



SUBURBAN UNIVERSITY STUDY HUBS

SUBMISSION TO CONSULTATION PAPER

**WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY**



Western Sydney University welcomes the opportunity to provide a detailed response to this Consultation Paper.

For more than three decades, Western Sydney University has been embedded in local communities, driving social, cultural and economic success in our region.

Western Sydney University is deeply committed to addressing socio-economic disadvantage in the communities we serve by providing access to education, particularly to those who face structural barriers to learning. For this reason, we believe universities that have strong connections with local community groups, industry and other tertiary providers as well as robust mechanisms to support students from equity groups are best placed to lead the development and delivery of Suburban University Study Hubs.

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 in their design and operation?

Place-based, stakeholder led approaches to delivering Suburban University Study Hubs will be critical in ensuring communities feel a sense of ownership and alignment with a hub, its direction and services. Central to these approaches is genuine consultation and engagement, delivered in a bespoke manner that reflects the broad, and often complex, needs of community.

Input from a broad range of stakeholders including community, industry and cultural organisations, is vital regarding the best ways to address the educational and employment challenges in specific areas. A one-size-fits-all approach, particularly in culturally diverse regions like Western Sydney, will not work. Local knowledge will help to tailor services that can target existing and emerging skills gaps, labour shortages, and community and cultural barriers to higher education.

Local governance and employment models support the integration of local perspectives in the design and operation of Suburban University Study Hubs. Inviting community leaders to sit on the board or management committee of a local hub will assist in maintaining an ongoing partnership with the community. Where possible locals should be employed at hubs to reinforce that these centres exist to enrich the community.

Western Sydney University has successfully employed these models at its Maldhan Ngurr Ngurra Lithgow Transformation Hub, delivering educational, social and employment outcomes for the community.

Suburban University Study Hubs can also catalyse civic engagement, ensuring people from equity groups are able to engage with the policy and political conversations that impact their lives. For example, Western Sydney University's Centre for Western Sydney model of bringing senior politicians directly to local people affected by the policies they promote has proved highly successful, with forums targeting issues of importance to the community.

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

As the delivery of tertiary education evolves, hubs will need to cater increasingly for lifelong learning. This will include supporting people undertaking hybrid learning (a mix of online and on-campus studies) as well as those seeking to combine accredited microcredentials from both higher education and Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers.

The digital divide has been identified as a significant barrier to participation for many learners in socio-economically disadvantaged localities, particularly those in primary and secondary education. A review panel on the impacts of COVID-19, led by Professor Peter Shergold AC, found that one-in-five students did not have access to a laptop or computer at home in low-socio-economic postcodes¹.

Suburban University Study Hubs must cater for this group, with the potential for drop-in services for those seeking high speed internet sitting alongside as structured study opportunities, such as Higher School Certificate study sessions which have been delivered by Western Sydney University.

¹Fault lines. An independent review into Australia's response to COVID-19. 20 October 2022.

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

Place-based, stakeholder led approaches, that were discussed in question one, are critical to embedding equity in the design of Suburban University Study Hubs.

Additionally, transport disadvantage is a significant barrier for socio-economically disadvantaged groups. Hubs must be located next to well-connected and accessible transport options, in addition to being physically accessible for people with disabilities.

They must also be safe and inclusive spaces, where people at any stage of lifelong learning are able to receive appropriate support in line with their needs. This will also require hubs to be open with extended hours to cater to people who need to balance work and caring responsibilities.

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?

Engagement must reflect the profile of the community, with culturally informed approaches to engagement vital to ensuring diverse voices are captured. Additionally, any governance mechanisms must ensure that they reflect the local profile of the community. Collaboration needs to be embedded and supported with resources to ensure cross-cultural stakeholder engagement.

One example is the successful model of Western Sydney University's Maldhan Ngurr Ngurra Lithgow Transformation Hub, which is governed by steering committee made up predominately of community members and chaired by a senior member of the University. This ensures locals have ownership of the hub and a say in its operation and direction.

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?

Under Western Sydney University's recommended model (see question 16), a local university would lead the community partnership running the hub. However, it would need to demonstrate its ability to collaboratively deliver a broad range of services that are accessible to all learners within the community.

We envisage that using placed-based approaches, including local governance frameworks, would be critical to ensuring strong connections with local providers, campuses and leaders. Options to explore could also include pilot approaches where other providers deliver programs within Suburban University Study Hubs through collaborative partnerships between institutions.

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?

Ultimately, the dedicated support services that are offered by Suburban University Study Hubs must be delivered in a way that addresses the intersectional needs of the community. Programs must be deployed to support both the attraction and retention of students in higher education to ensure maximum impact.

For example, Western Sydney University has established a series of programs across its campuses to support under-represented groups, including alternative pathways to higher education. Instead of creating programs from the ground up, these could be customised, with additional augments that support and cater to the needs of the local community and its learners.

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

Place-based, stakeholder led approaches, that were discussed in question one, are critical to embedding equity in the design of Suburban University Study Hubs.

Additionally, transport disadvantage is a significant barrier for socio-economically disadvantaged groups. Hubs must be located next to well-connected and accessible transport options, in addition to being physically accessible for people with disabilities.

