

# The Country Universities Centre

Submission to the Universities  
Accord Discussion Paper

April 2023



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## Introduction

One of the persistent inequities in higher education is that regional people participate at half the rate of metropolitan Australians (Halsey, 2018; Commonwealth of Australia, 2019; Productivity Commission 2019). This challenge has been perpetuated for more than 20 years despite numerous policy interventions such as Demand Driven Funding, HEPPP, and targeted regional scholarships (NCSEHE, 2017; Commonwealth of Australia, 2019; Ronan, 2020). While these policy settings had good intentions, they misrecognise the challenge of higher education in regional Australia and the needs of those in non-metropolitan communities.

HEPPP assumed that regional people lacked aspiration for higher education and needed universities to engage with communities to nurture these aspirations, yet research has consistently found that regional people have high aspirations for university study (King et al., 2022; Gore et. al., 2019). HEPPP has made no impact in widening regional student participation due to other systemic barriers restricting access and many regional communities have seen HEPPP outreach by universities used as a recruitment tool (Stone, King, and Ronan, 2022).

Universities posited that Demand Driven Funding would boost the number of places available in their institutions for equity students – especially at regional universities – and therefore increase regional participation; however, the Productivity Commission found that while Demand Driven Funding had a positive impact for other equity groups there was limited impact on regional student participation (Productivity Commission, 2019).

Financial support has also been touted as the solution to widening regional participation given the cost of relocation and distance to university campuses, but the cost associated with providing scholarships and the assumption that people want to or can leave their communities is problematic.

Should we be incentivising people to leave regional communities if we want a thriving regional Australia?

Many regional scholarships, such as the RRES, are undersubscribed and scholarships to leave regional communities can reinforce the notion that success for regional people is defined by leaving their community (Ronan, 2020). A future thriving regional Australia must provide local higher education study options rather than incentivising people to leave (RAI, 2023; Halsey, 2018; King et. al., 2022; Ronan, 2020)

These previous policy interventions assume that regional people lack aspiration, want to move, or should be incentivised to move to attend university; they illuminate a rigidity of the higher education system that is focused on changing the individual to fit higher education in its current form rather than structural changes to the sector to fit how regional and rural Australian community's function.

This misrecognition of the problem has rendered previous policy interventions ineffective and highlights the lack of agility in the Australian higher education sector to re-examine the challenges and think differently. Entrenched university practices that have embedded inequities for regional people in higher education participation will continue without structural intervention. What is needed are new ways of thinking about and undertaking higher education in Australia.

Not every challenge in higher education can or should be solved by providing more funding to universities. While universities are the delivery arm of the higher education sector and a fundamental part of the system, they are not all of the sector.

For over 20 years governments have been asking and funding universities to solve all higher education related equity issues and it is now time to engage other players to solve the pernicious remaining challenges such as increasing higher education participation of regional Australians. Other actors must be brought into being part of the higher education system to help generate creative solutions. There is a place for motivated not-for-profits and volunteers to be given capacity and persona in the higher education sector to play this role.

The CUC and its practices demonstrate a new way of not only thinking about regional higher education and supporting remote students to succeed but practical and proven examples that have successfully operated on the fringes of higher education policy. The role of regional communities in higher education has been historically omitted from the discourse, yet the CUC example demonstrates engaging communities are the key to widening participation and increasing bachelor attainment no matter where one lives.

The CUC is a grassroots organisation that was established in response to the market failure of governments and universities to do higher education differently and break the systemic inequities that exist in Australian Higher Education. It began outside the higher education system led by community members frustrated with the lack of engagement from universities and governments to recognise the more nuanced challenges of access to higher education in regional Australia.

As a community-led organisation that has grown since the initial Centre was opened in 2013, the CUC has developed practical and bold solutions to the failings of existing higher education policy and universities across Australia. We strive to nudge the sector to think and behave differently.

The Accord marks a once in a generation policy moment to weave the innovation of the CUC and the Regional University Centre (RUC) program into the broader higher education sector and policy framework, elevating the voices of those who have developed these successful grassroots approaches to higher education. It is an opportunity for the CUC, regional communities, universities, and government to work together to provide genuine access, opportunity, and support for higher education in regional Australia. With these principles this submission offers practical, bold, scalable, and cost-effective options that can transform regional higher education participation.

