



**National Tertiary
Education Union**
Let's aim higher

NTEU response to the

Implementing Suburban University Study Hubs Consultation Paper

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INTRODUCTION

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) represents the interests of higher education workers in universities, TAFEs, research institutions and other tertiary education providers nationally.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Implementing Suburban University Study Hubs Consultation Paper.

As noted in our submission to the Accord Interim Report, the NTEU supports all five policy measures for immediate action announced by Education Minister Jason Clare, including Suburban Study Hubs. However, the Government must also ensure that Study Hubs do not become a way for universities to avoid their obligations to become exemplary employers under Priority Action Number 5 via the outsourcing of student support services to new entities with inferior employment standards.

WHAT IS THE AIM OF THE SUBURBAN UNIVERSITY STUDY HUBS PROGRAM?

NTEU supports the stated aim of Study Hubs – improving participation in, and access to, higher education. NTEU notes, however, that suburban study hubs will operate closer to large university campuses than regional hubs, creating the new possibility that crossover with existing services provided by universities located near those suburbs will occur. Measures need to be put into place to ensure that the services provided in study hubs are not a *replacement* for services that should be provided directly by providers but are genuinely new additional support services intended for the target disadvantaged cohorts.

WHAT BARRIERS WILL THE SUBURBAN UNIVERSITY STUDY HUBS ADDRESS AND WHAT SERVICES WILL THEY PROVIDE?

As stated in the discussion paper the aim of Study Hubs should be to supplement and extend services provided by universities, and in no way should these services be replaced. To help prevent this, Study Hubs operated by non-university entities should not be able to simultaneously provide contract support services for universities whilst in receipt of government funding. Allowing this to occur would encourage universities to outsource basic student support services to Study Hubs in the same way they have already outsourced some services to third parties on their own campuses. This could lead to a diminution of services available on campus and a loss of institutional student support capacity. In addition, it should be noted that third party student services providers currently engaged by universities often re-employ former university staff to perform similar roles under inferior employment conditions. Given universities' extremely poor track record on employment practices the Department needs to remain alive to this real possibility.¹

¹ See for example the serious FWO case against major sector provider UNSW <https://www.fairwork.gov.au/newsroom/media-releases/2023-media-releases/september-2023/20230926-unsu-litigation-media-release>

SUPPORT AT THE POINT OF TEACHING IS THE GOLD STANDARD

It is no secret in the sector that as casualisation has risen student ratings of their learning experiences have declined. In 2015, 80% of students said they were generally happy with the quality of their educational experience; seven years later, in 2022, the figure was 75.9%.² This is because students are most likely to interact and develop relationships with the staff who are teaching the courses they are studying, whether online or face to face: their lecturers, tutors and demonstrators. As a result, students in under-represented metropolitan areas need access to appropriately resourced front line teaching staff in addition to specialised support staff. **Instead of only applying a patch to the current hole in student support via Study Hubs, university teaching staff should also be correctly resourced to respond to their students as the first port of call.**

As it presently stands the majority of teaching staff are casual and paid on a fixed per-class basis. This model of payment is extremely inflexible and means that basic staff contact with students outside of the classroom, even in direct relation to the course in question, is not consistently provided for.³ Instead, student consultation and care is often delivered on an unpaid and ad hoc basis. As a first step universities should start consistently offering a basic level of student support directly at the point of teaching. This means that explicit time allocations need to be made for all teaching staff to provide student contact, rather than the current approach which silently assumes this will happen on the side in staff's "spare time". If this occurs specialist student support services and Study Hubs will be freed up for higher needs students.

Suburban Study Hubs coupled with the appropriate resourcing of front-line teaching staff will create the potential to dramatically improve student success and retention rates.

STUDENT PREPARATION COURSES

It would be appropriate for Suburban Study Hubs to provide a physical point of connection between the providers of student preparation courses (these being existing higher education providers) and students in suburban areas. However, it would not be appropriate for Study Hubs to directly deliver their own courses, this would essentially mean a new category of higher education provider had been established. If the government intends to establish a new category of higher education provider this should be explicitly consulted on.

² Quality of Learning and Teaching Student Experience Survey Results, [https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey-\(ses\)](https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey-(ses))

³ For example, a casually employed teaching staff member may receive *1 hour* time allocation per week per class of 20 or 30 students to: distribute and update course materials and assignments via an online platform, monitor online course discussions and respond, update student attendance and assessment databases, engage in correspondence with course coordinators and administrators, attend course lectures, meet with individual students outside of the classroom, manage and respond to individual student issues and queries via email, including providing pastoral and academic support for struggling students.

Consideration of who can run Study Hubs is extremely important. There is a well-established history of private organisations poorly running public services in the pursuit of profit and the financial exploitation of publicly funded initiatives.⁴ To avoid this, for-profit operators should be excluded from the publicly funded Study Hubs program.

There is some merit to having community organisation run Study Hubs, for example, local knowledge and community links can be valuable. However, we note that presently there is no requirement for these providers to publicly report their financial, employment and student statistics in the same way that universities do. This should be rectified, particularly in relation to staffing data. It seems likely that given existing Study Hubs have only received fixed term funding that was periodically renewed, their employees would likely be employed on an insecure basis (and under unknown conditions).

In the case that community organisations are running Study Hubs they should be governed by an independent volunteer board which includes staff and student representatives, and members with background and expertise in public sector higher education.

A single existing community organisation should not be able to run more than one or two local hubs in their community. Beyond this they are no longer a community-based organisation and may become a professional student support services organisation. The development of such organisations in the sector is not desirable - they would develop an internal need to keep expanding, and to ensure their own survival through cutting costs and generating a surplus.

Considering this context, it would be appropriate for public institutions such a university, TAFE or a group of such institutions to directly run a Study Hub – as long as the Hub remains neutral with respect to support for and promotion to local students. Having public higher education institutions provide Hubs, with staff covered by the same industrial agreements as their colleagues in the main institution, would be a way to ensure that Hubs were not being used to outsource existing work to low-cost entities engaged in poor employment practices outside of the government’s line of sight. Publicly funded universities and moderate to larger TAFES also have the capacity to manage the challenges associated with periodic funding due to the size of their operations and their multiple income streams. This means these institutions would be in a better position to ensure Study Hubs attract high quality professional student support staff and create high quality jobs in the suburbs.

Study Hub providers should be required to meet the government’s forthcoming Secure Jobs Code for government contractors as a minimum, regardless of whether they are university or community operated.

⁴ For example, a 2019 Senate Inquiry received a large volume of evidence from the public that private employment service providers under the JobActive program had largely failed them
[Chapter 5 – Parliament of Australia \(aph.gov.au\)](https://aph.gov.au/Chapter-5)

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