They must also be safe and inclusive spaces, where people at any stage of lifelong learning are able to receive appropriate support in line with their needs. This will also require hubs to be open with extended hours to cater to people who need to balance work and caring responsibilities.

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?

Indigenous Student Support

Western Sydney University prides itself on its University Entry Program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Western Sydney is home to the largest Indigenous population in Australia, and, in 2022, 829 Indigenous students undertook study at the institution, and were provided with a range of support services.

The Badanami Centre for Indigenous Education, which is run on seven campuses, has Indigenous Student Success Officers working intensively with Indigenous students. Services include cultural support, the Tutoring for Success (TFS) Program and information and assistance with scholarships and cadetships.

Support for International Students and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse groups

Many Suburban University Study Hubs will face higher demand for specialised cultural and language services than Regional University Study Hubs. For example, Western Sydney University's Fairfield Connect campus will support a population where 69.7 per cent of residents use a language other than English at home and 18 per cent arrived in Australia in the five years prior to the 2021 census².

Programs which support people in these communities to access education and training opportunities, such as Western Sydney University's Refugee, New & Emerging Communities program are critical in ensuring the impact of the Suburban University Study Hubs model.

Pasifika Achievement to Higher Education (PATHE) is another successful program run by Western Sydney University. Support includes Sessions for Success where students are helped to develop essential skills such as critical thinking and other tools to increase their chances of employment.

Women in STEM Education

The Women in STEM Education (WiSE) Program supports the career development of identifying women studying in the areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) at Western Sydney University.

It reshapes the STEM workforce in the region through a range of activities and initiatives, building empowering networks of women who are enrolled at Western Sydney University through mentoring, employer visits and access to additional support.

Fairfield Connect

In August 2023, Western Sydney University announced Fairfield Connect, which is specifically designed to meet the needs of the Fairfield community in Sydney's west and significantly expand educational and workforce opportunities for locals.

The centre will focus on rapidly upskilling locals through programs including adult literacy, flexible study options and streamlining access to the university's 'The College' program. The College provides intensive support for students who aren't from a traditional learning background, ensuring they can be fast-tracked into university programs that provide them every chance of success regardless of their socio-economic circumstances.

Fairfield Connect will have high tech, state of the art advanced facilities, including computers, videoconferencing, high-speed internet, collaborative learning spaces and concierge-type support services. It will provide career development support, including advice on further education and employment services.

In addition, the centre aims to help boost local industry through entrepreneurial, innovation and launch pad programs. It will be a community facility alongside a teaching and learning centre. It will also serve the important role of outreach to local high schools to give secondary students an early taste of higher education.

²Fairfield City Community Profile, id., 2023

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?

As discussed in question six, several student support services offered by Western Sydney University could be extended to study hubs with specific needs to avoid duplication. These services have been developed and refined over many years and continue to evolve. It would be unnecessary to reinvent the wheel.

In addition, other support services such as existing English language courses and Foundation Studies programs could be offered.

Hubs could also provide career advice and guidance, and support with job matching through local employers and industry placements. On top of this, assistance in developing employability skills would also make an impact.

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

For existing students, hubs should be promoted online at universities and TAFEs. They should also be communicated as part of the supports available during high school outreach programs. Importantly, hubs will need to tap into local community and cultural groups to get the word out.

A highly visible presence, with signage, will also build a familiarity among the community about further education. This visible presence, as the consultation paper notes, is important to demonstrate that further study is an option for locals. In other words, “you can’t be, what you can’t see”.

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

A targeted approach to delivering Suburban University Study Hubs, aligning them with areas that experience significant barriers as well as low attainment, is critical to ensuring that students from under-represented backgrounds can access education.

Hubs have a significant role to play in encouraging and supporting people to transition into tertiary education, and there is wide scope to extend existing enabling and preparation courses into study centres. In particular, there is scope to deploy programs that emphasise the multiple flexible pathways to learning and higher education, in partnership with the high schools, VET providers and the broader higher education sector.

For example, Western Sydney University has delivered pre-access programs to encourage students from underrepresented backgrounds towards university since 2010. This has included partnering with primary schools, high schools and community groups across the region to raise participation levels of students from key equity groups.

A critical enabler of success in these programs is delivery at scale, which the Suburban University Study Hubs supports. For context, Western Sydney University’s pre-access programs cover 80 primary schools, 130 high schools, 8,000 primary school students and 12,000 high school students participating in one or more programs each year across the region.

WHERE WILL THE SUBURBAN UNIVERSITY STUDY HUBS BE LOCATED?

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

If boosting access to education is the primary driver for Suburban University Study Hubs, locations must be assessed based on key demographic indicators that this model looks to address in order to assess and benchmark impact. These include Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas, educational attainment, English proficiency, median household income and engagement in employment, education and training. Areas exhibiting below national average levels of university degree attainment should also be considered.

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)

Proximity to social infrastructure is a key enabler for the model's success, in particular:

- Childcare centres
- Creative spaces: performance and maker spaces
- Libraries
- Community centres
- Mental health 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?

