

11 April 2023

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

Dear Professor O’Kane and the Australian Universities Accord Panel

This submission is made on behalf of the Geraldton Universities Centre (GUC) as a response to the Australian University Accord Discussion Paper.

GUC was the original Regional University Centre and has been providing academic, administrative and pastoral support, in purpose-built facilities, for more than 20 years in the Mid West of Western Australia. Around 300 local students a year are supported, many meeting multiple equity criteria alongside living in regional, rural or remote (RRR) Australia. Around 8% of our students are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people.

GUC has actively contributed to the University Accord submission from the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA). We fully endorse the recommendations of that submission as they pertain to the *Creating Opportunity for All Australians* section of the Accord Discussion Paper.

Further we actively support the four guiding principles presented by SPERA to enable larger cohorts of RRR students to aspire to, access and complete higher education in the regions:

- Aspiration Raising Program for all students regardless of their location
- Free, universal enabling programs to provide RRR students with access to multiple higher education options
- Local higher education support delivered on country
- Community led and owned solutions, acknowledging that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work across Australia.

Having worked in a range of partnerships over the years with universities under varying Commonwealth funding models, GUC offers a further perspective below on what is required to maintain the larger campus model Regional University Centre’s like GUC and provide incentives in the higher education system to allow for third party partnership arrangement.

Why is this important?

The Commonwealth’s Regional University Centre (RUC) program has been an attempt to support regional, rural and remote students at scale across Australia. It does so however within very thin markets in each community served. A range of models have developed under the scheme, reflective of the vast array of regional communities throughout Australia.

The campus model RUC description has been coined to describe larger centres that provide not only the study hub facilities and general student supports of smaller RUCs, but also face-to-face, academically supported courses locally, including a focus of pathways. Fee-sharing partnerships with universities (based on the equivalent full time student load or EFTSL), to support local delivery of qualifications, is key to this model.

Campus model RUCs providing this additional academic support are a particularly important equity measure in regional WA and SA where regional universities do not exist. Geraldton for example has a population of 40,000. Many regional cities with this level of population in Eastern States support satellite campuses of regionally based universities.

GUC brief case study

Commencing operations in 2002, GUC restructured in 2010 to a community-based model of governance committed to meeting the needs of the community. Recruiting students to courses that would address local workforce need, GUC pioneered an innovative model of supplying face-to-face, course specific academic support to these cohorts of local students enrolled in partner university's online courses. GUC sources tutors from local industry - current professionals to foster the growth and development of future professionals for the Geraldton community to thrive.

This support for students in Nursing, Education, Psychology, Social Work, Accounting, Business, Engineering and Environmental Science has seen GUC:

- Produce **more than 500 graduates** since inception to supply a professional workforce for Geraldton's schools, hospitals, community agencies and businesses.
- With a strategic focus on Aboriginal student support, 6% of these graduates have been Aboriginal, providing inspiration and role models for future Indigenous students.
- Further, in the past 10 years, more than 280 local students have been supported in bridging programs to achieve university entrance, a life changing opportunity for individuals and the community.

An efficient model

Under the demand driven system, prior to the caps on Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs), this success was achieved without the need for any additional funding or allocation of CSP places through an RUC program. The one allocation per student to a strategically aligned University partner was shared with us to deliver these outcomes on the ground. **A clear demonstration of the power of demand driven funding.**

It is worth stating that CQUniversity and the University of Southern Queensland have been long term partners in this space. I note recent analysis by Emeritus Professor Alan Pettigrew¹, showing these universities are doing much of the heavy lifting (among only a quarter of Australia's Universities) for the provision of university education for equity students, yet they still have valued the support we are giving these students to succeed and been prepared to share funding where it is already tight to support this.

¹An analysis of Institution Student Equity Performance Data 2011 to 2021, Emeritus Professor Alan Pettigrew presented at the UTS Student Equity Forum, 27 March 2023

What is needed - recommendations

(This information is of particular relevance to Qu 33 of the Accord Discussion paper – What changes to funding and regulatory settings would enable providers to better support students from under-represented groups in higher education?)

GUC has been through many iterations of Government funding in our 20 years of operation. Inadvertent effects of altered funding and policies for the sector have placed GUC in precarious financial positions from time to time throughout the journey. Each time we have had to pivot, make pleas to government for assistance or alter financial arrangements with partners to survive.

These three recommendations below are key to a campus model RUCs survival so we can continue to provide the important work we do for students in our communities.

Reinstatement of Demand Driven Funding

There is no opportunity for third partner shared funding arrangements possible if the student place does not receive guaranteed funding by the Commonwealth. There is simply nothing to be shared! Demand driven funding saw the biggest rise in equity student enrolments and would be GUC's preferred position for the Australian Higher Education system. We appreciate budget concerns may take this off the table, however an absolute minimum starting point **must** be to guarantee CSPs for all equity students (low SES, RRR, Indigenous and students with a disability).

To suggest any target to increase student numbers in this space without it would not be achievable.

Ongoing Funding of the RUC program

The RUC program should be embedded in the Higher Education legislative framework and ongoing funding for Centres guaranteed for core operations to provide organisational, student and community certainty of this vital ongoing support. This funding for RUCs must take into consideration models of operation and flexibility to respond to particular geographical or demographic challenges. We reiterate that one size does not fit all across Australia.

Further, should demand driven funding not be a feature of policy emanating from the Accord, the option for ongoing CSPs for campus model RUCs to allocate to university partners (as is currently provided) must be at the very least maintained.

Regional loading and access to equity funding

Regional loading is critical to address the imbalance in the costs of providing higher education in thin regional markets. This loading should more adequately reflect the very real costs incurred by regional universities and indeed RUCs.

It has also been an important funding source for GUC, with 100% of the regional loading allocated to our university partners for their students studying through us passed on to the Centre as part of our funding agreements.

Under the Jobs Ready Graduate Package, it is planned that regional loading be absorbed into an overall loading via the Indigenous Regional and Low SES Attainment fund (IRLSAF) at the 2023.

This is one of the classic cases of inadvertent effects on third parties of changes in policy. With a lack of transparency over what makes up the various components of this IRLSAF loading, it makes it far more difficult for innovative arrangements to be funded in third party agreement to better cater for regional student needs in their community.

Should RUCs be embedded in legislation, it may be possible for regional loading to be funded directly to RUCs. This may also be the case for access to other equity funding sources like enabling loading, the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme or aspiration and outreach funding through HEPPP/IRLSAF. If it were possible, real benefits could be achieved on the ground in the very locations where regional students are studying. The recent inclusion of a Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program is a good example of providing access for RUCs for aspiration and outreach activity but \$7million over 4 years for the whole of Australia was never going to be adequate.

We welcome any visit, follow up or questions to this response.

Yours sincerely



Natalie Nelmes
Director