This submission will provide a brief background and overview of how the CUC works and then present four challenges with bold solutions for the Panel's consideration. A summary of the submission is provided in the table below:

## Submission Summary

### 1. Growth of the Regional University Centre Program

Existing Problem	Bold Solution	Scalability	Policy Recommendations
Regional and Remote higher education participation rates have stagnated despite numerous policy interventions.	Expand the community-led CUC and RUC program to any regional community that has the local desire, need, and governance to support it.	The CUC already has a network of 18 community-led Centres and has demonstrated cost-effective scalability. The model has infinite possibilities to be scaled with local communities who desire a CUC. The cost to government of supporting a student through the CUC is cheaper than relocating that same student to a metropolitan campus.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expand the community-led CUC and RUC program to any regional community that has the local desire, need, and governance to support it.</li> <li>Incorporate the CUC and RUC program into all aspects of higher education funding.</li> <li>The Commonwealth Department should remain the primary funder but stay out of operations and management decisions of RUCs in favour of community autonomy.</li> <li>Embed the RUC program in the Higher Education Support Act and make RUCs eligible for HEPPP/IRLSAF funding to support student retention and widening participation activities.</li> </ul>

### 2. Embedding community-led Widening Participation and Outreach

Existing Problem	Bold Solution	Scalability	Policy Recommendations
University-led HEPPP Outreach and Widening Participation has not worked in regional Australia and has been used as a recruitment tool by universities, rather than serving the interest of regional Australia.	Embrace community-led outreach that is institutionally agnostic. This can be achieved by CUCs and RUCs leading Widening Participation and Outreach work in their communities rather than universities. Funding should go to RUCs rather than Universities. Universities become partners rather than drivers of Widening Participation.	The Eastern Australia Regional University Centre Partnership as part of the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP) represents how this approach could be networked and scalable with partner universities and RUCs across Australia.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CUCs and RUCs should lead Widening Participation and Outreach work in their communities rather than universities.</li> <li>Funding for widening participation and outreach in regional Australia should be provided to communities through CUCs/RUCs rather than universities, with universities becoming partners on projects rather than drivers of widening participation.</li> <li>Expand the RPPPP to be a core component of HEPPP/IRLSAF to fund these activities.</li> <li>Include the CUC and RUCs in any future iterations of HEPPP/IRLSAF.</li> </ul>

### 3. Access to HEPPP/IRLSAF for the CUC and Regional University Centres

Existing Problem	Bold Solution	Scalability	Policy Recommendation
CUCs and RUCs are providing face-to-face academic support for equity students, and widening participation activities yet are not eligible for access to HEPPP funds.	Allow the CUC and RUCs access to HEPPP funding for equity student support and retention activities and widening participation alongside universities.	This policy setting can assist in financially supporting all current and future Regional University Centres across Australia.	Given the CUC and RUCs perform the core functions of supporting the retention of equity cohorts and widening participation activities, allow the CUC and RUCs access to HEPPP funding for equity student support, retention activities and widening participation alongside universities.

### 4. CUC Low-population model for remote communities

Existing Problem	Bold Solution	Scalability	Policy Recommendation
No higher education or vocational training access with face-to-face or local student support available in small remote communities	Implement the community-led low population CUC model to provide access to any university degree and TAFE/vocational education with local face-to-face support.	The model has been designed off Central Western QLD but can be applied in other low-population remote regions where communities are willing to work together.	Invest in the low-population regional model of the CUC as a subsection of the Regional Universities Centre Program.

## 1. Growth of the Regional University Centre Program

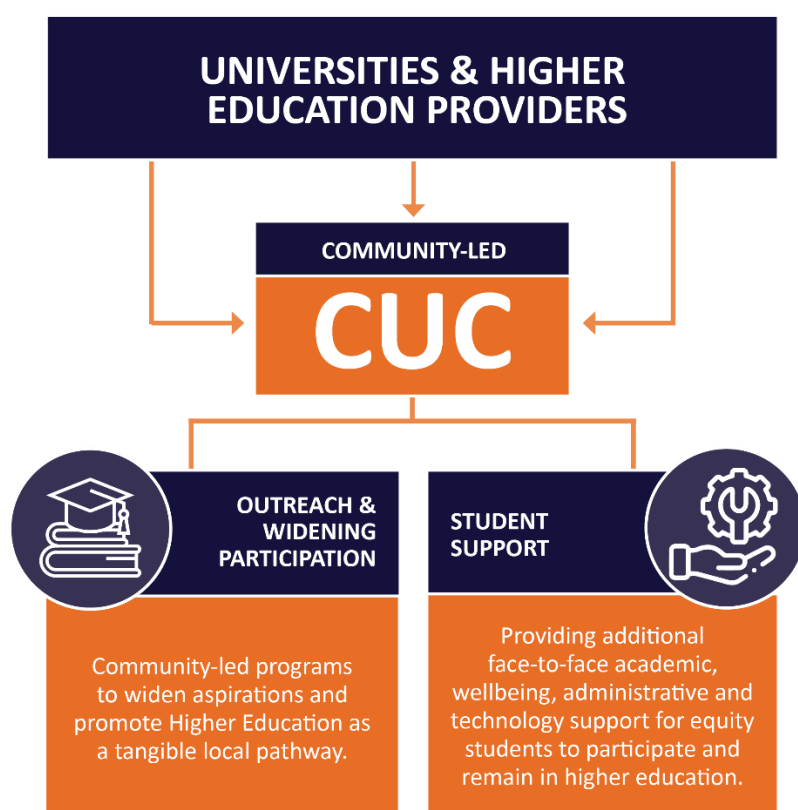
This section guides the Panel through an overview of the CUC, how it works, the current demand from regional communities to establish a CUC, and recommendations on scalability as an innovation to increase participation of regional students in higher education.

