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Consultation Paper:  
Implementing the  
Suburban University  
Study Hubs

**ENQUIRIES**

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## A. INTRODUCTION

La Trobe University welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department of Education's consultation paper on *Implementing Suburban University Study Hubs*.

Doubling higher education participation and attainment by 2050 as the Accord Interim Report outlines will require significant effort and generational change. To achieve this, the higher education system will need to grow substantially and target students from underrepresented backgrounds, including people from the regions and outer suburban areas.

La Trobe supports the establishment of Suburban University Study Hubs and believes they can play a vital role to achieve the Australian Government's vision for higher education and expand the local learning landscape in outer suburban areas. However, we argue through this submission that the policy intent of the suburban hubs needs to be further refined in order to deliver on the Government's vision to improve diversity, equity of access and participation in higher education.

The current information about the design of the suburban hubs suggests they will be similar in function and operation to the regional hubs. We strongly believe the suburban hubs serve a different purpose to the current Regional University Study Hub (RUSH) program. We recommend that careful consideration is given to the name of the Suburban program to distinguish their purpose and mission from the regional program. A point of difference for the suburban operational program model could be to support greater integration of universities, TAFEs, RTO, and industry. Our view is that replicating the regional model in outer suburban areas will not serve the specific needs of these communities, given the difference in community composition between outer suburban and regional areas, and the contrasting policy intent of each program.

Australian students are more likely to attend university or TAFE 'down the road' in their community. If access to higher education is not available locally, students from disadvantaged backgrounds simply do not pursue post-secondary education. We support universities and TAFEs becoming eligible providers to run Hubs in outer suburban and peri-urban areas where access to university is limited and university attainment is low. Universities are well placed to help students from underrepresented and disadvantaged cohorts to succeed, particularly as they typically have higher needs and require more support both academic and non-academic.

Our submission details that a place-based approach will be critical to increasing participation of underrepresented cohorts of students and achieving the overarching objectives of the program. Each Suburban Hub needs to be established and supported to be more than a study site or computer lab. Our vision is for vibrant, community-driven suburban study hubs with outreach services and academic support to enable students to pursue and complete their studies, and dynamic course delivery that connects students with local industry and employers.

A robust and connected higher education and training sector is critical to meeting future skills and workforce needs in order to drive productivity and economic growth. We believe the role of industry is important in the growing outer suburbs and that the suburban model could provide a blueprint for universities to work with TAFE, industry, and community to meet local skills needs. The co-location of Suburban University Study Hubs with TAFE Centres of Excellence could present a unique opportunity for collaboration and integration across both programs.

La Trobe supports the concurrent Accord process and the *Support for Students Policy* consultation under the Higher Education Provider Guidelines that are still underway, as well as the release of the Employment White Paper. This work may provide further recommendations about how learning and teaching can support more equitable participation and attainment from underrepresented cohorts.

We welcome the Government's immediate action to increase access and participation in higher education and encourage further alignment and coordination across the Government's higher education, skills, training, and employment policy agenda.

La Trobe supports the recommendations made by the Innovative Research Universities and Universities Australia in their submission. We look forward to further consultation and engagement taking place on the design and implementation of the Suburban University Study Hub program to broaden higher education options for disadvantaged and underrepresented communities in outer suburban and peri-urban areas.

## **B. SUMMARY OF KEY RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 1. The Suburban model serves a different purpose to Regional University Study Centres, and this should be clearly reflected in the program model and name.**
- 2. The policy intent needs to be clearly articulated in the program design to reflect the Government's vision to double the number of students studying at university by 2050.**
- 3. Careful consideration should be given to ensure the suburban hubs program does not increase social stratification by limiting disadvantaged cohorts to specific course options that are more suited to be delivered online or by distance.**
- 4. Universities and TAFEs are well placed to help students succeed and should be eligible providers to deliver this program in outer suburban and peri-urban areas.**
- 5. The Suburban University Study Hub program could provide a blueprint for universities to work in partnership with TAFE and industry to meet local skills needs.**
- 6. Opportunities to co-locate Suburban University Study Hubs with TAFE Centres of Excellence should be explored to make full use of existing infrastructure, investment, and synergies across both programs.**
- 7. A place-based approach will be critical to success and the program should incentivise and leverage local education providers, industry, and employers in the community.**
- 8. Further analysis on outer suburban and peri-urban areas experiencing rapid development and population growth should be conducted, and there should be program flexibility to support these areas where there may be limited existing infrastructure and services.**

