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Submission to the Consultation Paper: Implementing Suburban University Study Hubs

Executive Summary

The Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA) is the national voice for the 15-million Australians who are members of and love their public libraries. Australia's public library network is a national treasure that consists of more than 1,700 local libraries in nearly every municipality in Australia. The mission of Australia's public libraries is to provide lifelong-learning opportunities to their communities, and they are used extensively and intensively by Australians of all ages looking for support while they are engaged in formal and informal education.

Australia's public libraries are the ideal implementation partner for the Government's planned expansion of the University Study Hubs network. Rather than investing funding to acquire physical spaces, fit out facilities, purchase technology, and employ and train staff, it makes far more sense to invest to upgrade and enhance the capabilities of existing public libraries in the localities where the Government would like to see the greatest impact regarding increased access and accessibility to higher education.

Public libraries already contain all the core elements that are required to serve as Suburban University Study Hubs, and indeed they have been serving informally in this role for years. They are vibrant locations of lifelong learning, and they are the single most popular and trusted services provided by local governments. By investing allocated funding into upgrades and enhancements of public libraries, it is likely the Government's funding will go several times further, serving many more locations, multiples of students, and have a far greater impact than if it decides to "start from scratch" as it has with its [Regional University Centres](#) to date. Moreover, public libraries are "forever" institutions, which will not be subject to the whims of future governments and future budgets. By investing public funding in this manner, the Government can be certain it will not be wasting taxpayer dollars on temporary, "white elephant" or otherwise impermanent services.

The following submission in response to the Suburban University Study Hubs Consultation Paper makes clear that in every way, the best solution to the challenge the Commonwealth has set is to leverage Australia's exceptional public libraries to augment their existing capacity to meet the needs of university learners.

Background Facts and Supporting Data:

The Friends of Libraries Australia (FOLA) is the national voice for the 15-million Australians who are members of their local public library. Australia's public library network delivers more educational outcomes (for people of all ages) and social and economic benefits per dollar invested than any other institution. More than 1,700 local, public libraries in nearly every community and local government area in Australia provide a tremendous diversity of lifelong learning experiences at a national cost that is less than the budget of a single metropolitan university. The more than 500 public libraries in rural, regional and remote locations, as well as the hundreds in low-SES and ex-urban geographies, can play an essential role in helping the nation achieve the Accord's ambitions.

The Accord's most important mission, as stated in its Interim Report, is to make access to higher education more equitable by making it more accessible to disadvantaged Australians, including First Nations, rural, regional, and remote, and low-SES communities. And yet for all the reforms that took place as a result of the Bradley Review (2008), the Interim Report notes that "The system is inequitable. Opportunity and attainment are influenced by location and student background. Higher education participation rates for low SES and regional, rural and remote students have gone backwards since 2016. First Nations participation has increased but remains around 40% below population parity." (page 24)

"Consultation Paper: Implementing Suburban University Study Hubs" seeks advice on 20 questions regarding the optimal way to achieve the Commonwealth's objective of improving access and outcomes for traditionally disadvantaged Australians who have the potential to benefit from a tertiary education. FOLA's responses below make clear that the most efficient, effective, and impactful way to achieve the goals of the SUSHs is by investing directly in existing public libraries in every geography the Commonwealth identifies as meeting criteria for a SUSH.

Consultation 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?

FOLA Response: Public libraries by their very definition are highly localised lifelong learning centres where communities come together for a broad spectrum of literacy-based activities. Every public library in Australia is a physical manifestation of the community it serves. Local residents, who are members of their public libraries, frequently consult with local government regarding the design, construction, and enhancement, often informally and sometimes through more formal structures such as Friends groups.

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

FOLA Response: The mission of public libraries is to be entirely free, open and accessible to all members of the public, from newborns to the elderly. It is fair to say that no other public institutions are as much about "widening participation" as public libraries, which represent a "third space" for all Australians, outside of home and work/school to engage with learning.

Indeed our public libraries are already serving as de-facto SUSHs and thus they represent the perfect opportunity for the Commonwealth to add to their existing investment.