### Overview of the Country Universities Centre

#### What is the CUC?

The Country Universities Centre (CUC) is a network of 18 community owned and operated centres across regional NSW, QLD and Victoria that provide equitable access to higher education for regional people without the need to leave their community. The CUC is the lynchpin between higher education and the local community in regional areas where universities cannot operate. They facilitate widening participation activities, student support and retention, and generate local industry connections and workforce pathways for students. Each CUC is locally owned and governed by a skills-based board from that community. This allows each CUC to be reflexive to the local higher education needs of their community.

The core functions of the CUC are local face-to-face student support for equity students, and community-led widening participation activities.



### Establishment and Growth

In 2013, the Cooma Universities Centre was established (later becoming CUC Snowy Monaro) with the assistance of local industry - particularly Snowy Hydro - and local government. The Centre operated without any state or federal government assistance for its first five years of operation.



## Current funding arrangements

The CUC currently receives funding from the Australian Government Regional University Centres program, NSW Government, local councils, and industry. The CUC also generates additional revenue through partnerships with universities and CSPs which have been allocated to the CUC as part of the Regional University Centre program. In 2023, the CUC has also received funding for community-led widening participation activities under the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP). This collaborative funding model, in addition to over \$4 million of in-kind support from local volunteers and community organisations, has ensured the ongoing success and sustainability of the CUC.

## Student Services

The CUC supports any student studying any course from any university or higher education provider, which encourages a diversity of degree pathways and vibrant regional learning communities. In Semester 2 2022, there were 1687 CUC students studying 861 unique degrees from over 40 different Australian Universities. Providing students choice and diversity of degree and university choice is key to the success of the CUC. For example, in CUC Far West (Broken Hill) there are currently 153 students, studying 95 unique courses from 27 universities but the CUC provides a united singular learning community.

Each CUC provides face-to-face generalised academic and wellbeing student services from local staff, and facilities that have quiet study spaces, breakout rooms, high-speed internet, and a local learning community. This allows students to have the physical infrastructure and personalised face-to-face local support needed to ensure their higher education success. The CUC compliments content specific support that universities provide online students with face-to-face wrap around support in the local community.

## Widening Participation

The CUC has developed community-led outreach and widening participation activities in partnership with 19 universities and 15 Regional University Centres (RUCs). This is in response to failings of existing university HEPPP outreach and widening participation programs. Rather than universities travelling out to regional areas, the CUC develops local programs that are delivered by CUC staff while partnering with consortia of universities. This community-led approach to widening participation was initially community driven and funded, but due to its success has been scaled through the Commonwealth Government's Regional Partnership Project Pool Program (RPPPP) and will now reach 99 schools across 21 communities. It is a sustainable and cost-effective model that is discussed further in section of the submission entitled *Embedding community-led widening participation and outreach*.

## Equity

The CUC is focused on supporting equity students within regional communities and those who have traditionally been excluded from higher education to ensure vibrant, diverse, and educated regional communities into the future.

Across the CUC Network in 2022:

- 57% of CUC students are from Low Socioeconomic backgrounds.
- 80% of CUC students identify as Female.
- 8% of CUC students identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- 48% are the first in their family to study at university.



- 62% are 25 years of age or older.
- 5.4% have a disability.

The CUC has demonstrated its ability to deliver equitable educational outcomes for students from these traditionally underrepresented backgrounds. For example, in Broken Hill 12.2% of students at the CUC identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander while the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in the community is 8.5%.