## C. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section, we make eight recommendations about the policy and program design of the Suburban University Study Hubs in order to achieve the Government's objectives.

### 1. **The Suburban model serves a different purpose to Regional University Study Centres, and this should be clearly reflected in the program model and name.**

With almost every job in the future requiring VET or university qualifications, La Trobe agrees that the Suburban model will need to play a key role to achieve the Government's vision to significantly increase the number of university students.

We note that Priority Action One of the Accord Interim report outlines extending the RUSH program and that a similar concept should be established for suburban and metropolitan locations<sup>1</sup>.

How community reveals and presents itself in a peri-urban location is very different to regional and rural communities. La Trobe argues the policy intent of the Suburban model is different to the current RUSH program, and so its naming and design should reflect this difference.

The purpose of the RUSH program is to support students in rural, regional, and remote Australia to access, participate, and succeed in tertiary education without having to leave their communities<sup>2</sup>. Regional Hubs are embedded in, and independently run, by the local community. Student load is a by-product of their operation.

The point of distinction for the suburban model is that they must be driven by student load, especially from students coming from underrepresented cohorts to achieve the Government's vision to rapidly increase higher education participation. This is a significant task for any single provider to deliver and we believe this program would be better served by universities, TAFEs, industry, and community working together to raise access and participation in outer suburban and peri-urban areas.

To avoid confusion between the two programs, La Trobe recommends that the name of the suburban model is given further consideration. Language is important, and the name should reflect the specific intent of the suburban model and distinguish that it serves a different purpose and mission to the regional program.

### 2. **The policy intent needs to be clearly articulated in the program design to reflect the Government's vision to double the number of students studying at university by 2050.**

The suburban model will need to help facilitate a significant increase in student load across the hubs network and greater participation of equity groups in higher education.

The suburban hubs need clearly defined goals and a tight remit, for too much flexibility and lack of specification about how the model will deliver on the policy objectives may be detrimental to achieving success, especially for equity cohorts. The program goals and objectives should be reflected in the policy intent of the suburban hubs program and the operating model in order to meet current and future demand in outer-suburban and peri-urban areas.

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<sup>1</sup> Accord Interim Report, "Bringing university education to under-served communities," Pg28

<sup>2</sup> Regional University Centre Network, <https://www.rucnetwork.edu.au/about>

La Trobe supports the program being based on the specific local needs of suburban communities and adopting a place-based approach to meet community needs. Addressing local skills needs and community development will be an important driver of the program, particularly to raise aspiration in underrepresented groups, including those from low SES backgrounds or first in family.

The specific characteristics of suburban areas and peri-urban areas, local skills and training aspirations, and establishing local partnerships should be elevated in the design of the suburban hub model. The Suburban model will also need to draw from expertise and knowledge from its own network, separate to the RUSH network.

A tailored and concerted effort will be required at the local level to lift aspiration and increase higher education participation and attainment. This requires the function of suburban study hubs to be broader than a study space and facilitate other opportunities such as data collection for research activity, outreach programs and services, and enabling local thought leadership. This concept is worth further consideration to raise interest and change the perception of higher education in underrepresented and disadvantaged communities.

