

Country Universities Centre response to: Consultation Paper on the reallocation of Commonwealth Supported places for enabling, sub-bachelor and post-graduate courses

The Country Universities Centre (CUC) supports the initiative of the Government to review the allocation of enabling, sub-bachelor and post-graduate places, and encourages the Department to consider geography and profile of commencing students in allocating these places.

Background

The CUC is a network of community owned regional study hubs (RSH) across NSW. In 2019, the CUC has three operational Centres, in Cooma, Broken Hill and Goulburn, with a further five sites under construction (Figure 1). The Centres offer campus-like facilities to any student studying at an Australian university. The Centres offer high speed internet (100 mbps symmetrical), video-conferencing facilities, computers and printing; as well as tutorial spaces, and areas for social collaboration. Beyond the facilities, the CUC staff offer students' academic, administrative and pastoral support. The CUC model supports students in participating communities studying any degree at any university.

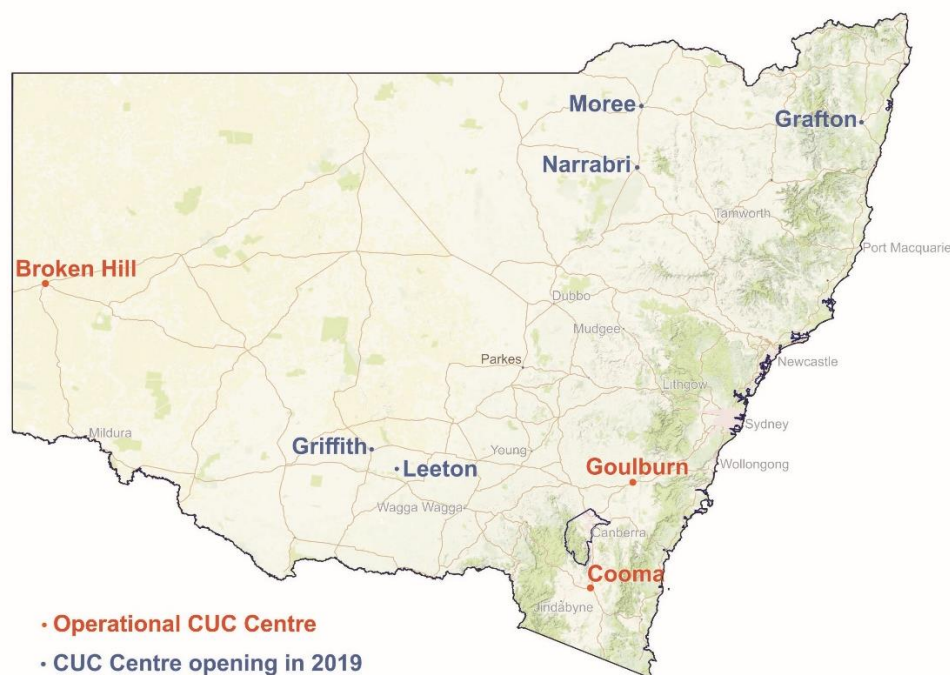


Figure 1 Location of CUC Centres

Regional student participation in higher education

Regional study hubs are an emerging tool in assisting regional students to participate, and be successful, in higher education. Regional and remote Australians hold Bachelor degrees at approximately half the rate of metropolitan Australia. In 2018, 22.7% of people aged 25 - 34 years in regional or remote Australia had obtained a Bachelor degree or higher, compared to 44.6% in metropolitan areas (Figure 2 ABS 2018). Following the 2008 review by Bradley et al., the Federal Government set a target of 40% of all Australians aged 25 – 34 years to hold a Bachelor degree by 2025. This target is required to ensure that Australia remains internationally competitive, and the workforce are prepared for the growing knowledge economy. In 2018, this target has been exceeded in metropolitan areas, but remains a distant goal for regional areas.