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

FOLA Response: Public libraries are built on a foundation of equitable, free access for all members of the communities they serve. They are reputationally predicated on being open and welcoming for people of all ages, backgrounds, genders and abilities. By leveraging public libraries for the creation of SUSHs, the Commonwealth can be confident that equity will be in the DNA of every venue.

Consultation 5: How can we ensure that SUSHs operate to support students engaging with any provider, while also ensuring strong connections with local providers, campuses and leaders?

FOLA Response: The highly skilled, professional knowledge workers at public libraries already do this to great effect, for example, in how they interact with school students from myriad schools, as well as TAFE and university students and independent adult learners. On any given day, a library in an outer-metropolitan or peri-urban area could be supporting learners from dozens of different institutions, equitably, with open access to all of the library's resources and expertise. At the same time, libraries are open to partnerships and relationships with local educational providers. FOLA can provide dozens of examples of these partnerships, if needed.

Consultation 6: What dedicated support services should SUSHs provide? Are there gaps in support for underrepresented cohorts?

FOLA Response: Public Libraries serving as SUSHs can offer highly trained and skilled knowledge experts, including professionals qualified with bachelor's and master's degrees in library science who can assist students with their research and studies, including learning foundational skills within the context of the library's physical and digital collections. Public Libraries can also offer dedicated, time specific access to study areas, including meeting rooms facilities set aside for university students, and private spaces where students may want to utilise virtual connections to campus-based support services. The privacy and anonymity offered by public libraries makes them ideal spaces for learners of all backgrounds, circumstances, and abilities.

Consultation 8: Are there examples (in Australia or internationally) of similar support services that could inform the design of SUSHs?

FOLA Response: Australia's public libraries are already serving as SUSHs in a de facto manner. See the detail, for example, in FOLA's previous submission to the Universities Accord process. There is ample evidence that tertiary and higher education students make extensive use of the resources and physical spaces at their local public libraries *precisely because university campuses are often at a distance, inaccessible, expensive and time consuming to travel to and access*. Public libraries are *local, generally situated near public transport and within walking distance of other amenities, including shops, cafes, and parks*. By investing funding to enhance and expand the capabilities of public libraries to make them official SUSHs, the Commonwealth will augment their capacity to meet learner needs, track impacts and measure the outputs of the program.

Consultation 9: Are there existing support mechanisms that could be leveraged and offered through the SUSHs? How could the SUSHs provide useful additional impact and avoid duplication of services?

FOLA Response: Indeed, as we hope has been made clear, public libraries currently possess all the capabilities to support university students. The best way for those responsible for implementing the SUSH policy to determine this would be for them to visit their own local public libraries to observe for themselves the services, facilities, and materials that are available, as well as the capabilities of the knowledge workers that staff them. We urge Minister Clare to pay a visit to the Bankstown Public Library, located in the heart of his electorate in a converted former council building situated in Paul Keating Square. This library is a perfect example of what public libraries provide to their local communities of learners.

Consultation 10: How can SUSHs best communicate the supports they provide to local students and support aspiration in their local community?

FOLA Response: Local libraries have myriad communication systems in place that allow them to reach local learners directly. First, they offer free membership, which links a person's email address to a borrowing account and a physical borrowing card. This email address can be used to allow learners to opt into communications, specifically around SUSH support services. Libraries also have newsletters, are prominently featured on local council websites where they are heavily visited by residents, and often are reported on in local newspapers, radio, and other media. Many larger public libraries have staff dedicated to local community outreach.

Consultation 11: What role could SUSHs play in supporting enabling/tertiary preparation courses for students from under-represented backgrounds?

FOLA Response: Public libraries frequently offer free courses to locals to assist in learning basic technology, research and career-related skills. There is no reason why, with additional funding, they could not also provide support for pathways and enabling courses for students from under-represented backgrounds.

Consultation 12: What factors should be considered when selecting locations for SUSHs?

