

Submission to the Implementing Suburban University Study Hubs Consultation Paper

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ABOUT THE REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES NETWORK

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Implementing Suburban University Study Hubs Consultation Paper. RUN is a national collaborative group of seven regional Australian universities: Charles Sturt University, CQUniversity Australia, Federation University Australia, Southern Cross University, University of New England, University of Southern Queensland, and University of the Sunshine Coast.

This submission reflects the positions of RUN institutions, and in doing so, also aims to represent the views of those students and communities which RUN universities serve; the one-third of Australians who live outside of metropolitan centres in Regional, Rural and Remote locations.

OVERVIEW

Suburban University Study Hubs have the potential to provide significant opportunities for Australians in outer metropolitan and peri-urban areas to access and benefit from the life-changing experience of higher education, unlocking talent in these communities and building local capability.

RUN member institutions have seen firsthand the impact that existing Regional University Study Hubs have in communities by removing barriers to education and enabling Australians to pursue tertiary study. Regional universities are important partners to these existing hubs, with the three largest university providers to existing centres being RUN member institutions.¹ We welcome the extension of a successful regional policy initiative and regional universities look forward to partnering with the Suburban University Study Hubs to increase opportunities for all Australians to be able to access the higher education course

of their choosing in a location and mode convenient to them. RUN's response to each of the components of the consultation paper are embedded in four principles we believe should underpin all aspects of the design of Suburban University Study Hubs, from the aims, services, locations and funding. These are:

1. Ensuring study hubs are place-based and responsive to community need
2. Grounding the establishment, operation, and metrics for success of study hubs in evidence and drawing on the lessons learned from existing Regional University Study Hubs
3. Prioritising a focus on students and equity support
4. Fostering collaboration with industry, government, higher education providers, and community organisations.

For further information please contact RUN on 0408 482 736 or execdir@run.edu.au.

¹ Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2022, Regional University Centres Program 2022 Funding Round Briefing Session, accessed 24 September 2023. <https://www.education.gov.au/regional-university-centres/resources/briefing-session-presentation-2022-regional-university-centres>

AIM OF THE PROGRAM

To meet the aim of widening participation in higher education and supporting lifelong learning, the design of Suburban University Study Hubs must incorporate best practices and lessons learnt from the operation of existing Regional University Study Hubs while allowing each hub the flexibility to adapt to community need.

Regional universities – as institutions which pride themselves on providing opportunity to non-traditional cohorts, meeting local need, and driving economic growth – are deeply grounded in the communities they serve and are at the forefront of community engagement. These institutions understand the importance of bringing education to people where they are, and that the impact is driven not only by access to infrastructure and student support but also visibility and connection within the community. To achieve this, initiatives must be evidence driven but also deeply embedded in place.

As local conduits to tertiary education providers, there is potential for the Suburban University Study Hubs to be vibrant, community owned centres which have a critical role in unlocking talent and building skill in outer metropolitan and peri-urban areas.

The first step in achieving this is establishing a shared set of evidence-based principles that can be adapted to each community. To achieve this RUN recommends an initial review into the 32 Regional University Study Hubs currently operating to establish practices that have led to the most significant success. Some of the focal points for a review could include:

- Analysing hubs that have been most effective in aspiration raising and providing access to students from underrepresented backgrounds and how this has been achieved
- Evaluating where are the most robust connections between the hubs and surrounding industry, education, local government and community stakeholders and how these have been achieved
- Identifying how pre-existing infrastructure has been most effectively leveraged to avoid duplication and redundancies and focus on improving facilities
- Assessing where community ownership is strongest, and how community consultation has contributed to the establishment and operation of hubs
- Analysing, and publishing, data on student enrolments, retention, success and attrition to ensure that the study hubs are not just providing access to, but are providing the appropriate support for students to succeed at universities.

BARRIERS & SERVICES

Suburban University Study Hubs need to provide more than just practical resources to enable study; they should be nurturing environments where students, regardless of their background or age, feel supported and equipped to achieve their goals. The measure of their success will lie not just in the number of students accessing the hubs, but in attainment and student satisfaction.

To effectively enable students to succeed and provide a culturally safe environment that meets the distinct needs of individuals and encourages new students into tertiary education, Suburban University Study Hubs must be designed as key parts of the communities they serve, and utilise existing support facilities, existing educational providers, and expertise. The resourcing and focus of student services in these hubs should be responsive to the needs of the community and incorporate avenues for feedback from the student body as well as the broader community.