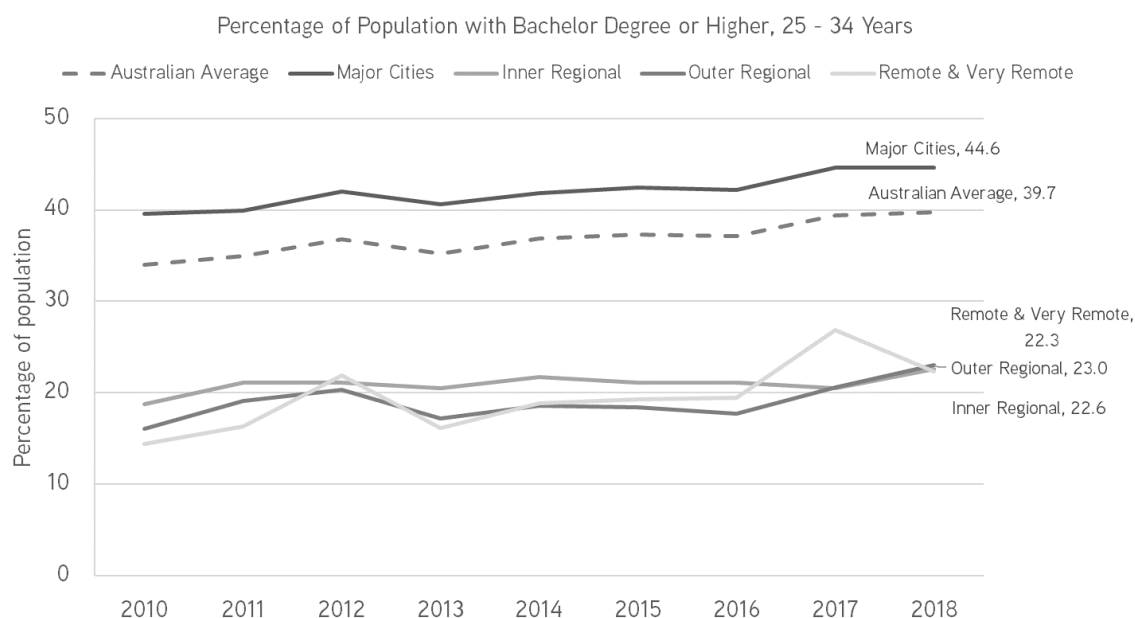


Figure 2 Percentage of Population with Bachelor Degree or Higher, Age 25 – 34 years (ABS 2018)

Profile of CUC Students

In 2018, there were 292 students registered with the CUC, of whom 67% were studying undergraduate degrees, 11% enabling courses and 22% postgraduate degrees. Within the CUC student cohort, 98% of students are classified as regional or remote, with the remaining 2% usually comprising of metropolitan students on placement in the area, such as medical students. The CUC cohort consists of predominantly non-traditional students, including:

- 75% of students over 25 years of age
- 52% studying part-time
- 98% regional or remote

- 98% low or medium SES
- 65% entering study through non-ATAR pathways
- Over half of the CUC cohort is the first in their family to attend or complete higher education

The above student characteristics have poorer outcomes than metropolitan students at each of the benchmarks for Bachelor attainment (acceptance of university offer, first-year attrition and completion of degree). Additionally, belonging to multiple equity groups has a compounding effect on higher education completion rates: the more 'at-risk' groups to which a student belongs, the lower the completion rate for a student becomes. For example, completion rates of regional and remote students, who were over 25 years old and studying part-time, dropped to 43.9% compared to full-time metropolitan students, who had a completion rate of 78.7% (Edwards & McMillian 2015). These students in regional areas require additional support to be successful in higher education.

Mature aged career advice, and advice on pathways into university

Regional students are more likely to be over 25 and studying part-time than their metropolitan counterparts (Figure 3). The Department of Education and Training report on *Improving retention, completion and success in higher education* (2018) highlighted the difficulties that mature-aged students encounter in accessing the advice necessary to make informed decisions about which higher education path best suits their aspirations. Lack of advice, and consequent inappropriate choices, adds to the risks of attrition for this group.

