

## RMIT's response to the Suburban University Study Hubs Consultation paper

September 2023

RMIT congratulates the Federal Government for planning for and funding the Suburban University Study Hubs (the Hubs). The Hubs will address many long-term challenges of University access, participation and success while also providing a new structure for Universities to innovate and improve our Outreach efforts to Widen Participation in Higher Education. If used as a basis for widening participation activities that improve understanding of University skills, roles and careers ("Outreach") the Hubs may also help overcome issues in the current Outreach funding arrangements to individual Universities which make difficult sector-wide collaboration and impartial and consistent advice to communities.

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 in their design and operation?*

Similar to the Regional Study Hubs, it would be good to establish Management boards with local service providers and community group representatives (social services, business/employer groups, religious and cultural groups) as members of the board who provide input and feedback on the establishment and ongoing operations. They can also be a channel of information to and from their own community group network. Also, wherever possible staff recruited to work at the Centre should be selected based on their connection with the local community as well as their skills, particularly the Centre Manager role.

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

Current plans as outlined in the Consultation Paper are well considered and should work.

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

Equity has already been embedded in the strategy of the establishment of these centres (locations, aims) and will form a good foundation. Putting systems in place to track the utilisation of facilities and services by students, and reviews of the data to ensure parity of participation by equity groups will be important. Where the Hubs may be over utilised by upper level and more privileged students (post-graduate students, M-H SES) then the matter can be referred to the Management Board to put additional processes or services in place to reach out to equity groups and offer then specialist programs or access. Specialist partnerships with NFP groups might need to be established so that volunteer/community groups and their members can also be present at the Hubs to encourage utilisation and offer specialist services. However it would be generally preferable that the Hubs implement Inclusive Education policies and staff training so that all students, no matter the cultural background or identities, are made to feel welcome by all staff and services all the time, as a matter of business as usual.

4. *Where multiple communities may co-exist within the same area (for example, ethnic, cultural, industry-based, etc.), how can Suburban University Study Hubs ensure they meet the needs of these different communities?*

Diversity of representation on the Management Board would facilitate this aim, combined with partnerships from different NFP community/cultural groups as noted above.

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?*

The Hubs must not be branded or associated with any one University provider, even if they are contracted to be run by a University. Separate branding and email accounts must be used by all Hubs and their staff, as is done with the Regional University Centres.

Policies must be in place to ensure that all relevant University providers are invited to participate and contribute at events and that Hub staff provide services in navigating University provider information rather than the Hubs being a space for a plethora of separate University recruitment materials.

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 have co-located Childcare centres to ensure that women, carers and mature age learners are catered for. In addition, knowing such services are available will go a long way to encouraging under-represented students to consider and enrol in University courses. Designing the spaces using Universal Design principles to ensure they are fully accessible.

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

Appropriate Inclusive Education policies and staff training combined with community/cultural representation on the Boards and suitable partnerships as noted previously.

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? It is our understanding the Canadian government put in place a network of similar Study Hubs to support distance and flexible learning in the 1990s which were initially very effective including for First Nations communities and students. It might be good to look into these experiences as I think difficulties were encountered – possibly related to reduction in funding. Further info can be found here: <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/distance-learning>*

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?*

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

Through connection with local schools, LLENS, local government and locally located community organisations that are supporting people with employment or training related services.

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

Being a clear first point of contact for students, helping them to unpack their needs, being able to help them navigate tertiary education structures and systems, providing a soft landing point.

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

Good public transport options, good internet connectivity, parking and access to cafes and also preferably access to some open spaces for taking breaks. If the Hubs will be open late at night, then consider the safety and lighting of students leaving the Hub late.

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)*

Yes Childcare services.

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?*

Considering how stretched University support services are, how under-represented equity students are in many of our support offerings, and how difficult it is to provide required support for distance/online students anything that can be done at the Hubs will be a good complement. Some consideration might need to be given to supporting students with Disabilities in ways that do not overlap and conflict – further consultation should be undertaken with University providers who typically are implementing individual Equitable Learning Access plans for students.

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

A strong commitment to inclusive education practices with demonstrated experience of community partnership work that has led to strong outcomes for the communities they work with and seek to represent.

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?*

Board of Management with broad Community representation as noted previously.

17. *Should a single organisation 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?*

Board of Management with broad Community representation as noted previously.

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

Perhaps the solution would be not to put that responsibility onto the Hubs, but to modify the University HEPPP/IRLSAF funding scheme to incentivise working with the Study Hubs.

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

The space being open for use for community organisations to use – prospective students can then connect with the space in multiple ways, not just through being a student.