One of the advantages of Suburban University Study Hubs is their ability to provide a physical space to access existing or expanded educational offerings. High-speed digital services, computers, and other equipment such as desk space and printers can assist learners who face a digital divide at home and are complementary in nature to other educational offerings.

Governance models that support collaboration with other providers could also provide an opportunity for cross-institutional offerings that more holistically meet the needs of students. This could potentially involve blended qualifications from different providers, such as universities and TAFEs.

WHO CAN APPLY?

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?

Skills

- Proven ability in establishing and maintaining partnerships with a wide network of community groups, industry and other school and tertiary institutions (higher education and VET).
- Proven ability to support students, particularly those who experience additional barriers to learning, through a range of relevant services.

Services

Student/learner course related

- Track record of providing academic and course support, including running tutorials and study groups.
- Experience in providing high speed and accessible digital services and support.

Student/learner support and pastoral care

- Proven experience and understanding in delivering services and support to different cultures and communities in respectful and safe ways.
- Experience in navigating other barriers to further education are needed including dealing with social issues (first in family to attend, low levels of confidence in navigating new environments), psychological issues (low self-efficacy or a feeling of “imposter syndrome”) and family expectations.
- Proven ability to deliver bridging courses, alternative pathways to tertiary education, and Foundational Skills courses.
- A track record in assisting learners to navigate tertiary institutions, liaising with universities, providing advice on enrolments, access to scholarships and programs.

Student/learner career and employment

- Career advice/guidance and experience in job matching and industry placements.
- Experience in delivering/expanding employability skills such as time management, communication, critical thinking and resilience.

Attributes

- Integrity
- Commitment to addressing social-economic disadvantage and expanding educational pathways.

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?

While community-based organisations have a critical role to play in the effectiveness of Suburban University Study Hubs, it is vital that a single university is designated as the lead organisation to deliver each hub. The higher education sector has the resources to deliver these models at scale, as well as longstanding expertise and experience in delivering transformative outcomes through access to education.

To ensure that these hubs reflect the needs of the community, they must be delivered in collaboration with other providers, industry and, most importantly, community. To support this, each suburban study hub should be governed by an independent board of leaders reflecting the breadth of the community. This would provide the lead university with critical insights which will support the mobilisation of partnerships and resources to meet the needs of the community.

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?

Universities should be eligible to operate multiple hubs, provided they can demonstrate their genuine connection to local community and their ability to deliver impact.

For example, there are several locations in Western Sydney that may be viewed as priority areas if the indicators highlighted in question 12 were considered. Western Sydney University has longstanding connections with each of these locations and would be better placed to both develop the governance infrastructure required as well as deliver a hub which addresses the needs of the local community, when compared to other institutions.

WHAT WILL THE SUBURBAN UNIVERSITY STUDY HUBS PROGRAM FUND?

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

As we identified in our response to the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper, the nature of further education continues to undergo seismic change. This includes the development of new innovative and disruptive models of education, microcredentials and industry-based and partnered training.

In the regional context, Western Sydney's economic transformation with the construction of the Western Sydney Airport and the Bradfield precinct will further accelerate opportunities for innovation and world leading industry attraction and development.

Study hubs are the perfect vehicle to encourage further collaboration between not only universities but TAFE and industry partners.

Western Sydney University is leading on new education models that specifically target in-demand skills such as the NSW TAFE Institutes of Applied Technology initiative, the New Education and Training Model (NETM), and the NUW Alliance's 'Engineering Plus' program.

To meet not only the construction phase but demand for high-skilled jobs in areas such as advanced manufacturing, a study hub could help support local communities to upskill for these opportunities through a mix of tertiary and industry-based learning, including microcredentials.

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

It is important that Suburban University Study Hubs take a holistic approach to impact, with a focus that goes beyond educational outcomes and encompasses broader participation and wellbeing for learners and the wider community. The lead University organisation must prioritise partnerships as a significant driver of impact and prioritise the activation of these spaces by other organisations as well as their own.

Social and community partnerships should feature prominently in delivery models, with an emphasis on issues that matter to the community and services which provide wrap-around support for learners. Industry partnerships are also critical, providing access to work integrated learning opportunities and broader career guidance. Collaborations which cut across educational silos are also critical and must consider the local population's distinct needs and aspirations.

While metrics for measuring partnerships and their ongoing impact must be contained within the KPIs for the establishment and delivery of Suburban University Study Hubs, it should be acknowledged that these are often resource intensive and can be long-term endeavours. An impact measurement model regarding these partnerships is critical, to ensure that they are delivering genuine outcomes for the community.

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 Uni Hub Spencer Gulf in South Australia has students enrolled in locally supported workforce degrees or undertaking bridging or school-based pathway courses into these degrees³.

By identifying skill shortages in particular areas, suburban study hubs can work with tertiary partners to deliver qualifications that will help address areas of workforce shortage by delivering bespoke programs that build up skills in a local regions to address gaps.

Western Sydney University is available to provide additional detail as required in support of this submission.

³ *New Regional University Centre opens. Media release. <https://www.education.gov.au/newsroom/articles/new-regional-university-centre-opens>. Accessed September 2023.*

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