

11 April 2023

Professor Mary O’Kane AC  
Chair  
Australian Universities Accord Panel  
Department of Education  
GPO Box 9880  
Canberra  
ACT 2601

Dear Chair O’Kane

### Submission to Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper

I write to you on behalf of the six local governments (Balonne, Bulloo, Maranoa, Murweh, Paroo and Quilpie) that form the South West Queensland Regional Organisation of Councils (SWQROC) <https://www.swqroc.com.au/>. As an organisation committed to growing the potential of our region, we welcome the opportunity to highlight some key points relevant to the themes presented in the Discussion Paper’s Terms of Reference (ToR).

#### *TOR 2: Access and opportunity*

As noted in the 2018 Final Report: *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* Chaired by Dr John Halsey, Emeritus Professor from Flinders University, “the key challenge for regional, rural and remote education is ensuring, regardless of location or circumstances, that every young person has access to high quality schooling and opportunities” (2018, p. 6).

For regional, rural and remote communities such as those in South West Queensland, this challenge has historically been significant with various studies pointing to the fact that students located in regional, rural and remote locations often lag well behind their counterparts in metropolitan areas. In relation to higher education, “the proportion of regional students in the university undergraduate population has remained relatively unchanged for over 20 years, at 19.6 per cent in 2019 (Koshy, 2020) compared with 19.2 per cent in 1997 (Department of Education, 2017). Overall, Year 12 regional students have lower achievement levels than Year 12 metropolitan students and lower rates of transition to university (Cardak et al., 2017), leading the Productivity Commission (2019) to conclude that children growing up in regional or remote areas continue to be much less likely to attend university even though they may have the same academic ability as their metropolitan peers”.<sup>1</sup>

For regional, rural and remote students, going to university frequently involves moving away from important home, family and community connections to forge new connections in unfamiliar environments. This is a daunting prospect discouraging many from considering university as an option. Further, “the challenges for higher education students who study online, remotely from their university, are well documented and include feelings of isolation, lack of dedicated study times and spaces, problems communicating with teachers and other students, poor course design,

<sup>1</sup> Stone, C., King, S., & Ronan, C. (2022). Taking university to the students: Forging connections and inclusion through Regional University Centres (RUCs). A practice report. *Student Success*, 13(3), 46-53. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.2434>

and technology issues (Devlin & McKay, 2016; McKay et al., 2021; Moore & Greenland, 2017; Ragusa & Crampton, 2018; Stone, 2019).<sup>2</sup>

In response to these challenges, the leadership of Balonne Shire and Maranoa Regional Councils established Country University Centres (CUCs) in St George (including a hub at Dirranbandi) <https://www.cucbalonne.edu.au/> and Roma respectively <https://www.cucmaranoa.edu.au/>.

In short, a Regional University Centre (RUCs) - or Country University Centre in the instance of South West Queensland - is a facility that regional students enrolled at any Australian tertiary institution can use to seek support to study tertiary courses delivered by distance.

Regional University Centres provide:

- Infrastructure such as study spaces, break out areas, video conferencing, computing facilities and high-speed internet access.
- Administrative and academic support services such as developing writing and researching skills and managing administrative processes.
- Student support services including pastoral support, study advice and assistance with accessing tertiary education student services.

Regional / Country University Centres are funded by the Australian Government under the *Regional University Centres Program*.

The CUCs in St George, Dirranbandi and Roma have been incredibly successful with increasing student enrolments each year since establishment – refer to Appendix 1 for a summary of these successes.

In addition, and noting **TOR 4: Governance, accountability and community**, such CUCs are instrumental in supporting the liveability, productivity and sustainability of local communities and regional towns, which in turn contribute massive wealth to State and National economies.

This point was highlighted in the submission by the Regional Universities Network (RUN) to the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education*, where it was recommended that “Education should be seen as a major lever to drive economic development in regional Australia. Issues, policy and funding around school education and transition to work or further education should not be seen in isolation from other issues around regional economic development. Governments should ensure that relevant policy settings are consistent and working together across the school, higher education, industry and regional development space” (2018, p. 1).

The Regional Australia Institute (RAI) estimates that if people in the regions had the same share of Bachelor level qualifications as in metropolitan areas, there would be just over 461,000 more graduates living and working in regional Australia, collectively earning about \$26 billion each year, based on the average salary for a graduate. Likewise, the workforce would be well-matched to the regional labour market, with employers finding the right workers, and workers finding the right jobs. As a consequence, there would be increased prosperity of regional communities, as average household incomes are bolstered with increased skilled workers in the local labour market.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Stone, C., King, S., & Ronan, C. (2022). Taking university to the students: Forging connections and inclusion through Regional University Centres (RUCs). A practice report. *Student Success*, 13(3), 46-53. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.2434>

<sup>3</sup> Regional Australia Institute (2022) Regionalisation Ambition 2032: A Framework to Rebalance the Nation.

