

## Implementing Suburban University Study Hubs

The Queensland Widening Tertiary Participation Consortium is a whole of state initiative to increase participation of key under-represented groups in tertiary education involving Queensland's seven Table A universities, the multi-state Australian Catholic University and the Queensland Department of Education. The Consortium has over 13 years' experience working with schools and communities across outer urban, regional and remote Queensland where participation in higher education is below state averages and where low SES background students are most concentrated. These areas also serve large First Nations populations. In 2022, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students made up 14% of the student population in schools targeted by Consortium activities. This response to the Suburban University Study Hubs consultation paper represents practitioner voices from across Consortium institutions and is not necessarily the viewpoint of individual institutions.

### 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?**

Each Suburban University Study Hub must establish a governance structure such as a board or advisory body that provides a voice for local communities in design and ongoing operation of the Hub. Governance models will vary according to local circumstances and may include representatives from local councils; Indigenous organisations and Elders; local migrant, refugee or cultural associations; business associations; key industries; education providers including local schools, universities and TAFE/VET providers; and social service organisations.

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

Hubs should be resourced to undertake community outreach and collaboration to widen participation. This needs to build on any existing university led widening participation activity in the region, adding a more local perspective and linking widening participation to local needs and employment opportunities. Provision of tailored career and pathways advice is a known gap affecting under-represented learner groups that could also be addressed by Suburban Hubs to widen participation. Provision or facilitation of bridging and enabling programs through Hubs will contribute to widening participation by addressing gaps in academic preparation and confidence to undertake tertiary study.

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

Criteria for location of Hubs should include consideration of demographic factors (eg. proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people from low SES backgrounds, unskilled workforce including migrant or refugee populations), and representation of these groups in governance structures for the Hub. Appropriate strategies and support also needs to be in place to ensure cultural safety and inclusion. Dedicated widening participation funding is required to focus Hubs on under-represented groups, community engagement and building a pipeline of students from priority learner groups.

**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?**

Governance arrangements, community consultation and outreach embedded in design of the Hubs should ensure representation and engagement with key communities. Depending on demographics and size of hub, consideration should be given to employment of specific support or liaison officers from key target communities such as First Nations, Pasifika, or specific migrant communities.

**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?**

Hubs should be community owned and controlled and independent of any one provider. The model used by Regional University Centres i.e. infrastructure, administrative and academic skills support services, and student support services should be followed for Suburban Hubs. Partnership with universities and other providers should be encouraged to assist with widening participation activities, student support and provision of specific programs at the Hub. While many regional Hubs have developed partnerships with universities, there is even greater scope for this to occur in Suburban Hubs due to greater proximity to metropolitan university campuses. Partnerships including face-to-face delivery of workshops, course content or support services should be encouraged.

**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?**

The Hubs should deliver similar support services currently provided in Regional University Centres plus any additional services identified as necessary during community consultation. Access to mental health and wellbeing support is likely to be beneficial, especially if Hubs are to support learners from backgrounds that include inter-generational poverty, trauma, domestic violence or out-of-home care. As stated above, career and pathways advice is often necessary to assist students make the right study decisions and link their skills and experience to future career opportunities.

Support services need to be tailored to specific community needs and to requirements of priority learner groups such as First Nations Students, students with a disability and low SES students. Some students with a disability favour online study, and may require specialist support.

Mature-age students are also likely to make up a good proportion of online students and require support that meets their specific needs. 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, and consideration of accessibility of child-care.

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

Include broad local representation on governing body for design and operation of Hubs and prioritise consultation with local community leaders. Where feasible, appoint First Nations staff and staff from the other cultures represented in the local community to key roles in the Hub. Ensure ongoing engagement with community groups through widening participation activities, community engagement, celebrations and events.

**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?**

**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?**

With strong community engagement and connection, Hubs could leverage local health, counselling and employment services and connect students to these services as well as those offered by partner universities. Other education focused organisations active in suburban locations such as The Smith Family would be appropriate partners.

The Queensland Widening Tertiary Participation Consortium, is able to work with Hubs to map existing widening participation activity in Queensland suburban locations, identify gaps and collaborate on co-design and co-delivery of widening participation programs. The Consortium is also able to facilitate networking with widening participation practitioners and inclusion in local communities of practice. Representatives from Regional Universities Centres have participated in annual Queensland practitioner seminars and this offer would be extended to Queensland Suburban Hubs once established.

