



October 2023

The University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Consultation Paper regarding Implementing Suburban University Study Hubs (SUSHs).

UniSQ has a productive history of involvement with Regional University Centres (RUCs). UniSQ's Provost, Professor Karen Nelson, has provided expert advice and guidance about relevant student learning engagement theories and good practices in supporting student learning to the Country Universities Centres (CUCs) during the time the CUCs were being established. UniSQ's collaboration with RUCs commenced with the Geraldton Universities Centre and more recently Balonne (St George and Dirranbandi) and Maranoa (Roma) CUCs and the RUC in Goondiwindi. UniSQ has a dedicated senior staff member who manages the relationship with RUCs, i.e., Ms Helen Nolan, Executive Director (Strategic Liaison Education Communities).

The goal of the RUC Program is strongly aligned with the University's Strategic Plan and priorities, in particular, increasing and widening access and participation in higher education, educational excellence, engaged research on issues vital to regions, and engaged service to our regional, rural and remote communities. One of the University's key performance areas is 'being the university of choice for staff and students across all our regions', and the RUCs are a key partner with UniSQ in achieving this goal.

RUCs have been successful in supporting university access and participation in communities that have been currently under-served by providers because the Program has supported the establishment of Centres in thinly populated areas that are remote from existing university campuses. The Centres provide in-person first-level support to students, connections to specialised provider student services and provider academic advice, high bandwidth internet, well equipped study premises, and opportunities for collaborative learning, and they are safe, family-friendly environments. In our experience, RUCs and universities collaborate to ensure the timely and seamless provision of services, particularly access to specific course of study, discipline, and provider advice for students. Importantly, when there is a cohort of students studying in a common discipline or course of study or with a provider, RUCs foster a sense of belonging among students and with their educators, which further supports persistence with study and success in tertiary education.

The benefits of the relationships between RUCs and universities to students in regional, rural, and remote areas of Australia are clear. However, based on the information provided in the Consultation Paper, we have concerns about the apparent assumption that the success and benefits associated with the RUCs will be transferrable to SUSHs. The issues about access and participation rates in well populated outer-metropolitan and peri-urban areas are likely to be less related to the distance from a provider campus and more related to the socio-economic patterns of participation in tertiary education. It is not clear from the Consultation Paper that the proposed SUSHs alone will improve access or student participation and success in tertiary education in outer-metropolitan or peri-urban communities. While UniSQ strongly supports the desired outcome, our responses are framed in accordance with our concerns. Our response is informed by our knowledge and application of the extensive body of research and good practice that underpins success in widening access and improving student outcomes.

Consultation questions

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?

The proposals within the Consultation Paper are fundamentally about a form of student support and have the benefit of being place-based facilities, like the pre-existing RUCs which appear to be the model used, albeit, adapted for outer-metropolitan and peri-urban settings. However, the RUCs have no curriculum or teaching function and have only limited pedagogical inputs to student learning.

The SUSHs will be complementary to existing providers and the fundamental reasons they are being established is to increase higher education attainment in previously under-represented, equity and First Nations communities by improving access, and widening participation for people from low SES backgrounds, for First Nations Peoples, for mature age people and those with caring responsibilities. These student groups will mostly be first in their family to undertake a university education - they require support and tuition which is aligned with their discipline content and is appropriate and sensitive to social and ethnic/community contexts to successfully support their transition into higher and further learning.

The Consultation Paper contends that the SUSHs will have a strong role in supporting aspiration for tertiary education in local communities. Local communities have views and perspectives on what counts as valid and useful knowledge and the SUSHs and local providers will need to work collaboratively to change perceptions in the community about undertaking further study for cohorts unfamiliar with higher education.

To ensure the voice of local communities is integrated in the design and operation of SUSHs, representation from universities with footprints within the area, and a coordinated approach for linkages with schools and industry to align with qualifications, skills, and employment prospects in the areas in which the Hubs are located, will be vital.

In terms of governance, it would be desirable for the Hubs to be guided by representatives from education communities (high schools, VET providers and universities) and local industry and with a focus on pathways to study. Linkages to existing university pathway offerings already provided by TAFE and universities would also be essential.

