

## **Implementing Suburban University Study Hubs Consultation Paper: Response from Queensland University of Technology Widening Participation Team**

### **Background**

The Queensland University of Technology's Widening Participation team is part of QUT's Equity Unit. The area is responsible for HEPPP-funded (Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program) activities across the University and has a particular focus on outreach activities in the pre-access stage of the student lifecycle. The team is currently engaged in the *Eastern Australia Regional University Centre Partnership* funded as part of the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP), working in partnership with the Balonne Shire Regional University Centre and several other Queensland universities.

### **What is the aim of the Suburban University Study Hubs Program?**

- 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 into their design and operation?**
  - a) Provide a voice for local communities in the design and ongoing operation of Hubs by consulting local Councils, Indigenous organisations, Business associations, key industries, local schools, and social service organisations.
  - b) Ensure this consultation is ongoing and transparent, with opportunities for the community to influence Hub design, services, and priorities. Develop a Governance structure that includes this community representation to ensure continuous community involvement and decision-making powers.
  - c) Include local community members who are currently studying online as part of the consultation and governance structure.
- 2) How can the Suburban University Study Hubs widen participation and support and extend further study opportunities, adding to existing or planned investments?**
  - a) By firstly engaging in community consultation to determine local needs and priorities with the groups identified above. Once priorities are established this should be followed by consultation with tertiary education providers already engaged in the geographical area along with other providers whose physical location is reasonably close by. The aim of this consultation would be to determine if/how these institutions might assist the community to meet their self-identified needs.
  - b) As there is a lack of quality career and pathways advice and insufficient bridging and enabling programs – both of which contribute to widening participation - Hubs could also facilitate these, where appropriate.

Note: networking and partnership development takes time and needs to be incentivised through dedicated funding.

### **3) How can equity be embedded into the design of Suburban University Study Hubs?**

- a) Embedding equity into the design of Suburban University Study Hubs requires a proactive approach:
  - i) Prioritising inclusivity by ensuring Hubs are physically accessible and culturally safe for all students.
  - ii) Appointing staff members from diverse backgrounds, including Indigenous Australians, to key roles within the Hubs.
  - iii) Offering cultural competency training to Hub staff to ensure they understand and respect the needs and backgrounds of the students they serve.
  - iv) Implementing policies and practices that actively address the unique challenges faced by under-represented groups, such as flexible operating hours for mature-age students and students with caring responsibilities.

- b) Equity considerations should be uppermost in the minds of the community representatives listed in Qu 1 above because Hubs will be established in areas with low proportions of tertiary educated people which have relatively high levels of unskilled workers and high unemployment. These areas have a relatively high proportion of people from low SES (socioeconomic status) and Indigenous Australian backgrounds, and people with a disability.
- 4) Where multiple communities may co-exist within the same area, how can Suburban University Study Hubs ensure they meet the needs of these different communities?**
- a) By including representatives from each community in the development and operation of these Hubs. This might include employing staff from key target groups such as Indigenous Australians, Pasifika peoples, or those from specific migrant communities.
  - b) By tailoring outreach<sup>1</sup> and support services to address the specific needs of each community, taking into account language, cultural, and educational differences.
  - c) By encourage cross-cultural interactions and collaborations within the Hubs to promote understanding and inclusivity among diverse groups.
- 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?**
- a) By ensuring that Hubs are not controlled by any one tertiary education provider.
  - b) By providing the same facilities as the Regional University Centres i.e., infrastructure, administrative and academic skills support, and pastoral support services.
  - c) By including members of the community groups identified in 1. above in the development and operation of each Hub.
  - d) By establishing partnerships and collaborating closely with local tertiary education providers to offer seamless academic support, pathway programs, and transfer opportunities for students. Section 20. b below elaborates on key success factors for institutional collaboration.
  - e) Promote websites and resources (such as *The Good Universities Guide* and TAC sites) that provide information about all available courses and services from all providers.
  - f) Engage with local leaders, including government officials and industry representatives, to strengthen connections and promote the Hub's role as a regional educational resource.

**What barriers will the Suburban University Study Hubs address and what services will they provide?**

- 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?**
- a) The Hubs should include the support services currently provided in Regional University Centres plus any additional services identified as necessary during community consultation.
  - b) Specific support for students with a disability should be a priority as a high proportion of this group studies online.
  - c) Mature-age students are also likely to make up a good proportion of online students, so their specific needs also need to be supported. This may include ensuring the Study Hubs are open in the evenings and weekends to accommodate students in full-time work and/or with caring responsibilities.
  - d) Services should include:
    - i) Specialised academic support programs, such as tutoring and mentoring, specifically designed for First Nations students and students with disabilities.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'outreach' is used throughout this submission to refer to pre-access activities with school students and post-school community members.

- ii) Career counselling and guidance that takes into account the unique challenges and aspirations of under-represented groups.
- iii) Engagement and support throughout tertiary students' academic journey including the transition to graduate employment.

