awards for University Teaching, in the 'Student Experience that Supports Diversity and Inclusive Practices' category.

While we support the principle that the Hubs should be 'provider-agnostic' we feel Charles Sturt's experience in both online education and student support make us an ideal partner for either Suburban or Regional University Study Hubs. We will be actively seeking opportunities to contribute to the success of the Hubs.

It is with our experience and expertise in mind that Charles Sturt University offers the following observations on the Suburban University Study Hubs. We were pleased to see that many of the ideas set out below have been incorporated into the design of the new Regional University Study Hubs, the details of which were announced on 28 September. I would be happy to provide the Department with more information on any of the University's projects, programs or other initiatives mentioned below.

Yours sincerely

Professor Renée Leon PSM
Vice-Chancellor and President



Consultation Paper on Implementing Suburban University Study Hubs

Response to 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?

Early consultation with local communities should be a core part of any proposal to establish or operate a Hub. Charles Sturt University's experience working closely with regional communities indicates that early and regular consultation will promote a sense of 'ownership' that will encourage active support for the Hub and underpin its success.

To that end we suggest that the guidelines for applicants include an explicit requirement to show that there has been consultation with the community, as well as written expressions of support – similar to the approach set out in the documentation for the Regional University Study Hubs. To make this effective, the timeframe for applications should allow time for meaningful consultation.

2. How can the Suburban University Study Hubs widen participation and support and extend further study opportunities, adding to existing or planned investments?

Building local aspiration must be a core part of any Hub's mission, so it will be essential for the operators to work closely with local schools, community groups, and local government – with the latter especially if the Hub is to complement existing or planned investments (including in, for example, transport, or local/regional renewal projects). With schools, the Hub will need to be a visible symbol of the opportunity of higher education: outreach activities, such as sponsoring events or awards, should therefore be part of the business plan.

Engagement with local employers, including social services (NDIS, education) and health care providers, as well as the local Chamber of Commerce or equivalent, would ensure they are aware of the potential benefits of the Hub in meeting their training and upskilling needs as well as providing work integrated learning, internship and post-graduation employment opportunities for students.

3. How can equity be embedded into the design of Suburban University Study Hubs?

In our submissions to date to the Accord, Charles Sturt University has proposed the setting of institution-specific equity targets that take into account each university's profile and mission. The same principle could be applied to the Hubs. Demographic analysis (see question 12, below) would help providers understand the profile of the local community and inform the design of equity targets, particular in relation to, for example, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities. These targets could be built in to the Hub funding agreement, with recognition that as a new entity (and a new type of higher education provider) the Hubs may need more time to achieve those targets than established providers.

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?

As noted above, the needs of differing communities within a local area can be met through careful consultation before establishing the Hub. Active engagement (formal and informal) will also be important

once the Hub is up and running, and the diversity of the local community should be a consideration in governance and staffing arrangements (see below).

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?

Hub operators should be open to including local or nearby education providers (schools, universities, and VET/TAFE) in a Hub's governance arrangements or as part of an advisory group.

There should also be an expectation that the Hub operator will establish and maintain contact with any out-of-region provider that has students at the Hub, to make themselves aware of what support services the provider offers and to explore how those services could be extended to students at the Hub.

Hubs and providers will need to agree on appropriate and flexible arrangements for cost sharing/splitting, especially for equity students or support services. This would be difficult to achieve on a case-by-case basis, so the program may need to offer model arrangements or guidelines, with the recognition that while they may not cover all contingencies the net effect will be an equitable split of funding over time.

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?

Suburban University Study Hubs should be required to provide facilities similar to those expected of Regional University Study Hubs, as set out in the documentation released on 28 September. Moreover, since Hub operators cannot assume that even the most fundamental services will be available in a community or to all the students who might access the Hub, they may also need to provide:

- IT equipment hire
- Printing equipment
- Extended opening hours
- Appropriate security
- On-site staff
- Structured cross-disciplinary study groups (such as 'Shut Up and Write' events), and
- Some social spaces.