## Impact

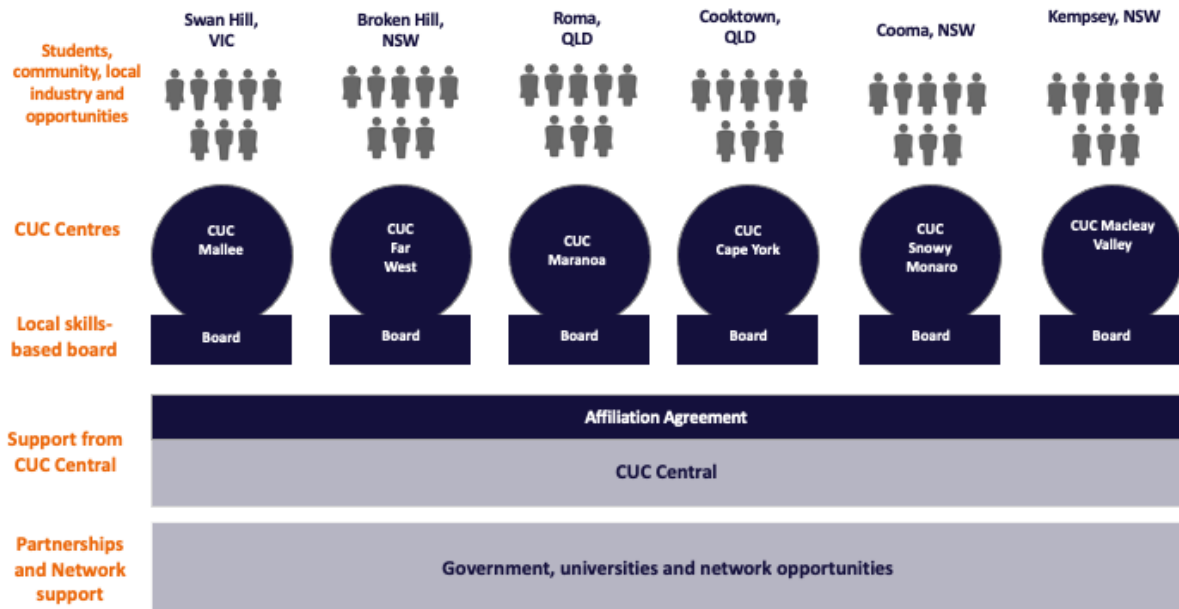
Since its creation, the CUC has supported over 4,770 regional students across NSW, Queensland, and Victoria. In 2022 alone, over 200 CUC students graduated and 96% went on to work as professionals in their local community or further study.

## Vocational Education/TAFE

In communities where there is no TAFE/VET provider the CUC has supported vocational students by providing face-to-face learning skills support and inclusion into the local learning community alongside university students. In 2023, the CUC has worked collaboratively with small communities in remote Queensland to codesign a model that incorporates TAFE/VET and University study support under the CUC. This is explored further in part four of the submission on *CUC Low-population model for remote communities*.

## Governance

Each CUC is locally owned, operated and governed by a volunteer skills-based board. Each CUC is a separate legal entity registered as a company limited by guarantee and registered with the Australian Charities and Not for Profit Commission (ACNC). Each Centre is affiliated with a central body – CUC Central – which provides support for each of the locally governed Centres.



## Further Expansion of the CUC Network

The CUC has been approached to work with a significant number of communities who are passionate about establishing their own CUC and local solution to higher education access. In Queensland alone the CUC has been approached by 26 communities to seek assistance in establishing their own community-led Centre. This is in addition to community demand in NSW and Victoria. The following map shows the locations of communities across QLD who have approached the CUC to support establishing a Centre. It demonstrates that the CUC is ready to be significantly scaled up from the current network.



Figure 1 Communities in Queensland that have expressed interest to the CUC to establish Regional University Centres

## Success of the CUC

The CUC has successfully supported regional online students, blended-delivery students, and placement students to succeed in their studies and increase the proportion of regional communities engaging with higher education (Stone, Crawford et. al., 2022). The CUC conducts an annual Student Experience Survey to understand the dynamic needs of students and how they are engaging with the CUC.

In 2022:

- 89% of students indicated they are more likely to continue with their studies as a result of the help they received from the CUC.
- 90% of CUC students felt that using the CUC helped to improve their academic results.
- 93% of students who used the CUC stated that they were better able to focus on their studies due to the support and facilities of the CUC.
- 87% of CUC students experienced a sense of belonging to the CUC.
- 99% of students found the staff to be very or extremely helpful.

## The CUC as a mechanism for Widening Participation

The table below draws on census data to demonstrate how the CUC has been a mechanism for widening participation in regional Australia. Census data shows that university student numbers in NSW towns with CUC Centres grew by 24.7% over the 2016-2021 period, whereas in non-metropolitan NSW (excluding Sydney) university student numbers grew by 5.4%.

The significant growth in student numbers in towns with a CUC above non-metro NSW trends was repeated across every community with a CUC; the growth in student numbers in individual CUC communities vary from 16 to 34%. That is, every town with an established CUC in NSW had a growth in university student numbers threefold to sixfold greater than the non-metropolitan NSW average growth.

CUC Snowy Monaro in Cooma is the only CUC that straddles two census periods and had an increase of 64% of current university students over the two census periods 2011-2021, compared to a 17.5% increase for non-metropolitan NSW in that same period. This is just below a fourfold increase in university student numbers when compared to non-metro NSW trends being sustained in Cooma, which significantly outperforms the population growth of Cooma over the same period which has only grown by 13% between 2011 and 2021 (ABS, 2021).