It is important that location and operation of Hubs (in both suburban and regional settings) recognises existing education provision including existing university campuses, study hubs and community partnerships and avoids duplication or increasing competition in thin markets. Many universities have established suburban campuses with strong community links, however the viability and sustainability of these is compromised by thin markets, high support needs and perceptions that larger city campuses will provide better educational opportunities. Hubs must take a role in growing the pool of potential students in collaboration with university partners and provide a unique bespoke service targeted to local needs. This may include such things as providing small-scale learning environments, more personalised service, intense wrap-around support, or more direct connection with local employment opportunities and experiences than can be provided through a larger campus. It may also be possible to co-locate a Hub within an existing campus or facility that is able to support students from multiple universities and make better use of existing facilities and services.

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

Dedicated resourcing for community engagement and widening participation is essential for Hubs to ensure they are well connected to community networks and information channels and to support aspiration, skills development and understanding of tertiary opportunities in the community.

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

Provision of enabling/tertiary preparation is essential to ensuring tertiary access and success for a large portion of students from under-represented groups. Hubs could provide support for participation in online courses as well as use of facilities for on-site provision. Provision of information on enabling and preparation courses should be carried out through the Hubs' community engagement/ widening participation function. Provision of career advice and pathways planning by the centre or in partnership with other providers is also crucial to supporting students to access the right course and to achieve successful tertiary outcomes.

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

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

As outlined in Q3, local demographic factors such as the proportion of the working age population with university qualifications, proportion of people from low SES and First Nations backgrounds, and existence of low skilled migrant or refugee communities should be considered in locating centres. Consideration should be given to presence of other suburban university campuses or study hubs near-by and any impacts on their student demand and campus utilisation. Time taken to travel to nearest comprehensive higher education provider by public transport should also be considered. Availability of high-speed internet connectivity is also essential for a Hub.

**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)**

Ease and safety of access and proximity to other services should be priorities in locating hubs. Proximity to public transport and free parking facilitates access. Proximity to other services or community infrastructure (such as educational institutions or shopping centres) increases visibility and safety. Proximity to child-care, and schools eases accessibility issues for parents.

**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?**

Solutions provided by education providers tend to focus on higher population areas, single institution offerings and usually a limited range of courses. Hubs can complement such provision

by focusing on smaller, less connected locations, and by offering support for a broad range of institutions and courses.

## **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?**

Host organisations should demonstrate existing connections in the local community, ability to undertake community engagement, student support and referral, and to manage external partnerships. Experience in delivering educational or other community services is desirable.

### **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 Q1 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?**

Only where it can demonstrate existing engagement with communities in all Hub locations and has separate governance arrangements with community representation for each Hub.

A networked model such as the Country Universities Centre network could also be applied to Suburban Hubs to provide support to multiple independent Hubs.

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

Partnership approaches to establishing and operating Hubs should be encouraged including with Universities and VET providers. As outlined above, local education providers should be included in membership of Hub governing bodies. Dedicated community engagement activity should encompass local education providers and leverage partnerships with universities and VET providers. As outlined in Q9 above, universities within the Queensland Widening Tertiary Participation Consortium have existing relationships across suburban communities in Queensland and would work collaboratively with Queensland based Hubs to enhance local widening participation activity.

Collaboration between Hubs could be enhanced by establishing a Community of Practice or network of Suburban Hubs to share best practice; brainstorm solutions to challenges; share information regarding activities, programs and partnerships; and undertake joint initiatives.

## 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?**

Partnerships within the community and with tertiary education providers should be central to the design and operation of Hubs. Dedicated resourcing is required to build and maintain community and other partnerships.

### **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.**

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 prior to establishing key needs/priorities around program delivery, student support and widening participation activities. However, Suburban Hubs will also have distinct and different characteristics and student cohorts requiring differing approaches.

There are also learnings to be taken from the various suburban university campuses or study centres that have been established by universities in outer urban areas. Successful centres have learnt to engage effectively with local communities and provide courses and services aligned to community needs.

The learnings from the Queensland Widening Tertiary Participation Consortium are highly relevant to collaborative partnership across higher education institutions, and improving access to tertiary education for under-represented group. These learnings include: the need for a clear rationale for collaborative rather than competitive activities; establishment of a community of practice for knowledge sharing; providing time and resourcing needed to establish trusting respectful relationships; coordination of activity to minimise gaps and overlaps in service provision; and need for common approaches to data collection and sharing.

The current Eastern Australia Regional University Centres Partnership funded under the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP) is testing a model for sustainable, long-term, and collaborative widening participation partnerships between universities and Regional University Centres (RUCs). This partnership between 20 Universities and 16 RUCs – including Queensland Consortium partners - will provide valuable learnings which can be applied to the design and development of collaborative widening participation models for Suburban Hubs.