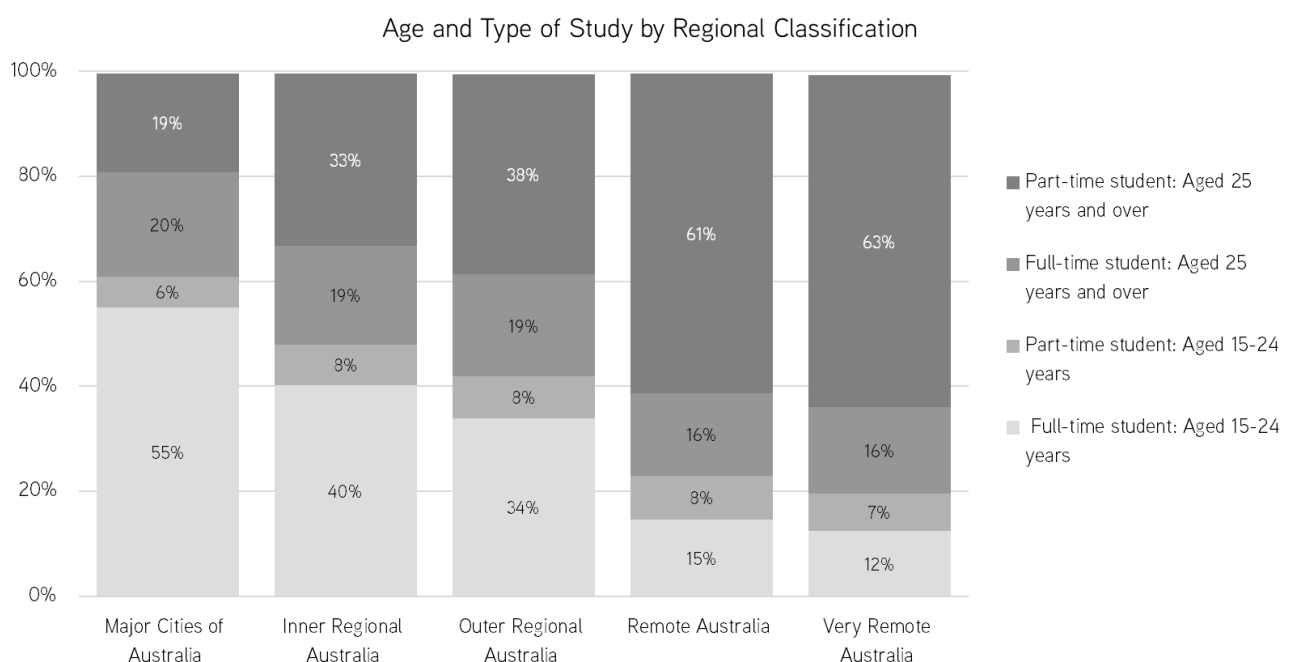


Figure 3 Age and type of study by regional classification (ABS 2016)

Approximately two-thirds of the CUC student cohort enter study through pathways other than direct ATAR entry. Across Australia, students from regional areas are less likely to follow traditional pathways directly from high school to university (Cassells et al. 2017).

The CUC staff are commonly asked to provide career advice, assistance in selecting the right degree, or finding pathways into study. This advice needs to be customised to local area, as often the desired result is to be able to upskill for a better career in the local area. Typical career advice might include a student, alongside Centre support staff:

- considering the location that the student would like to work in;
- looking at job advertisements in the region to get an understanding of job prospects for potential careers;
- working backwards from there to understand what qualifications may be required; before
- looking at potential pathways to enter study.

There is demand for career advice from both mature age students, and school leavers who may not have received their ATAR preferences, who need more assistance understanding pathways and options. This advice may include highlighting the advantages of diploma pathways or nested degrees.

The CUC's role around providing advice for study pathways and course selection in regional areas should be cultivated, ensuring potential students select the best enabling or sub-bachelor place for their circumstances.