FOLA Response: There is unlikely to be any better location than the current public library in every community where the Commonwealth is considering locating a SUSH. Public libraries are located in central locations, almost always close to public transport and other facilities, often as part of the local government precinct, and often with other amenities, including museums, galleries, parks, plazas, and squares. Apart from every other factor, it makes zero sense to invest in new locations when public libraries are already in the ideal locations in every community.

Consultation 14: How can SUSHs complement, rather than replace, the innovative solutions being implemented by education providers to support students in outer metro and peri-urban areas?

FOLA response: As noted in FOLA's previous submission to the Accord, there are prior examples of public libraries partnering with Open Universities Australia to support students who were studying online. There are other examples of universities investing in public libraries to provide study support services to high school and pathways students, though these are periodic, inconsistent, and often subject to the vagaries of university budgets. In order to deliver reliable, persistent, stable services to underserved university students, it's essential that a reliable, persistent, stable partner be identified. Only public libraries fit this bill.

Consultation 15: What skills, services and attributes should an organisation be able to demonstrate as evidence of their ability to establish and operate a SUSH?

FOLA response: Any organisation wishing to operate a SUSH should have the level of operational knowledge, financial controls, integrity, governance, human capital, technological resources and capabilities, physical and digital resources and collections, and the capacity to ensure the physical safety and security of the location. Every public library possesses these capabilities. Further, there is a serious issue that granting organisations face every time they make modest grants to small organisations that rely on the existing and ongoing capacity of those organisations to meet their mission. This is key reason why public libraries are the ideal – and indeed likely only – trustworthy recipient of SUSH funding. Public libraries are exceptional at making use of all funds efficiently and effectively, acquitting any grants appropriately. Granting SUSH funds to them will also minimise the risk of misuse of any public monies as public libraries adhere to the public sector code of conduct.

Consultation 16: What governance mechanisms should be in place to ensure each SUSH is operating effectively and meeting the needs of the local community?

FOLA response: Assuming the Commonwealth grants SUSH funds to public libraries, then it can rely on the existing governance mechanisms that all public libraries employ to ensure the appropriate acquittal of their current budgets. The likelihood of corruption in such a scenario is exceptionally low. Should the Commonwealth pursue a competitive grants process open to other sorts of providers, then it is likely to require a substantial investment in auditing and other governance systems and mechanisms to ensure its funds are being appropriately used and secured.

Consultation 17: Should a single organisation be eligible to operate multiple hubs? If so, how could local community drive and engagement be built into the SUSH operating model?

FOLA response: The only scenario in which this would make sense would be if a local council operating multiple libraries had libraries in multiple locations identified as SUSH localities. For example, Bankstown Council operates multiple libraries, in addition to its Bankstown Library and Knowledge Centre, in the following communities: Campsie, Chester Hill, Earlwood, Greenacre, Lakemba, Padstow, Panania and Riverwood. Some or all of one of these locations could be SUSH venues, operated in partnership with Bankstown Council, and they would each reflect the needs of the local community.

Consultation 18: How could the SUSHs encourage collaboration between hubs and education providers (including universities and VET)?

FOLA response: Public libraries already have close relationships with local schools, VET providers and, in some cases, universities. They employ outreach coordinators in many larger outer-metropolitan and peri-urban areas, and these professionals have the capacity to build deep and enduring relations with tertiary education providers. This is all part of the existing infrastructure that makes public libraries the ideal – indeed the only and the obvious – choice for SUSH funding.

Consultation 20: What learnings are there from existing initiatives, and/or are there new ideas that could support the design and development of the SUSH, noting that they are intended to be different from institution specific study centres/hubs.

FOLA response: There are many previous initiatives that should guide the Commonwealth in the direction FOLA recommends. Specifically, there are multiple examples of Canberra seeking to establish parallel infrastructure – such as the Commonwealth Rural Transaction

Centres ~25 years ago. This and other initiatives duplicated services provided by public libraries. They were poor shadows of the services and comforts available at public libraries, and as such they all failed, were shut down, and proved a waste of taxpayer funds. Similar failures have taken place at the state level, for example in Tasmania where rural “LINC” centres sought to provide technology services in small communities. Most of these were located near public libraries, and now many of these service centres do not exist anymore, while all of the public libraries continue to serve their local communities.

