



Draft IRU response – October 2023

Consultation Paper on *Implementing Suburban University Study Hubs*

Introduction

The Innovative Research Universities (IRU) welcomes the opportunity to provide input on the implementation of the Suburban University Study Hubs Program. As one of the five priority actions recommended in the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report in July 2023, the IRU welcomes policy and funding measures that will improve access, equity and student support across the tertiary education system.

The seven institutions in the IRU trace their history back to previous expansions of Australia's university system, first in the late 1960s and early 1970s and then again as a result of the Dawkins reforms in the late 1980s and early 1990s. New universities were created to serve growing cities and communities across the country and to expand access and participation. Today, the universities in the IRU are successful multi-campus universities with a continued commitment to access and equity — together, the seven IRU universities now operate 52 campuses across the country in a mix of metropolitan, outer metropolitan and regional areas.

The IRU supports a focus through the Accord on equity and on place-based approaches to improving access and participation, informed by genuine community partnerships. As stated in the IRU submission to the Accord in April 2023, we believe that there is important unfinished business for equity in the higher education system — while participation rates have grown, progression and completion rates for key groups of students (eg. Indigenous students) have remained flat. And expansion of access has not yet adequately addressed entrenched disadvantage in some parts of Australian society.

In response to the Department of Education's Consultation Paper (September 2023), we offer the following observations and recommendations to inform the implementation of the Suburban University Study Hubs Program.

Key IRU recommendations

1. **Suburban University Study Hubs should not duplicate existing facilities and programs**

The IRU agrees with the statement in the Consultation Paper that the implementation of new Suburban University Study Hubs should “avoid duplication” with existing campuses and services. In order to achieve the goals set in the Accord Interim Report for the further expansion of access and participation and meet future skills needs, it will be crucial to grow the pie and build upon what is already in place across the country. This will require a more detailed mapping of demographics and existing campuses to ensure a genuinely needs-based approach (see below).

Implementation of new Study Hubs in outer metropolitan and peri-urban areas should reinforce the crucial anchor role of universities in their communities, rather than undermining them. IRU universities that currently operate campuses and services for students in under-served communities are only able to do so by bringing together a mix of Federal Government, State Government and philanthropic funding. New investments should be made in such a way as to not undermine the viability of existing services and infrastructure.

2. A better evidence base is required to inform the design and placement of Suburban Study Hubs

A key issue for the implementation of new Study Hubs is a more detailed and publicly-available evidence base. This should combine national demographic data matched with detailed data on educational attainment and the locations of existing tertiary education providers (universities and TAFEs). Attainment data should go beyond just access and enrolments to include measures of student success and completion and also indicators for key equity groups.

This mapping should include projections for future population growth rather than just using existing data. Professor Andrew Norton has done some initial work with ABS data which highlights outer metropolitan areas experiencing strong growth in the high school age population. The Department of Education should take the lead in a systematic national approach to analysis of this data, to inform the development and assessment of proposals for new Study Hubs.

In the United States, the American Council on Education and the Brookings Institutions have both published analyses in recent years of “education deserts” across America, or geographical areas where students face greater challenges in accessing tertiary education. This data is publicly available for all post codes across the country and highlights the importance of place for efforts to improve access and equity. A similar analysis should be undertaken for Australia to inform the implementation of new Study Hub programs.

3. Suburban Study Hubs should be clearly differentiated from Regional Hubs

The Consultation Paper makes it clear that new Suburban Study Hubs will be different to the existing Regional Study Hubs and these differences should be more clearly articulated as part of implementation. Whereas Regional Study Hubs are clearly conceived as not being educational providers, the Consultation Paper envisages a role for Suburban Study Hubs in delivering enabling and other preparatory courses to students.

In our submission to the Universities Accord, the IRU recommended that enabling places be expanded across the country and included in the AQF, with funding allocated through university-specific mission-based funding agreements based on need. We agree that Suburban Study Hubs should be set up to deliver enabling and other courses, but this will require a different relationship with universities and other tertiary education providers. The Consultation Paper does not provide any detail about how this will be managed and how student load will be allocated, but this should be clarified prior to implementation, with further consultation with providers.

We agree that Suburban Study Hubs could be led by a university in partnership with other providers (see below) and local community organisations. But this will require a different set-up than the “provider agnostic” approach stipulated for the Regional Hubs. There will need to be clarity of responsibility and funding to make the Suburban Study Hubs work, with clear accountability for quality of educational programs (and reporting to TEQSA etc.).

4. Study Hubs provide an opportunity for closer collaboration between universities and TAFE

A model that allows one university to take the lead for a Suburban Study Hub is not at odds with closer collaboration between universities and TAFE providers, and this should be a feature of the design and implementation of the program. Mapping of demographics and need, and of existing campuses and programs, should include TAFE services and infrastructure, as well as specialist or technical colleges that provide pathways for VET qualifications and university. The Suburban Study Hubs provide a valuable opportunity to support further integration of university and TAFE services for under-served communities.

Collaboration in this way through the Suburban Study Hubs would also provide a platform for coordinated engagement with schools by both universities and TAFEs. It would also provide an additional coordination point for education and training programs to be aligned with the needs of local industry and community organisations. In this way, the Suburban Study Hubs have the potential to support the development of innovative courses and pathways across tertiary education providers to raise aspiration, participation and attainment.

5. Suburban Study Hubs should be aligned with university missions and demonstrate genuine community partnership

The IRU supports new measures to improve place-based approaches to increase participation and equity. We agree with the proposals in the Consultation Paper for the new Suburban Study Hubs to be required to demonstrate genuine partnership with local community organisations and to take into account community needs.

In our submission to the Universities Accord, we recommended that the primary mechanism for driving focus on equity, participation and student success should be university-specific mission-based funding agreements. This approach would enable greater differentiation among universities and drive clearer focus on the needs of diverse communities. Through this model, increased funding to address equity and the areas of greatest need would be matched with appropriate accountability from institutions.

The implementation of the Suburban University Study Hubs should proceed in line with these mission-based agreements between government and universities, to ensure the most effective and efficient targeting of public funds. Participation in a Suburban Study Hub could become part of the equity plan required through each university's mission-based funding agreement.

The implementation of the Suburban Study Hubs will also need to be flexible enough to be tailored to the specific needs of diverse communities – for example, culturally-appropriate support and services for Indigenous students. In some cases it may be preferable to create pathways and opportunities for students to engage with services and student groups already established on larger campuses, rather than duplicating smaller services in a separate Study Hub.

Further, the deployment of Suburban Study Hubs provides an opportunity for greater alignment with existing centres set up by State governments, for example the Jobs and Skills Centres established in Western Australia and Victoria. These incorporate support services for a range of students (including specialist services for Indigenous students) and have been implemented with community consultation.

Finally, the Accord also creates a process for greater coordination between Federal and State/Territory governments on the governance of the university system. This creates an opportunity for greater alignment over time between Federal and State investments in universities and TAFEs to better meet the needs of under-served communities.