**3. Careful consideration should be given to ensure the Suburban Hubs program does not increase social stratification by limiting disadvantaged cohorts to specific course options that are more suited to be delivered online or by distance.**

Teaching and learning delivered online can fill an important gap where students are unable to relocate or commute and wish to participate in areas of study that can be delivered online or via distance. However, Study Hubs are not able to offer courses in disciplines that require labs, special equipment and infrastructure for teaching and learning requirements in specialised fields such as the applied sciences, areas of health, engineering, and design. This may limit the aspirations of higher education attainment for some students.

Careful consideration is needed in the to ensure the study hubs are designed to raise access and participation from students from disadvantaged backgrounds across a broad range of course disciplines to expand teaching and learning in outer-suburban and peri-urban areas. Universities, TAFEs, RTOs, and industry should also consider new ways to broaden course access and innovative teaching and learning approaches that support disadvantaged cohorts to pursue their chosen field of study. For example, this could include flexibility to achieve course completion, intensive subject delivery options, work-integrated learning, and microcredentials.

Local facilities that encourage higher education by virtue of their proximity to students' homes is a benefit of the Study Hub model and may be less intimidating for students as opposed to attending a full-scale university campus. However, there are associated negative outcomes when students may be dissuaded from taking part in a range of campus-experiences, including those that are not feasible in a hub due to infrastructure or specialised teaching requirements. We also note that online course delivery and distance education cannot solely mitigate the varied and often compounding challenges faced by underrepresented and disadvantage cohorts.

With this in mind, the government should consider the provision of other programs, resources, scholarships, and partnerships to enable students from all locations and backgrounds to participate in the course they wish to pursue.

**4. Universities and TAFEs are well placed to help students succeed and should be considered eligible providers to deliver this program in outer suburban and peri-urban areas.**

Students from underrepresented cohorts typically have higher needs and require more intensive support both academic and non-academic. Compound disadvantage, where students experience multiple forms of disadvantage, can make it even harder for young people to navigate a path to university.

In order to lift participation and attainment in areas with historically low participation rates, we see a critical part of the solution is to invest in students early in their education, well before they consider tertiary study. This includes through engagement and collaboration with secondary schools and delivering more pathway programs with other higher education providers in the broader community.

It is important to acknowledge that supporting students from underrepresented cohorts will take time, effort, and more resources from a range of providers and support services. For example, La Trobe's successful secondary school pathway programs rely on philanthropy to fund scholarships to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds who might not otherwise have considered going to university.

Our experience developing a range of pathway programs has shown that innovative teaching and learning approaches, flexible course offerings, tailored study skills support, and peer mentoring are essential components to give students from underrepresented backgrounds the best start to a university education. Well supported pathway programs reduce anxiety and make the transition to university less daunting for students who come from a diverse range of backgrounds.

To achieve the Government's goal for increased higher education participation over the next decade, policy settings should encourage and support universities and TAFEs to work together in the interests of raising higher education attainment in disadvantaged and underrepresented cohorts. Hub providers should be engaging earlier with schools and nurturing local partnerships to deliver targeted teaching and learning for community.

Diploma pathways are one option for universities and TAFEs to collaborate and develop new opportunities to provide students from disadvantaged backgrounds the chance to gain a qualification.

For these reasons, La Trobe believes universities and TAFEs are well placed to become eligible providers under this program and in partnership with other providers to operate Hubs in outer suburban and peri-urban areas.

#### **5. The Suburban University Study Hub program could provide a blueprint for universities to work in partnership with TAFE and industry to meet local skills needs.**

The establishment of this new program provides a bespoke opportunity for universities, TAFE providers, and industry to collaborate and deliver a more adaptable and comprehensive post-secondary education system. A dynamic partnership between higher education providers and industry will provide practical training and skills solutions and better connect people with local jobs opportunities.

La Trobe supports the suburban study hubs being designed with flexibility to meet current training and workforce needs and to provide options down the track for hubs to become future university and TAFE campuses. To achieve this, each hub needs to be established as more than a study site or computer lab, but a vibrant centre with outreach and support programs, dynamic course delivery that is connected to local industry and embedded in the community.