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

In addition to the response to Q1, any partnership arrangements would require deep community engagement and strong collaboration with providers to ensure SUSHs are a sustainable and effective model for the community support to achieve support for higher education and VET.

One example of an area of collaboration would be provision of dedicated careers education (in particular, at the local schools conducted in partnership with universities and other providers) to link careers education to available courses of study.

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

UniSQ is well placed to support SUSHs in supporting enabling/tertiary preparation courses for students from under-represented backgrounds. UniSQ already provides these courses via UniPrep, Tertiary Preparation Programs and English Language Programs.

Consideration needs to be given to the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) rating plus Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data - in particular, data on engagement in work and/or study, current and recent study, qualifications, and transitions to work. This ABS data is critical to highlight the future workforce needs and programs that might be appropriate at SUSHs in the future.

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?

Collaboration with specialist services already existing within providers will ensure consistency in experience. A porous interface between SUSHs and providers will be essential in the success of the SUSHs.



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?

In addition to our introductory comments and the responses to Q1-4, it is likely that some commonly agreed protocols will be required to ensure that local SUSHs maintain relationships with local providers and industry as well as students attending their premises, and it will be critical that they do not offer contradictory or redundant services or advice.

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?

Students living in outer-metropolitan and peri-urban areas are more likely to be a member of one or more equity groups. They face economic barriers such as cost, lack of private and public transport, lack of available childcare, lack of access to dedicated computers, in addition to social barriers (notably high levels of work and family commitments and 'othering') that hamper inclusion and engagement. It is proposed that the SUSHs will support students who may be studying in a variety of ways – internal (on campus), external (online) and multi-modal (a mix of on campus and online study). The SUSHs will support these students by providing a local option for accessing convenient support, reducing barriers through in-person support, and providing ICT equipment and local study spaces. The Consultation Paper calls for tailored wrap-around support based on local community and student need.

One of the key lessons arising from access and widening participation efforts is that student support delivered to access and widening participation students is effective when it accompanies relevant discipline content – and therefore collaboration among providers and SUSHs to ensure the SUSHs are effective in achieving their aims will be essential. SUSHs could devise and deliver community/cohort specific support (e.g., access to childcare in safe social learning spaces outside of regular work hours to meet community needs). We cannot assume that the tuition or support from different providers are the same because units of study and assessment requirements vary from provider to provider. Therefore, we contend that learning support, specialist and discipline advice cannot be organised on a 'provider-agnostic' basis although some other services and extra-curricular services can be, noting that equity students will also be time poor. Most outer-suburban students entering higher education will choose between one or more local universities. Educational background and postcode are key factors mentioned in the Consultation Paper, but we are unsure of the evidence base that supports the assertion that a visible presence of a local Hub will ensure more Australians participate and succeed in tertiary education... 'regardless of background or postcode'.

It is not the existence of the Hub that will widen participation, but what the Hub actually delivers for potential students and current learners. Content-free student support activities may indeed be very useful for the target cohorts, but they will not on their own secure motivations and aspirations for disadvantaged students to get to university. Access can never be 'regardless of background'; it is essentially because of background, not regardless of it, that access is needed. Educational disadvantage and exclusion exist along parameters of difference and inequality which must be recognised in order to address under-representation and increase the overall number of students participating in higher education.

Divided and competing institutions tend to add confusion and fragments the offer for students and this can inhibit the take-up of coherent pathways for students.

At an Australian Universities Accord consultation meeting held at the CUC in Broken Hill earlier this year, it was reported that the lead university was establishing a 'placement centre' within the CUC to address local challenges to placements.

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

By consulting with First Nations people, local communities and local welfare and social services providers.

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?

Most universities have experience in support and teaching of First Nations students and students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and this experience and practice could inform SUSH practices.



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?

SUSHs would be best placed to provide general and place-based services that meet the needs of local communities, e.g., food banks, out of work hours / weekend childcare, printing and copying services, high speed internet, front line support, liaison / referral to university services. It will be critical that SUSH staff are familiar and trained in and about the services offered by various providers and that dedicated SUSH relationship / contact officers are identified within SUSHs and providers. Funding for these new roles should be included in SUSH funding applications. In addition, and with appropriate collaboration between SUSHs and providers, SUSHs could provide support to students on academic probation, particularly in the early stages of their study to provide tertiary literacies support such as study skills, time management, reading and interpreting complex information, information literacy skills, how to complete assessments with attention to academic honesty, and support for academic English.

