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Chair
Australian Universities Accord Panel
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14 December 2022

RE: UNI HUB SPENCER GULF

Dear Prof O'Kane,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback to the Review of Australia's Higher Education System.

Uni Hub Spencer Gulf is a local not-for-profit organisation established by the civic leaders of our region in 2017 to help 'grow our own' skilled workforce and help overcome the long-term market failure of tertiary education in our region.

Uni Hub supports regional students to access tertiary education without having to leave their community, operating study centres in partnership with the Commonwealth's 'Regional university Centre' program and Local Councils in Port Pirie, Port Augusta, Kadina, Port Lincoln and Roxby Downs.

An additional, but central focus of Uni Hub's operation is brokering partnerships with universities and tertiary education providers who are willing to support local 'blended' delivery of qualifications that explicitly help address the region's professional workforce shortages – including nursing, teaching, engineering, allied health, business and accounting.

Well over 200 students currently utilise Uni Hub services across our region, studying a range of diploma, degree and graduate qualifications, professional development short-courses or a school-based or foundational pathway into our 'workforce' qualifications.

Whilst this number of students may seem insignificant and unviable in the context of a university or capital city context, even a relatively small number of local graduates has a substantial impact for regional communities, with flow-on benefits not only to our skilled workforce, but also to our wider regional economic and community capacity.

The majority of students supported through Uni Hub are 'first-in-family' to attend university. Without the local assistance provided by Uni Hub, most would not be studying and would not otherwise have the financial means, confidence or social support mechanisms to relocate to Adelaide or study online unsupported from home.

Uni Hub is not just providing an alternative for country students already on a university pathway, but is 'growing the pie' by encouraging and supporting students who never thought university or a professional career was an option for them.

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In addition to providing physical study centre facilities, Uni Hub also invests significant resources and effort into local industry and school engagement to develop a strong pipeline of students into our workforce qualifications, including opportunities for school-leavers and upskilling or reskilling existing workers.

This wider engagement effort is funded through a combination of university fee-sharing for supported 'workforce' qualifications, along with industry sponsorship, community donations and a range of opportunistic grants.

Whilst the barriers for regional students to participate and succeed at university are well documented in the Halsey¹ and Napthine² reports, South Australia's unique geography and highly urbanised population adds another layer of challenge that impacts on the provision of higher education and fewer opportunities for transition to university for regional students³.

Unlike the eastern states, South Australia does not have any regional universities, nor any large regional population centres. Across Australia there are 30 regional communities with a population over 30,000 people. None are in South Australia.

Despite their status as 'regional', all three South Australian public universities are located in Adelaide and whilst all three have a form of outreach or presence in some regional centres they are generally limited in scope, support and service, with the main student focus and decision-making resting within the capital city.

This has manifested in a persistently low level of aspiration and engagement with higher education which has impacted both skilled workforce and community capacity.

Whilst the region is on par with the nation in terms of vocational level qualifications, the 2021 census⁴ revealed a significant gap in higher education.

Whilst over 26% of Australians have completed a Bachelor degree or higher, this is only 9% in our SA regions. More alarmingly, despite ubiquitous on-line access to higher education, only 5% in our region are currently studying at university, compared to just over 15% nationally.

Academic literature⁵ and local industry data⁶ point to two key factors underpinning this:

Firstly, the historic lack of access to university in regional SA, combined with the high financial and social costs of having to relocate to the city, has ingrained for many in our community the belief that a university education and professional career is out of reach. A lack of confidence or ability to study online from home, particularly for first in family students, compounds this belief. High socio-economic disadvantage, intergenerational unemployment and low internet access at home in regional centres like Port Pirie & Port Augusta adds further challenges.

¹ Halsey J (2018) Independent Review into Regional Rural and Remote Education – Final Report; Commonwealth of Australia

² Napthine D (2019) National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy – Final Report. Commonwealth of Australia

³ King S, Stone C, Ronan C (2022), Investigating transitions to university from regional South Australian high schools. University of South Australia, The University of Newcastle, NCSEHE, Curtin University; Country Universities Centre.