Concluding Comments

While speaking at the EduGrowth higher education conference in Melbourne in August, FOLA’s president, Jack Goodman, described a vision of leveraging Australia’s public libraries to bring higher education to all the geographies and communities that have been historically underserved by the nation’s universities. The idea received an ovation from more than 150 attendees, as well as subsequent comments via email, LinkedIn and other communication channels. The sentiment was one of: “What a blindingly obvious idea. This clearly should happen. What could possibly stand in the way of such a sensible collaboration?”

That feedback has prompted FOLA to make this further, more detailed submission. The Consultation Paper to which this document is a response is, to be honest, somewhat worrying. It reads as if the authors already have an idea of what the SUSHs should look like, where they should be located, what types of organisations should apply for the competitive funding, how they should acquit those monies, and what the SUSHs will look like. If it does go down that pathway, FOLA fears it will waste the majority of the funding, the process will be time consuming, expensive, and likely to be wound up with a change of government.

The alternative is to implement a thoughtful, comprehensive strategic partnership with potentially dozens of public libraries to deliver an enduring, meaningful educational solution that will have a real impact on the Commonwealth’s laudable objective of widening participation rates and successful outcomes for disadvantaged communities. As a reminder, our public libraries already possess:

- IT infrastructure
- Study spaces
- Student support services
- Academic skills support
- A network of like-minded peers (1,700 peer public libraries)
- An unmatched workforce of highly skilled, qualified and empathetic knowledge workers, also known as librarians.

Taking this approach will ensure that the Government’s investment will:

- Go much further and increase access for many more students in more geographies, than its historic approach with RUCs. An investment of, for example, \$500,000 to upgrade and enhance tertiary learner support services at existing public libraries would mean that, with the same budget, up to 136 additional Study Hubs could be delivered, allowing the Government to meet the Accord’s objective of scalable solutions to problems much more quickly.
- Serve as an exemplar of how public libraries, which are already serving the needs of local communities in myriad ways, can be scaled up to solve previously intractable problems, including access to education, information, services, and community

building activities.

- Serve as an exemplar of how the Government can partner directly with public libraries and their local governments (and the state government in the case of Tasmania) to deliver outcomes and build public trust in all levels of government.
- Avoid the risk of creating “white elephants,” that is, new infrastructure that is under-utilised. A stand-alone Regional University Study Hub will be exclusionary in that it will only be available to tertiary students, and it no doubt will take time, effort, and treasure to build up a reasonable utilisation level. In contrast, public libraries are existing, dynamic, engaging, and welcoming community learning hubs. As just one example, in 2021-2, Australians booked more than 500,000 hours of meeting spaces at public libraries.¹

More than a decade ago Open Universities Australia (OUA), at the time Australia’s largest online higher education provider, piloted a program called the OUA Connect Library Program, in which it partnered with public libraries to provide local support for students studying online via OUA’s partner universities. The project was, according to OUA, highly successful, though it faltered because OUA never invested financially in the public libraries it was asking to deliver services to its students.

The President of FOLA, Jack Goodman, published a paper entitled “Library, community campus, learning hub?” in 2015. That paper, published in Analysis & Policy Observatory, concluded that public libraries are ideally positioned to support the changing nature of higher education in Australia, including its trends of widening participation and online/hybrid course delivery.

Finally, the Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association in 2019 published a study entitled ‘Working together’: Public libraries supporting rural, regional, and remote low-socioeconomic students in partnership with universities. This paper provides further evidence of the capacity of public libraries, when properly augmented and invested in, to deliver the kind of local, face-to-face learning experiences that help students build a sense of belonging and encourage them to believe they can successfully pursue their course.

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¹ NSLA – Australian Public Libraries Statistical Report, 2021-22.