A fundamental component of stakeholder engagement for these hubs will be working with schools to encourage school-leavers to consider tertiary education, as well as understand the barriers students face and spread awareness of the resources that are available through the hubs with their communities.

Beyond this, however, there needs to be recognition that not all potential students are school leavers, and thought needs to be given to how these hubs can engage mature age students. Unlike school-leavers, who are usually physically studying at educational institutions and can be engaged through targeted programs or interventions, mature-age students represent a more diverse and dispersed demographic. Reaching these cohorts will require outreach and engagement through community organisations, groups, and employers. Thought needs to be given to the different barriers older university students face when considering or undertaking tertiary education. For example, data shows that the older a domestic student is when studying an undergraduate degree the more likely they are to study part-time.² However, part-time students are much less likely to complete their studies than students enrolled full-time.³ They are also more likely to already be engaged in full-time work and are more likely to have children, requiring them to balance their education with competing work and life pressures, and these students often cite work or family responsibilities as reasons for withdrawing.⁴ A critical aspect in supporting aspiration will be in supporting tertiary preparation, including connecting students to enabling or preparatory courses and providing requisite academic and pastoral support. Enabling programs are a proven way to build academic preparation and provide a supportive pathway for students from underserved backgrounds.

LOCATIONS

In deciding the locations of the Suburban University Study Hubs, RUN support the outlined approach of using data analysis to identify communities with greatest need as well as the emphasis on co-location with existing infrastructure where possible. This approach will help to maximise the potential impact of the hubs not only in communities but nationally.

In mapping areas with the highest need to identify potential locations, RUN recommend taking into consideration:

- Consideration of potential school leavers, current mature age students, and also the broader demographics and profile of a community, including current educational attainment, projections for growth, infrastructure, identified skills gaps, and industrial need.
- Consideration of current social and community infrastructure. However, this should not be in itself a sole determinant. If there is a clear need for a study hub and the potential social impact for a community could be genuinely significant, a study hub could be reasonably resourced to provide infrastructure or encourage collaboration where it is otherwise lacking. A lack of services should not be seen as a reason to withhold services.
- Consideration of existing infrastructure. New hubs should not replace, or eclipse existing satellite campuses operated by universities in target markets – rather it should be investigated how this existing educational infrastructure can be leveraged to ensure opportunities for higher education study are maximised.

² Department of Education, Higher Education Statistics Student Data [unpublished data], Department of Education, Canberra, 2023.

³ Cherastidtham I, Norton A, University attrition: what helps and what hinders university completion? Grattan Institute, 2018, accessed at: <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/University-attrition-background.pdf>

⁴ Cherastidtham I, Norton A, Dropping out: the benefits and costs of trying university. Grattan Institute, 2018, accessed at: <https://grattan.edu.au/report/dropping-out/>

HUB OPERATORS

RUN is supportive of the proposed approach that potential operators be required to demonstrate capacity in the development and delivery of services. RUN recommends reviewing current Regional University Study Hubs to identify the expertise demonstrated by operators who are successful in improving student engagement, support, and attainment, and use this to establish metrics for robust governance.

Additionally, it is crucial to make data about the operation of both Regional and Suburban University Study Hubs accessible where possible. This ensures that providers, the Government, community, and stakeholders can gauge and comprehend their impact to aid in informed decision-making and facilitate continuous improvement.

RUN is supportive of the focus on embedding engagement within the delivery requirements of the study hubs, and propose that broader collaboration with industry, government and community organisations is also encouraged.

PROGRAM FUNDING

RUN recognise the important role of Suburban University Study Hubs in facilitating access to the full benefits of tertiary education, including the academic and pastoral support that can be challenging to access without being based near a university campus. As outlined in the consultation paper, these hubs should be embedded in the communities they are based in and responsive to local needs. Given this, RUN recommend a funding model that is grounded in consistent principles however considers the potentially unique functions of these hubs and associated fit-out and operational costs. RUN note that the current consultation paper states operators cannot use funding to build new infrastructure or purchase land, which may have the unwanted result of excluding communities that would potentially benefit the most.

RUN endorse the idea of extending the dedicated stream of partnerships funding available to Regional University Study Hubs to the Suburban University Study Hubs, as well as other incentives to encourage collaboration with tertiary providers, industry, and community groups.