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022). Census 2021, Community Profile SA3, South Australia. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, ACT

⁵ King S, Stone C, Ronan C (2022), Investigating transitions to university from regional South Australian high schools. University of South Australia, The University of Newcastle, NCSEHE, Curtin University; Country Universities Centre.

⁶ Uni Hub Spencer Gulf (2019) Port Pirie and Port Augusta Industry Skills Analysis and; Uni Hub Spencer Gulf (2022) Regional Partnerships Pool Program Phase 1 Community Consultation

Secondly, low aspiration is further exacerbated by low value placed on a university education in many of our communities⁷. The number of parents, particularly fathers, with a university degree is extremely low across regional SA, more so than in other states. This parental influence away from higher education is then further perpetuated by:

- 1) a lack of locally relevant career advice provided within schools;
- 2) irrelevant and uncoordinated marketing and outreach visits by universities themselves;
- 3) increasingly complex and confusing pathways between school-VET-university-work;
- 4) low visibility of the range of graduate career opportunities actually available in the region and;
- 5) a lack of broader awareness of the locally supported university study that is now available through RUC's like Uni Hub Spencer Gulf.

Regional SA is already starting from a low base and with future jobs increasingly requiring more highly-skilled and university qualified individuals⁸ there is an increasingly urgent need for any higher education reform to pay particular attention to supporting and financing initiatives that addresses this market failure in regions and develops our future workforce capacity.

Given the significant amount of public investment in higher education in Australia, the need for an over-arching, national policy and regulatory framework is certainly appreciated. However, consideration also needs to be given to embedding flexibility to respond to particular geographical or demographic challenges and provide support for different operating models and more nuanced or place-based initiatives.

This 'placed-based' approach recognises that 'one size fits all', 'short-term', 'top-down' or institution led approaches are often inappropriate and local communities are themselves central to developing solutions that generally leverage additional resources, generate efficiencies and develop collaborations that would otherwise not occur,

The Commonwealth's 'Regional University Centre' program is a striking example demonstrating how a relatively small government investment (within the context of the higher education budget), can produce substantial and in some cases, transformational outcomes for many regional and rural communities.

The financial and psychological significance of bi-partisan support for continuation of the RUC program and funding for core operation of study centres cannot be overstated and must be a key consideration as part of the Accord Panel's review.

As the program has expanded however, different operating models are also emerging. Whilst these differences reflect the particular needs of each local community, consideration needs to be given to additional policy or funding arrangements that support these differences.

For example, the operating model of Uni Hub Spencer Gulf is based primarily on fee-sharing partnerships with universities to support local delivery of qualifications to meet key regional workforce shortages.

⁷ King S, Stone C, Ronan C (2022), Investigating transitions to university from regional South Australian high schools. University of South Australia, The University of Newcastle, NCSEHE, Curtin University; Country Universities Centre.

⁸ Houghton K (2019) The Future of Regional Jobs, The Regional Australia Institute, Canberra

The challenge for RUC's like Uni Hub is having access to financial incentives or regulatory tools that entice universities to also invest their own resources and provide a financial recompense to the RUC to support delivery of qualifications in the thin, highly dispersed, commercially unviable market that exists in regional South Australia.

With these particular equity and workforce challenges in mind, Uni Hub Spencer Gulf offers the following broad recommendations to the Panel, in order of significance:

- 1. Embedding the RUC program and ongoing funding for core operation of study centres.**
- 2. Providing a guaranteed Commonwealth Supported Place for all RUC supported students enrolled in a 'workforce' qualification through a formal university fee-sharing partnership.**
- 3. Encourage all universities to financially contribute to the regional outreach and pastoral care provided to students who utilise local RUC services.**
- 4. Encourage universities to actively promote and connect their regional 'online' students to a local RUC (where available).**

We look forward to the opportunity for further input as the Accord Panel's review progresses.

For additional information or to arrange a time for further discussion, please contact me on mobile: [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely



Anita Kuss
Chief Executive Officer