### Students studying at University in Locality

(ABS 2021 Census Data)

	2011	2016	2021	% increase 2011- 2021	% increase 2016-21
New South Wales	30307	37613	37503	23.7%	-0.3%
Rest of NSW (Sydney Excluded)	73205	81648	86050	17.5%	5.4%
<b>Ave for Cohort One CUC Centre Locations</b>				<b>64.10%*</b>	<b>24.7%**</b>

\* Based on Centres established in Broken Hill, Goulburn, Grafton, Griffith, Leeton, Moree and Narrabri

\*\* Based on Centre established in Cooma

This data indicates that the CUC is attracting new students who might not otherwise have studied in addition to supporting students for greater success and retention who might always have intended to study locally online.

The Census data shows that while university students in CUC towns in NSW represent just 2.4% of the total university students in non-metropolitan NSW, the growth in students in CUC towns represents 8.9% of the total growth in students in non-metropolitan NSW (ABS, 2021). That is, nearly 9% of the growth in non-metro NSW university students (including locations like Wollongong, Newcastle, Coffs Harbour, Dubbo, Wagga Wagga, Orange which all have university campuses) took place in eight CUC communities (established CUCs at the time of Census).

While there are caveats to this data, including that it does not account for population growth and COVID may have disproportionately impacted the 2021 Census results, the consistency of significant above average growth in student numbers across every location where a CUC operates demonstrates the capacity of the CUC to widen participation in regional communities.

## Value for money

In 2021, the Commonwealth Government commissioned an independent evaluation of the Regional University Centre program which found the CUC operates on a cost of between \$2,500 to \$3,500 per student per year (Urbis, 2021). On a per student basis, this positions the CUC as a financially viable option to widen participation when compared to other mechanisms of student support such as the Tertiary Access Payment (TAP), scholarships and Youth Allowance.

NCSEHE research in South Australia found that when regional Year 11 and 12 students were initially asked if they would consider studying online, only 6.6% indicated they were considering it as an option. After an explanation of what an RUC was, 49% indicated that they would be more likely to consider studying online with the support of an RUC (King et al., 2022). This is a significant change from the 6.6% that were initially considering online study as an option without a local RUC and demonstrates the opportunity for the CUC/RUCs to widen participation. The CUC presents as a financially viable option to provide access to higher education for those students who aspire to attend university and would consider doing so online with the support of a local Centre.

Regional people should have choice in how they access higher education. Many regional people will continue to relocate for university study and this should be supported; but for those in regional communities that can't or don't want to leave, the CUC provides an alternative model of support that is cost-effective for Government and has demonstrated the ability to increase participation and bachelor attainment within small regional communities.

## Principals for growing the RUC network

The Australian Government's Regional University Centre program has provided significant funding to support the expansion of the CUC, as well as other independent community-led RUCs.

Although the Australian Government is funding the Regional University Centre program, the success of the CUC – and other RUCs – has been based on the ability for local flexibility and grassroots solutions to local challenges of higher education access. It is paramount to the further success and growth of the CUC and broader RUC program that Government allows communities flexibility in how they operate their Centre. Increased government or university intervention threatens the core principles and values of the CUC and RUC program that has ensured its success to date.

The CUC is a demonstrated mechanism for widening participation, supporting student success and is cost-effective for governments.

#### Recommendations:

- Expand the community-led CUC and RUC program to any regional community that has the local desire, need, and governance to support it.
- Incorporate the CUC and RUC program into all aspects of higher education funding.
- The Commonwealth Department should remain the primary funder but stay out of operations and management decisions of RUCs in favour of community autonomy.
- Embed the RUC program in the Higher Education Support Act and make RUCs eligible for HEPPP/IRLSAF funding to support student retention and widening participation activities.

## 2. Embedding Community-Led Widening Participation and Outreach

University-led HEPPP outreach and widening participation has not worked in regional Australia and has been used as a recruitment tool by universities, rather than serving the interest of regional communities. Despite numerous outreach activities and HEPPP programs, bachelor attainment rates and higher education participation has stagnated in regional Australia (Productivity Commission, 2019; Commonwealth of Australia, 2019).

Under HEPPP, universities are focused on delivering services to schools, as opposed to being engaged in rich collaboration in the design and implementation of higher education participation programs (Austin, 2021). Many regional communities have not had sustained engagement with universities and their widening participation and university-led outreach activities. Heat mapping exercises of where university outreach is occurring in NSW schools indicates some communities have multiple universities engaged, while others – predominantly those in regional and remote areas - have none.

Compounding this, in some universities the widening participation and outreach teams have been merged into student recruitment areas of universities. For those regional communities that have received engagement from universities, many outreach activities and HEPPP funding has been used for recruitment rather than institution neutral widening participation work. This behaviour serves the institutional agenda rather than genuinely widening participation in regional Australia.