As with the Regional Hubs, there should be no charge to students for using many of these services – indeed, the business plan for the Hubs should aim to provide all the required services at low or nominal cost.

Other gaps will vary with Hub location and the provider will need to tailor arrangements accordingly.

Charles Sturt university suggests that structuring the Hubs as not-for-profit entities and providing them with expedited Deductible Gift Recipient status would help attract financial, in kind and other support from local communities and firms and help ensure they can provide the kind of services listed above.

7. How can Suburban University Study Hubs provide a culturally safe environment for all students, that is relevant to them and their local context?

In addition to operating with appropriate governance arrangements that might include a wider community advisory group, the Hubs should develop good working relationships with local community groups and support services – again, as is expected of the planned Regional Hubs. Training for on-site staff is essential. Again, this may vary across different Hubs but some core competency in culturally appropriate conduct should be required of all staff. Most universities offer suitable training programs that could be made available to Hub partners.



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?

Charles Sturt University's Embedded Tutors Program is an example of the kind of student support service that could be offered by Hubs. The program, funded through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), has been proven to be a successful way to increase students' confidence and in providing support for participating students.

More information on the program is available at:

<https://www.csu.edu.au/division/student-success/units/academic-skills-student-retention/student-retention/Retentionteam@csu.edu.au>

This kind of program could be provided on-site or online and offer a useful connection to academic staff at a Hub student's 'home' university.

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?

As noted above, community consultation will help Hub providers identify local services, including support mechanisms, that could bolster the work of the Hub while the Hub in turn provides a benefit to those services (through upskilling staff, internship arrangements and so on). This might include, for example, building relationships with local employment services, NDIS providers and others.

10. How can Suburban University Study Hubs best communicate the supports they provide to local students and support aspiration in their local community?

See responses to questions 1,2, 4 and 5, above.

11. What role could Suburban University Study Hubs play in supporting enabling/tertiary preparation courses for students from under-represented backgrounds?

By providing support when and where students need it, the Hubs will have a vital role in expanding access to enabling and pathway programs. Well-designed enabling programs have generally proven to be effective in boosting disadvantaged students' progress to and retention in university study (see National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, [Equity implications of non-ATAR pathways: Participation, academic outcomes, and student experience](#), 2022).

Certainly, experience at Charles Sturt University shows that enabling programs help boost student confidence and attainment, including among those already in the workforce but with little or no previous experience in higher education. For example, the University's innovative Collaborative Teacher's Aide Pathway (CTAP) program gives Teacher's Aides, Education Aides, Aboriginal Education Officers, School Learning Support Officers (SLSOs), and other classroom support staff with VET or TAFE qualifications the opportunity to develop their skills and upgrade their qualifications through a combination of formal instruction and in-classroom experience. The program includes participants around Australia and has a very high retention and pass rate.

<https://insight.study.csu.edu.au/school-support-role-to-teacher/>



12. What factors should be considered when selecting locations for Suburban University Study Hubs?

Charles Sturt University suggests the following factors should be taken into consideration:

- Distance from established higher and tertiary education providers. Charles Sturt University's experience with some Regional University Centres suggests that locating a Hub too close to an existing campus can be a mistake, as it can undermine the sustainability of some on-campus services and courses and make the Hub itself less viable.
- Workforce and wider population demographics including projections and anticipated need/shortages.
The Employment White Paper released on 25 September cites workforce needs projections in a range of industries and notes that there is increasing confidence in demand forecasting in key industries. The underpinning data could be very useful in selecting the location for some Hubs.
- Need, indicated by, for example, low rates of higher education participation and attainment; evolving local skills needs; economic push factors including change, adaptation or diversification; and un- and underemployment rates. This is consistent with the approach proposed for the Regional Hubs.
- The general location, with an emphasis on integration with other services.
- The specific location proposed, with accessibility as an imperative. This includes ensuring the Hubs can be reached by public transport and have appropriate arrangements in place for students with disabilities.
- Community support and 'buy-in', including (but not depending on) the potential for financial, in-kind and other support from local government, employers, schools and so on. Ideally, Hub providers would be able to show good established connections to the local community, as is the case for the Regional 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)

Transport costs and the availability of public transport are a key factor affecting many outer-urban students' participation in higher education, so good transport links will be essential for the success of Hubs.

