

11 April, 2023

Australian Universities Accord Panel
Department of Education
GPO Box 9880
Canberra, ACT, 2601

RE: Submission in response to Universities Accord Discussion Paper

CUC Balonne would like to present some of the successes it has experienced since inception as part of a solution to the following questions posed in the Universities Accord Discussion Paper:

- **Q16** What practical barriers are inhibiting lifelong learning, and how can they be fixed?
- **Q17** How should better alignment and connection across Australia's tertiary education system be achieved?
- **Q30** How can governments, institutions and employers assist students, widen opportunities and remove barriers to higher education?
- **Q32** How can best practice learning and teaching for students from under-represented groups be embedded across the higher education system, including the use of remote learning?
- **Q33** What changes to funding and regulatory settings would enable providers to better support students from under-represented groups in higher education?

CUC Balonne is a not-for-profit company governed by a board of nine directors representing community interests in education, training and employment. CUC Balonne is affiliated with the Country Universities Centre (CUC) network of Regional University Centres (RUC) across NSW, Queensland, and Victoria.

CUC Balonne has campuses in St George (population 3000, and geographically remote) and Dirranbandi (population 600, and geographically very remote) and therefore operates as a pilot model example for other small population, remote communities in Australia to follow. It has supported over 180 students since inception in 2021. Students who utilise CUC Balonne receive face-to-face academic support, study spaces, exam support, access to high-speed internet and technology, wellbeing support, and a local learning community of other students. CUC Balonne employs a Centre Manager, Learning Skills Advisor, First Nations Community Engagement and Support Coordinator, and Administration Assistant.

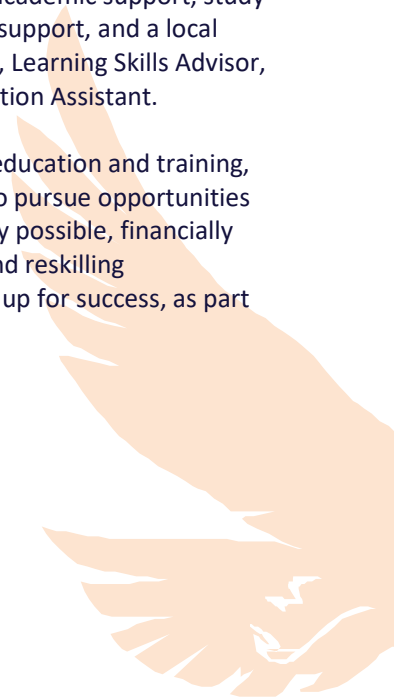
Our mission is to build the aspirations of our community through the power of education and training, by changing lives one student at a time. Key objectives of the organisation are to pursue opportunities that close the gap with pathway options into education and training; make study possible, financially viable and accessible; provide options to stay in the region, provide upskilling and reskilling opportunities for the local workforce, and to learn on country; and set students up for success, as part of a supportive, encouraging, and inclusive learning community.

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Please see attached a snapshot of the cohort that is supported by CUC Balonne. It is important to point out that the demographics of students who utilise the Centre are students who fall into a number of categories associated with low access and participation, and high attrition, including, but not limited to:

- Regional, rural and remote
- External mode of study
- Part-time study
- First in Family
- Low SES

Many students in CUC Balonne individually fit multiple above categories, creating a complex student cohort for the Centre.

The Country Universities Centre model is designed to help these students' overcome barriers through creating equitable opportunities of access and success in regional, rural and remote areas.

There is no TAFE campus in the Balonne Shire, so CUC Balonne supports Vocational Education and Training (VET) pathways by responding to individual enquiries, collaborating directly with local schools and employers, participation in careers days, and engaging with training providers to coordinate the delivery of accredited and non-accredited courses locally. CUC Balonne is not a Registered Training Organisation and is complementary to VET providers by providing wrap around student support for local based delivery.

In the absence of local public VET training providers or services, the schools, CUC Balonne and employers have navigated the VET system through necessity to find the best solution for their students and employees. COVID restrictions created opportunities for increased availability of online delivery options. However, entry into VET pathways is resource intensive and delivery mechanisms are often a negotiated compromise of services compared to what is available to students where VET providers are locally present. Regional University Centres in communities without a TAFE campus or alternative comparable Registered Training Organisation are uniquely poised to present solutions and as such CUC Balonne is conducting a study to better understand how to best facilitate vocational education.

In Semester 2, 2022, 8% of CUC Balonne's students identified as having Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Heritage. The 2021 ABS census data indicates that 20.5% of the population in the Balonne Shire identifies as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island people. Across the Country Universities Centre Network participation rates tend to be in line with the proportion of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people in the community.

This is a large proportion of the population in the Balonne region and is recognised as a deviation from other CUC location trends and CUC Balonne has identified an issue that requires attention and additional resources.

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According to the Australian Assessment and Reporting Authority My School data St George state High School had 53% of its student cohort identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. This makes the First Nations Community Engagement and Support Coordinator position even more important when it comes to the transition from school into further education or training.

The employee in this position started on 5 December 2022 and has been making headway to increase Centre inclusivity, improve connection with Elders and Indigenous service providers, planning outreach activities, and exploring how to implement a pre-study mentoring project to build self-efficacy. It is the hope of CUC Balonne to pilot this position to gather evidence of the program's success in offering supports to, and encouraging First Nations students to study on country.

Furthermore, the general population of the Balonne region has incredibly low literacy rates including digital literacy. Future programs that target improvement from a foundational literacy level is necessary to contribute to a holistic approach to improving educational outcomes across the region.

Recommendations

- Support the RUCs through baseline funding to ensure continuity instead of as a program that could be abolished in the future.
- Utilise RUCs in rural and remote locations to improve access to VET participation in low population models to create pathways into higher education.
- Utilise the RUCs in locations where there are underrepresented groups to help provide targeted services that increase equitable access to, and success in, education.
- Explore utilisation of RUCs in remote and very remote locations to support Distance Education to create better education outcomes and pipeline of students into tertiary education.

The aim of this submission has been to provide an overview of a program operating successfully and nimble enough to adapt to the community needs and challenges. CUC Balonne has been very well received by the local community and needs to be recognised as a potential solution for other remote communities like ours.

Sincerely,



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Chair, CUC Balonne
Enc.

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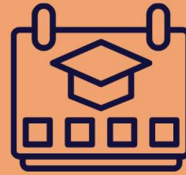
CUC Balonne Students

SEMESTER 1, 2023



184

students supported
since opening



75

students supported
in Semester 2 2022



49%

are the first in their
family to study

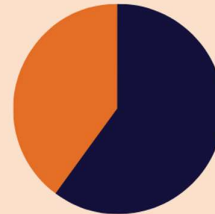
27



different
institutions

44%

study
full
time



56%

study
part
time

38%

Health

23%

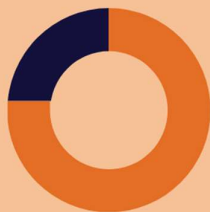
Education

9%

Agriculture
& Rural
Sciences

TOP Areas of
Study

10%
male



90%
female



8%

Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander
heritage

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