Research out of regional South Australia supports this notion and shows that students are highly aware of universities thinly disguising outreach as marketing for their own institution and shows that Year 11 and 12 students see through university visits to their school with students expressing disappointment and annoyance about what they perceived as “marketing,” rather than informing them about the specifics of university life. One student commented:

*“They come in and do a fun activity with us and then try to sell their uni. How stupid do they think we are? We know it is marketing” - Year 11 student (Stone, King, and Ronan; 2022, p. 81)*

In response to the ineffective HEPPP programs in regional Australia, the Country Universities Centre and UTS is leading a joint project with 15 Regional University Centres and 19 universities to change how widening participation and outreach occurs. This new approach utilises the RUCs to create community-led outreach and widening participation programs that are bespoke to each individual community. These projects are led by the local RUC but draw on several university partners to

support the project design. Funding for these projects rests with the RUC, which provides greater control for the community and stops universities from capturing and repurposing these funds for recruitment or other university activities that are not in the community's interest. Funding for this project has been possible due to the Australian Government's Regional Partnership Project Pool Program (RPPPP) – the first time RUCs have been eligible to receive grant funding for widening participation work.

During Phase 1 of this project (in 2022), universities reported that the amount of funding on the table in the grant was not enough to create outreach programs in regional communities with RUCs, whereas RUCs thought it was ample funding to meet their local outreach needs. This difference in perspective further illuminates that community-led outreach is a significantly more cost-effective option than providing funding for the same activities through universities. As at April 2023, this project has been provided almost \$5 million over two years for 15 RUCs and their 19 university partners with local projects planned to commence in June 2023. This approach is more cost-effective and targeted than any prior university-led attempts.

### **Nurturing aspiration without a local study option.**

Prior outreach and widening participation work has also been ineffective in regional Australia because any future higher education participation would require moving to university or studying alone online; for many low-SES, first in family, Indigenous and mature-age students this is an insurmountable barrier to participation in higher education. With the creation of the CUC and RUCs, students can now see a future where they can study locally with face-to-face support, a learning community, and physical infrastructure. Coupling the presence of a CUC/RUC with the CUC/RUC leading outreach and widening participation work in their community presents an opportunity to widen participation and bachelor attainment rates in regional Australia in a cost-effective way. A NCSEHE funded study in regional South Australia demonstrates the opportunities of having a CUC/RUC alongside community-led widening participation work (King et.al., 2022).

When regional Year 11 and 12 students in the study were initially asked if they would consider studying online, only 6.6% indicated they were considering it as an option. Further into the survey, students were also asked:

"Question 24: Are you aware that there are now a number of Regional University Centres in South Australia where students doing online university courses can go to study, to meet other students, get help from tutors and access books and resources?"

48% of students indicated that they were not aware that RUCs existed. However, students were then asked:

"Question 25: If there was a Regional University Centre located near where you live, would you be more likely to consider doing an online university course?"

After an explanation of what an RUC was, 49% indicated that they would be more likely to consider studying online with the support of an RUC. This is a significant change from the 6.6% that were initially considering online study as an option without a local RUC. The study also ran focus groups in schools across South Australia with students and teachers that also supported this finding. When this study was conducted no community-led widening participation work was occurring however it highlights an opportunity that when a CUC/RUC is established in a community and coupled alongside RUC-led widening participation work, then university becomes a realistic and tangible goal.

The study found that RUCs are a new concept and their awareness in Year 11 and 12 cohorts is low – which is where locally-led widening participation and outreach work can assist. However, the response of students in the survey should illuminate the potential that RUCs have for providing alternative options for regional students who do not wish to leave their community and the need for community-led outreach.

This study, along with research on outreach partnerships by Austin (2022), has formed the foundation of the approach to the CUC and UTS partnership under the RPPPP. Additionally, the project draws on the Napthine Review recommendation that HEPPP should be modified to create more cost effective, targeted, and tailored equity and outreach initiatives for regional communities (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019), and that outreach partnerships between regional schools and universities that embed local knowledges are more effective than delivering existing university programs with little regard for local context (Brown et. al., 2020). Additionally, RUCs have demonstrated to have a significant impact on regional student aspirations and possible futures, acting as a bridge between universities and regional communities (King, Stone, & Ronan, 2022).

Universities still must play a key role in widening participation and outreach as they have significant expertise and value to add, but this involvement should be as a partner rather than the leader.

#### Recommendations:

- CUCs and RUCs should lead Widening Participation and Outreach work in their communities rather than universities.
- Funding for widening participation and outreach in regional Australia should be provided to communities through CUCs/RUCs rather than universities, with universities becoming partners on projects rather than drivers of widening participation.
- Expand the RPPPP to be a core component of HEPPP/IRLSAF to fund these activities.
- Include the CUC and RUCs in any future iterations of HEPPP/IRLSAF.

### 3. Access to HEPPP/IRLSAF for the CUC and Regional University Centres

CUCs and RUCs are providing face-to-face academic support for equity students and conduct local widening participation activities yet are not eligible for access to HEPPP funds. Instead, the CUC has funded this work through philanthropy and core operational funding.

The CUC equity model of student support is focused on providing general academic support that compliments content specific support that universities provide. It is additional support targeted at equity students to help them navigate their learning journey and ensure they can *access, participate, remain and succeed in higher education* – the same objective HEPPP strives for.