Integration of study and work in regional communities

The CUC aims to support workforce pathways in regional communities, with a focus on areas of local demand such as health and education. The CUC supports students through finding pathways into study, selecting appropriate degrees, academic and administrative support during their study, integration into local practical placements or internships, and fostering local academic and professional networks.

Regional study hubs like ours are a resource that may be used to ensure that enabling places are integrated into pathways to local industry and workforces.

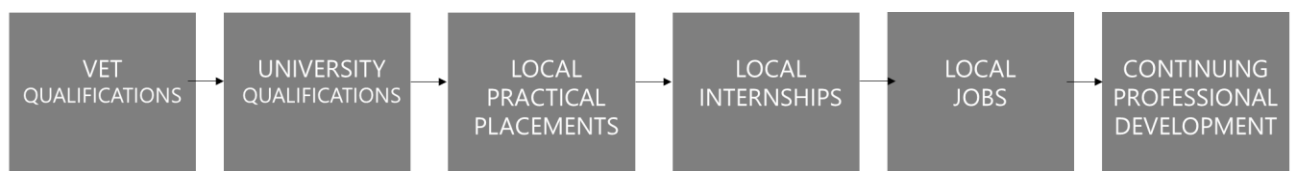


Figure 4 Workforce pathways considered by the CUC

Allocation of enabling places based upon geography and profile of student characteristics

Considering regional classification of students when allocating enabling places will foster pathways and opportunities for these students to enter higher education. This will be a powerful resource in working toward achieving the Federal Government target of 40% Bachelor attainment rates. The student support, learning community and facilities of the CUC centres and regional study hubs will increase the likelihood of retention and success of these students (Davis & Taylor 2019).

Through the Federal Government Regional Study Hubs program, RSHs were allocated 11.5 CSP places, to be dedicated to universities in partnership with the regional study hub. **The CUC encourages a similar scheme for enabling and sub-bachelor places, with enabling places allocated to regional study hubs. This will create meaningful pathways into higher education for regional students.**

Postgraduate study

Within NSW, people in regional and remote areas attain postgraduate qualifications at approximately half the level of metropolitan residents (3.02% compared to 7.0%). Approximately 22% of the CUC student are studying at a postgraduate level. **Consideration of geography (regional classification) in allocating Commonwealth Supported Places could assist in improving postgraduate attainment for regional communities. Allocation of postgraduate CSP places to regional study hubs could stimulate further discussions between RSHs and universities to financially support the RSH model.**

Currently the CUC is funded through a combination of Federal, State and Local Governments, corporate sponsorship, and university partnerships. **The long-term vision of the CUC is to transition away from government funding, towards a sustainable funding model supported by Australian universities.** The Department can assist through sensible policy design, thereby incentivising universities to increase engagement with Regional Study Hubs. Each of the successful recipients of the Federal Government RSH Program Funding in 2018 were allocated 11.5 commonwealth supported places, increasing to 32 places over 4 years. The allocation of these places has encouraged meaningful discussions with universities, and potential funding arrangements. We encourage the Department to recommend similar policy positions in the future.

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)(2018). *Education and Work, Australia, May 2018*. Retrieved from: <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/6227.0May%202018?OpenDocument>

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016). *Census 2016*. Retrieved from: <https://auth.censusdata.abs.gov.au/webapi/jsf/dataCatalogueExplorer.xhtml>.

Cassells R., Dockery M., Duncan A., Gao G. & Seymore R (2017). 'Educate Fair Australia?: Education Inequality in Australia', Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre, Focus on the States Series, Issue No. 5, June 2017.

Davis, M., & Taylor D. (2019) Regional Study Hubs: Increasing Student Engagement to Support Regional Students Facing High First-Year Attrition Risk Factors, CUC Final Report

Department of Education and Training (DET) (2018a). Final Report - Improving Retention, Completion And Success In Higher Education, Retrieved from <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/50816>.