As this submission has outlined, part of the solution is to invest in students early in their education by offering programs in high schools with low rates of student progression to higher education. TAFEs also have long-established offerings and apprenticeships available to

secondary school students and provide a strong place-based skills element. The suburban study hubs could support the development of innovative training courses and new engagement pathways across local higher education providers to raise the aspiration, participation and increase education and skills attainment in disadvantaged communities.

**6. Opportunities to co-locate Suburban University Study Hubs with TAFE Centres of Excellence should be further explored to make full use of existing infrastructure, investment, and synergies across both programs**

La Trobe notes the recommendations from the Australian Government's recent Employment White Paper and believes there is merit in exploring the implementation of the Suburban University Study Hubs and the TAFE Centres of Excellence in conjunction with each other.

Industry and employers need a higher education and training system that is highly adaptive and responsive to current and projected skills needs, especially in growing suburbs and peri-urban areas. Coordinating the roll out of both programs would encourage and strengthen tertiary collaboration to meet this demand, and present valuable opportunities for universities and TAFEs to develop, test and pilot innovative new types of qualifications and skills training.

Collaboration and co-location of Suburban University Study Hubs and Centres of Excellence could provide a unique opportunity for a joint approach to develop and pilot the National Skills Passport. This could help reduce barriers and increase participation in higher education from underrepresented and disadvantaged cohorts across both programs.

An integrated approach to the roll out of both programs may also identify further efficiencies that can be gained through co-locating infrastructure and operational resources. This joint program approach will also help to avoid a siloed policy response across the higher education, skills, training, and employment policy agenda.

**7. A place-based approach will be critical to success and the program should incentivise and leverage local education providers, industry, and employers in the community.**

La Trobe supports embedding community at the core of the program and enabling a place-based approach to address local skills needs in partnership with industry.

Connection between universities, TAFEs, industry, and local employers will be important to raise the aspiration and engagement of future students in these growing communities. Suburban study hubs are more likely to be successful with investment from the local community and also if industry has 'skin in the game.' We recommend that further consideration should be given to leverage the role of industry in the program, and how industry could be incentivised to participate locally.

One option to involve industry could be through local governance of the facility. For example, Industry and local business leaders are members of La Trobe's Regional Advisory Boards established at our regional campuses to ensure the university's efforts align with priorities of the community and contribute meaningfully to social responsibility.

To achieve scale and address local skills needs suburban study hubs should be encouraged to establish partnerships with local schools, community service and health providers, employers, and industry in the local community. Strong local partnerships will ensure the suburban hubs are embedded in the community, facilitate knowledge and resource sharing, and provide better coordination of services and non-academic student support.

The program assessment criteria should require applicants to demonstrate place-based knowledge and evidence including through:

- local community engagement and partnerships including how they will contribute value to the facility and for students
- the specific skills needs of the local community and local skills plans and skills maps
- targeted support for underrepresented groups and strategies to foster inclusive access for students from diverse backgrounds to succeed at university and TAFE

**8. Further analysis should be completed to identify outer suburban and peri-urban areas experiencing rapid development and population growth, and there should be program flexibility to support these areas where there may be limited existing infrastructure and services.**

Outer-suburban and peri-urban areas that are experiencing rapid development or are projected to have significant population growth, should be considered as eligible locations in the program. For example, in Melbourne's outer northern growth corridor, which includes some of the fastest growing Local Government Areas in Australia, there may be extremely low access or no access to existing infrastructure. Community infrastructure and services, such as public libraries, may be limited or slated for development in these brand new and emerging suburbs which means they may not be eligible as a suburban hub location under the program. These rapidly growing outer suburban areas are also typically communities where access to university is limited, and HE attainment is low.

To meet the Government's objectives to achieve greater access and participation in higher education La Trobe recommends that further consideration should be given to how these areas can be supported, or how the program can incentivise providers to establish a presence in high growth communities. Directing program funding to established outer suburbs and areas that are well resourced with existing infrastructure will mean other suburban areas that lack resources will be excluded under the program.