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

Through local secondary schools reaching both students and their parents, local sporting clubs, shopping centres, and in conjunction with other local events. Information booths and pop-up events in public spaces, e.g., community halls, libraries.

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

See responses to Q1-10 above.

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

The Consultation Paper states that Hubs will be located in areas classified as Major Cities of Australia (RA1) as per the Australian Statistical Geographic Standard (ASGS) Remoteness Areas 3. They will be in outer-metropolitan/peri-urban areas where access to university is limited, and university attainment is low. Like the Regional University Study Hubs Program, SUSHs will be encouraged to co-locate with existing infrastructure, for example public libraries or TAFE campuses, or leverage other appropriate community infrastructure.

Consideration needs to be given to the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) rating plus Australian Bureau of Statistics data - in particular, data on engagement in work and/or study, current and recent study, qualifications, and transitions to work. This ABS data is critical to highlight the future workforce needs and programs that might be appropriate at SUSHs in the future. Another consideration is that University Study Hubs in suburbs would benefit from being within a specified Local Government Area. Any partnership arrangements would require deep community engagement and collaboration so that a SUSH is a sustainable and effective model for the community support to achieve support for higher education and VET.

UniSQ recommends that consideration be given to establishing SUSHs in locations that allow for partnerships with TAFE Queensland, including Acacia Ridge; Alexandra Hills; Browns Plains Bracken Ridge and Woodridge. Further consideration could also be given to place-based locations within the UniSQ catchment areas for Logan, Redlands, Beenleigh, Redbank Plains (Watercress Boulevard); Spring Mountain; Collingwood Park; Springfield Lake and Ripley Valley, some of which could be in conjunction with local sporting clubs. UniSQ is well placed to provide dedicated support services in careers education and learning modules (in particular, at the local schools and in partnership with local TAFEs) at these venues. UniSQ is also well placed to support SUSHs in providing access to enabling/tertiary preparation courses for students from under-represented backgrounds.

We strongly recommend that consideration is given to establishing SUSHs in partnership with [PCYC Queensland](#). PCYC Queensland's mission, 'together we are building safer, healthier communities through youth development', aligns well with UniSQ and supports the aim of providing convenient, wrap-around support for higher education and VET students. Furthermore, PCYC Queensland's three pillars – youth development, crime prevention and community engagement – underpin all that we do. Their programs and activities encourage social cohesion, address whole of community needs



and positively impact local communities. PCYC Queensland states that “approximately 95% of their clubs are in low socio-economic areas, with 60% in the top 50 high needs areas of Queensland”. Consideration could be given to SUSHs being co-located or nearby a PCYC, and to ensuring ready access to local transport options.

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)

Free parking, access to public transport (bus and train stops), childcare.

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?

Please see responses to Q1-13 above.

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 successful track record in the not-for-profit and community-led service provision, good governance structures with clear terms of reference, success in establishing and maintaining relationships with key stakeholders.

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?

Governing bodies should include an independent chair, representatives of the communities, independent representatives with knowledge of the issues facing access and equity in higher education, and representatives of the funding body. In addition, SUSHs should have clear, systematic, fair, and accessible internal complaint management processes. The relationship between the Hub and university complaint and grievances processes and responsibilities should be very clear to students, staff and providers so appropriate processes are followed.

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?

Yes, providing that local voices and representation are based on the actual SUSH and the needs of the local community, and that governing bodies are appropriately constituted to ensure local communities are represented.

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

Provider(s) endorsement and commitment to the aim of establishing SUSHs could be documented as part of the establishment criteria. Maintaining strong collaborative relationships with education providers could be a mandatory criterion for establishing and allocating ongoing funding to a SUSH. Funding for key positions within SUSHs and within providers rather than the additional work required to be a further impost on provider resources.

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

Formal agreements between SUSHs and providers, performance-based agreements for SUSHs.

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.

The body of evidence related to research and practice regarding widening and increasing participation which apply generally could be used to inform the design, development, and implementation of SUSHs.