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

- a) Appoint First Nations staff and staff from the other cultures represented in the local community (e.g., Pasifika staff in SE Queensland locations) to key roles at the Hub.
- b) Provide cultural safety training and upskilling to Hub staff, where required.
- c) Offer culturally relevant support services, such as Indigenous-specific academic support and community engagement programs.
- d) Collaborate with local Indigenous organisations and cultural centres to ensure that the Hub's activities are culturally appropriate. Involve these groups in the co-design of resources.

**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?**

None that we can think of apart from the existing Regional University Centres.

**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?**

- a) Existing support mechanisms include those provided by The Smith Family and role model and mentoring from student ambassadors/mentors from similar backgrounds studying at partner tertiary institutions. Skilled academics and professional staff at from partner tertiary institutions could run academic skills workshops, time management workshops etc.
- b) A consortia/community of practice approach – as undertaken by the Queensland Widening Participation Working Group (see Section 20. B below) would help minimise gaps and overlaps.

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

- a) Establish a user-friendly website or portal that offers information about available services, resources, and events.
- b) Collaborate with local schools and community centres to distribute information to students and families. Engage with a range of community groups to reach a wider audience.
- c) Organise regular community events, workshops, and open houses to showcase the Hub's services and success stories.
- d) Develop partnerships with existing local media outlets and other channels to promote Hub activities and achievements. These include local newspapers, school newsletters, flyers in community libraries, council bulletins and associated social media including through community groups.
- e) Create a strong social media presence and through area-based targeted advertising campaigns

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

- a) Hubs could provide their premises and facilities for these programs to be run face-to-face as well as supporting students studying online tertiary bridging/enabling courses.
- b) The Hubs could also:
  - i) Engage with local secondary schools to identify potential candidates and encourage participation.
  - ii) Promote the existence of these programs more generally to the students and families they support and through the channels listed under 10. above.

## **Where will the Suburban University Study Hubs be located?**

### **12) What factors should be considered when selecting locations for Suburban University Study Hubs?**

- a) Factors to be considered include; the proportion of the working age population with university qualifications; unemployment rates; proportion of people from low SES and First Nations backgrounds; cultural mix; existence of emerging refugee communities; and the time needed to travel to nearest comprehensive higher education provider by public transport. The availability of high-speed internet is another essential factor.
- b) Priority should be given to areas with the potential for population growth and subsequent increased demand/need.
- c) Consider the availability of suitable local infrastructure for Hub co-location, such as public libraries, community centres, and TAFE campuses.

### **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)**

- a) Public transport and free parking should be close by. Proximity to child-care facilities and schools would increase the Hub's availability for parents and carers.

### **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?**

- a) Most education providers' facilities are concentrated in high population areas. When campuses do exist in outer metropolitan/peri-urban they tend to be from a single provider and offer a limited number of courses.
- b) Hubs can complement such provision by focusing on less connected locations and supporting students studying at any institution and in any course.

## **Who can apply?**

### **15) What skills, services, and attributes should an organization be able to demonstrate as evidence of their ability to establish and operate a Suburban University Study Hub?**

- a) Host organisations should be able to demonstrate existing connections in the local community; a community engagement track record; be 'provider-agnostic'; and have the skills to provide study skills support and to triage referral to outside support services.

### **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?**

See Qu 1 above.

### **17) Should a single organization 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?**

- a) We consider it inappropriate for a single organisation to be eligible to operate multiple Hubs. Similarly, a single university or TAFE/VET provider should not be eligible to lead a Hub but could contribute to its activities as part of a Consortium.

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

- a) By establishing a Community of Practice to: share best practice; brainstorm solutions to challenges; share information regarding activities, scale, scope, and impact; and by encouraging education providers to engage in capacity building activities with Hub staff and key community members e.g., teachers and social service providers.

## **How will locations and operators be selected?**

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

- a) By taking a student-centred approach to all decision-making including the composition of organisations/providers engaged as partners. Including current university students studying at the Hub is an important means of including the student voice.
- b) By providing dedicated funding for partnership development, recognising that this takes time.
- c) By setting up resource and data-sharing mechanisms.

### **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.**

- a) There is much to learn from the existing Regional University Study Hubs, notably that these Hubs need to be driven by the local communities and that Hub staff need to engage in extensive community consultation to establish key needs/priorities around widening participation activities.
- b) The learnings from the Queensland Widening Participation Working Group (operating for 13 year) are also highly relevant. These include: the need for a clear rationale for collaborative rather than competitive activities; communities of practice for knowledge sharing; acknowledgement of the time and effort needed to establish trusting respectful relationships in timelines and funding provision; focusing on minimising gaps and overlaps in service provision; and the need for common approaches to data collection and sharing.
- c) The current Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP) – a partnership between 20 Universities and 16 RUCs - is testing a model for coordinated, sustainable, long-term, and collaborative partnerships between universities and Regional University Study Hubs and will provide valuable learnings which can be applied to the design and development of Suburban Hubs.