In addition to childcare, proximity to other social services such as schools, health and care services would be useful, as would access to wider public services such as government services 'shopfronts' – though it may be that the Hubs could provide a nucleus around which such services could be developed.

The siting of Hubs should not neglect students' social needs, too, so proximity to public and retail spaces should be in the mix.

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?

Where there are existing provider-led initiatives in place in outer and peri-urban areas and a good case for scaling them up (based on evidence of need/demand), the Hub initiative could provide a vehicle for doing so, albeit in a way that doesn't duplicate the services of the established provider. In this case the established provider could be treated as a 'preferred bidder'. An established provider would be required to offer services equally to students from all universities.

In locations where there is no established higher education provision, though, a fully competitive process would be more appropriate.



A related issue is ensuring that Hubs complement existing community and local and state government initiatives to boost higher education participation and attainment, grow employment, or promote economic development. It might be useful for the Department to consult with state government agencies on the design of the Hubs program, and in some cases ensure that a Hub is eligible for state government support too.

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?

As is the expectation with the Regional Hubs, Suburban Hub operators should be able to demonstrate effective relationships with the local community and employers, local government, not-for-profit groups and others, and good knowledge of local conditions, opportunities and needs. Prior experience in education services and good organisational and financial management skills would be essential. Further, potential Hub operators should be willing to make an explicit commitment to the 'provider-agnostic' principle underpinning the Hubs, even or especially when they may have universities as formal partners in the proposal.

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?

Based on our experience working in and with regional communities, Charles Sturt University suggests each Hub should have governance arrangements that include a community steering/advisory group with representatives of local government, local employment associations, schools, community groups and others, and where appropriate nearby higher education providers (including TAFE/VET).

Whether Hubs involve formal governance arrangements, such as a board, may vary from case to case, but it may be useful for the Department to provide some models for Hub providers to use or adapt as required.

Similarly, model operating policies (on, for example, access and student safety) for Hubs would be useful. While Hub policies might complement and in some cases duplicate (but not replace) the policies of students' 'home' universities, they would provide a useful common framework for all those making use of a Hub.

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?

Yes, provided they can demonstrate the ability to do so, show where there may be efficiencies of scale that benefit the Hubs, that they appropriate connections to the target communities, and show willingness to work with devolved governance structures.

18. How could the Suburban University Study Hubs encourage collaboration between hubs and education providers (including universities and VET)?

As noted above, suitable consultation processes, governance arrangements, and cost- and revenue-sharing arrangements would facilitate collaboration. Depending on their location the invitation to submit proposals for some Hubs could include a requirement to collaborate with specific higher and tertiary education providers.

19. How can Suburban University Study Hubs encourage and support partnerships that benefit students? What incentives would be most effective to promote partnership development?

As suggested above, not-for-profit Hubs with DGR status would have an advantage in attracting private sector support and building partnerships and have potential to leverage public investment to great benefit to students. They may also be more likely attract community support and partnerships than a for-profit entity. Australia's unfortunate recent history with some for-profit education providers is a salutary lesson here, and one that many communities and potential students will be aware of.



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.

Charles Sturt University's experience with the Embedded Tutors Program, mentioned above, indicates that the availability of one-on-one academic support can have a significant impact on student engagement and success. While somewhat resource intensive this kind of model might be needed in the first few years of operation of a Hub, not least because it could provide a relatively quick example of success. A local cohort of successful students and graduates could also provide a pool of tutors/study leaders and contribute to outreach activities to build aspiration in nearby schools.