The graphic below delineates the difference between what universities provide, and what a CUC can provide to equity students (**Error! Reference source not found.**).

<b>Additional Support for Equity Students</b>	General non-subject specific student support: Academic skills development, wellbeing and motivational support, administration and access to technology and dedicated study spaces, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student support programs. Development of learning communities and student-led support networks	Country Universities Centre
<b>Tutorial and content support</b>	Subject specific support: tutorials, placements, clinical and professional skills	University
<b>Teaching and Learning</b>	Subject specific learning: lectures, seminars, or core teaching.	

The CUC supports students studying from any university and provides the additional layers of generalised academic support for regional, low-SES and indigenous students optimising their chance of retention and success.

Most CUC students are from regional, low-SES, indigenous equity groups or a combination of all three:

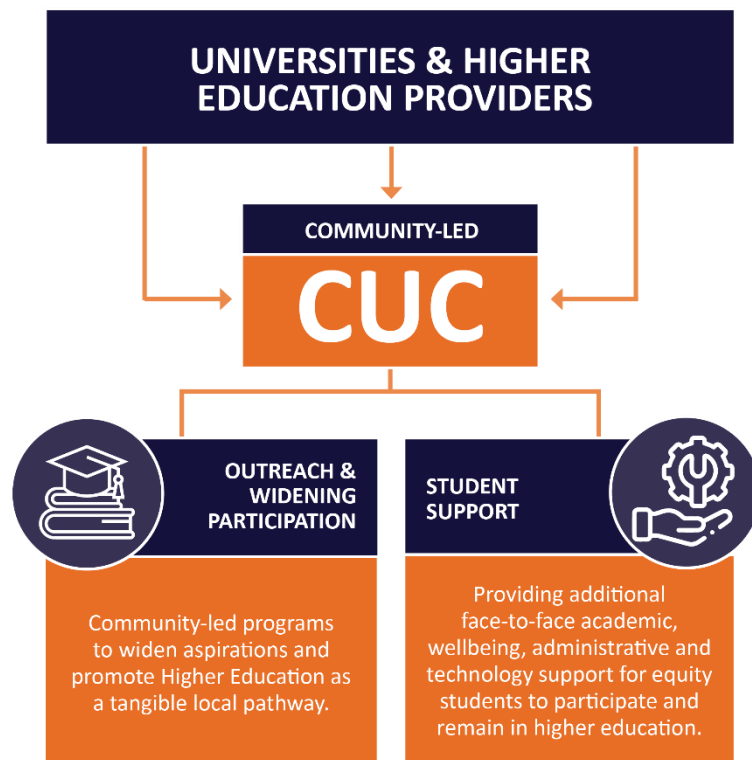
- 99% of CUC student are from regional communities compared to 19.6% participating nationally (NCSEHE, 2019)
- 57% of CUC students are from low socioeconomic backgrounds compared to 16.83% participating nationally (NCSEHE, 2019)
- 8% of CUC students identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander compared to 1.95% participating nationally (NCSEHE, 2019)

The key objective of the HEPPP is to promote equality of opportunity in higher education by improving:

- *outreach to widen aspiration and promote higher education to persons from a low SES background, persons from regional areas and remote areas, and Indigenous persons; and*
- *the extent to which persons from a low SES background, persons from regional areas and remote areas, and Indigenous persons access, participate, remain and succeed in higher education, and obtain higher education awards.* (Department of Education, 2023)

The core activities of the CUC align directly with the two key objectives of HEPPP. The CUC is doing the heavy lifting in supporting equity students to succeed yet are being excluded from the HEPPP equity funding framework.





#### Recommendation:

Given the CUC and RUCs perform the core functions of supporting the retention of equity cohorts and widening participation activities, allow the CUC and RUCs access to HEPPP funding for equity student support, retention activities and widening participation alongside universities.

## 4. CUC Low-population model for remote communities

No higher education or vocational training access with face-to-face or local student support is available in small remote communities. The CUC offers a bold solution to meeting this challenge as a mechanism to widen participation, increase access, and attainment for Australians living in remote communities.

The following is a preliminary appraisal of a very remote, low population tertiary education model designed for Central Western Queensland put forward as a pilot model to be trialed and if successful, adapted for similar areas elsewhere in remote Australia. A final appraisal of the model including financial budgets will be completed and forwarded to the Accord Panel before the end of May. The model is designed around to the maximum extent making use of existing facilities and human resources and turning those resources towards supporting access and success in tertiary education with the support of the CUC's expertise, experience, and network approach.