The role of educational institutions in regional development combined with [TOR 1: Meeting Australia’s knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future](#) is an issue on the Agenda for the RAI, with its recent Report *Regionalisation Ambition 2032 - A Framework to Rebalance the Nation*, recommending that boosting post-school qualification completion in regional Australia to 65% or above will require the fostering of localised tertiary education models that allow residents to study further qualifications in place, such as education centres and ensuring reliable, good quality digital access (2022, p. 29).

**In summary, the experience of CUCs in South West Queensland is one of success. So much so, that other councils within the South West Queensland region and further afield are likewise keen to develop CUCs in their local towns.**

This is echoed in the research by Stone et al (2022, p. 51) which states that “the importance of these spaces and places to the growth of higher education access, participation and success for regional students should not be underestimated. Through the presence of a physical study space, essential learning infrastructure, staff support and interaction with other students, RUCs/CUCs can provide the opportunity for regional students to connect meaningfully with university without having to leave the local connections that they depend upon for their economic and social stability. There are also broader, longer-term benefits for regional areas, with those who study locally being more likely to stay locally, using their qualifications to enrich the social and economic fabric of regional Australia”.

Additionally, and supporting the submission presented by the Balonne CUC, these models hold great potential in regional, rural and remote locations to:

- improve access to VET participation in low population areas in order to create pathways into higher education.
- provide targeted services to underrepresented groups to help increase equitable access to education.

**Put simply, the RUC / CUC is a model that works. It is an exemplar of placed based, value for money solutions; and the continued emergence of collaborative approaches to service delivery in regional and remote Australia.**

**For these reasons, SWQROC recommends that funding for the *Regional University Centres Program*:**

- 1. Be made permanent to provide confidence and certainty and to assist with long term planning and expansion of current Centres.**
- 2. Be increased in the 2023-24 Australian Federal Budget and beyond noting the desire for more Centres to be established across regional Australia and in recognition of the long-term positive externalities created for regional communities.**

Supporting the above, “collaborative, not competitive, relationships between universities and RUCs/CUCs are crucial in serving the best interests of regional students. In the interests of building such collaborative relationships we also recommend that governments at federal, state and local levels maintain and increase support for RUCs/CUCs, through funding models that do not place universities and RUCs/CUCs in a position of competing for funding within a local area, but rather recognise the distinct value of each in making higher education available, accessible and manageable for students”.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Stone, C., King, S., & Ronan, C. (2022). Taking university to the students: Forging connections and inclusion through Regional University Centres (RUCs). A practice report. *Student Success*, 13(3), 46-53. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.2434>


Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Discussion Paper.

We look forward to the outcome of the Panel's deliberations in due course and are happy to provide any further information to help inform the Panel's recommendations.

Yours sincerely

Cr Samantha O'Toole

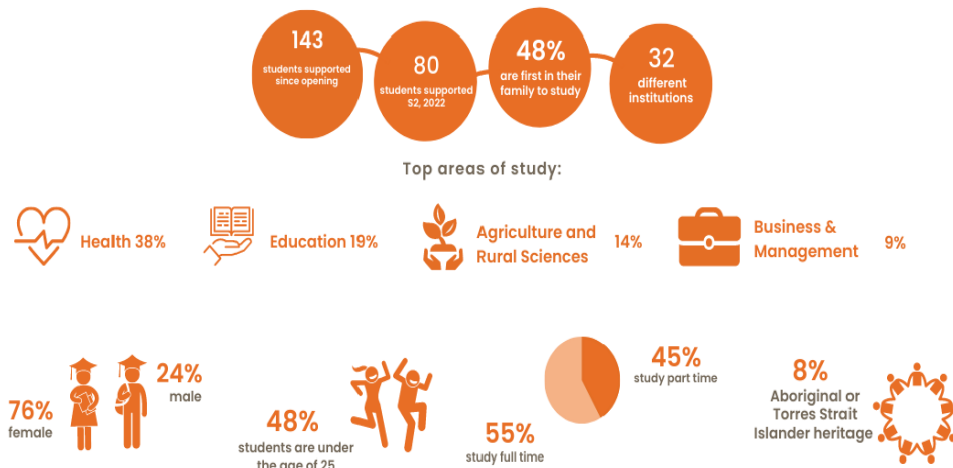


Mayor  
Balonne Shire Council  
Chair, SWQROC  
Ph: 

## Appendix 1: Summary of successes at Balonne & Maranoa Country University Centres

### CUC Balonne Progress 2021 - 2023

#### Semester 2, 2022 Snapshot



### CUC Maranoa Centre Statistics February 2023

#### Registered Student Numbers



#### Student Visit Numbers

1 = one individual student using the centre per day

Students visits for the month

**418**

Average daily student visits for the month

**14.93**

**735** Students visits for the year