### Case Study– A Low Population RUC Model for Remote Central Western Queensland (RAPAD)

The Country Universities Centre has received many expressions of interest from Councils and other groups in Queensland wishing to establish CUC Centres. The map below indicates all the communities in Queensland that have requested CUC assistance to establish Regional University Centres affiliated into the Country Universities Centre network:



Figure 2 Communities in Queensland that have expressed interest to the CUC in establishing Regional University Centres

The CUC has to date successfully assisted four communities in Queensland to establish and operate Centres (CUC Balonne (St George and Dirranbandi), CUC Maranoa (Roma), CUC Cape York (Cooktown) and CUC Mt Isa). Two of those facilities are in geographically remote areas (St George and Cooktown) and one facility is in a geographically very remote area (Dirranbandi). These remote and very remote Centres operate in localities where there is no TAFE Campus for vocational provision and so support vocational students as well as higher education students.

Although many other regions are seeking better local higher educational models through an RUC, many of these are small (under 4000 population) and require RUC models that thrive and are sustainable in low populations. The CUC has established two models in low populations (CUC Balonne and CUC Cape York) containing three facilities that are located in towns of between 600 and 3000 population.

The importance of low population RUC models is indicated in the map below, where the only location in Queensland to the north and west of the red line with a population of greater than 4000 is Mt Isa (which has already been funded to establish an RUC).

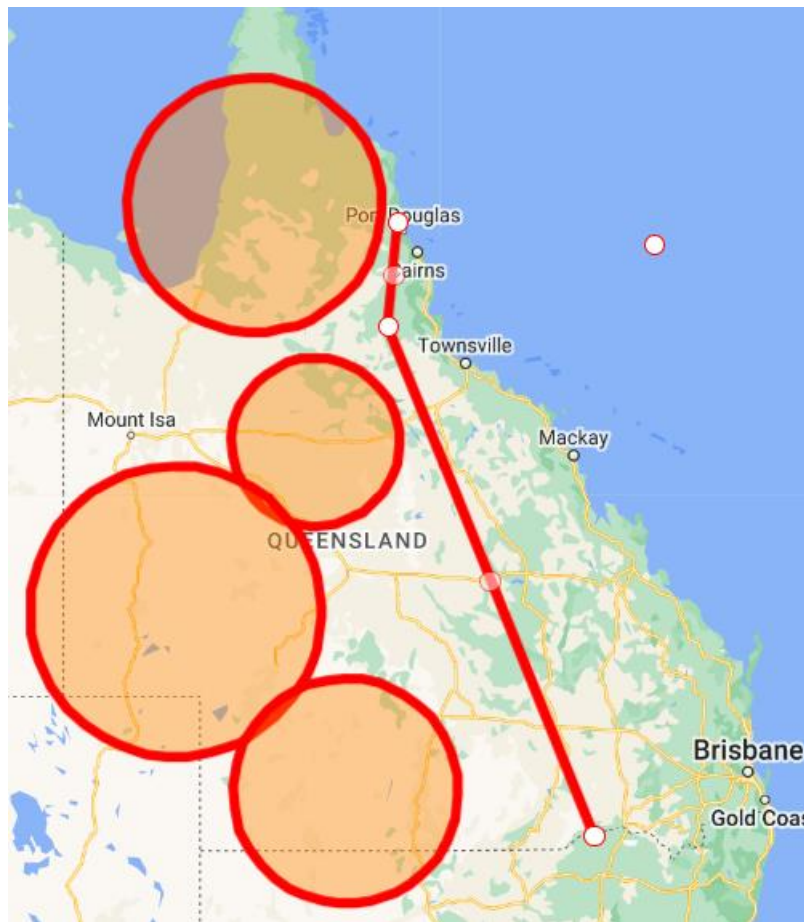


Figure 3- There is only one Queensland location to the north and west of the red line that has a population over 4000 (Mt Isa) indicating the importance of low population RUC models in higher educational access in vast areas of Australia. The circles indicate potential remote low population RUC regional models built across collaborating communities which capture many of the locations expressing interest in establishing RUC's (see Figure 1)

Using Queensland as an example, it is readily apparent that inhabitants of vast areas of Australia will gain better educational access and participation if sustainable models for small populations can be designed.

## Defining Features of Small Population RUC Models

In the CUC's experience, small population model design needs to account for the following features:

- Small population models will commonly be geographically more remote and seek to provide educational support for geographically dispersed and sparse populations;
- There will often be larger proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in these communities, occasionally significantly so, bringing the benefit of supporting people to study on Country;
- Model design and coverage will often be optimised by strategically developing models that can support students across a large geographic region rather than a single town location;
- As a result of this regional focus, the small population models will often contain proposed multi centres or nodes rather than a single facility;

- The small populations will often mean that there is no TAFE campus in the region, such that access to vocational training can be as challenging as access to higher education. This means that benefits can be broadened by providing vocational support through the model in addition to higher educational support, aligning with the Accord term of reference seeking greater streamlining of vocational and higher education;
- Small and remote populations will have larger proportions of online secondary students, so that RUCs in these areas can be broadened to support online school students with the collateral benefit of exposing those secondary students to tertiary students, options and pathways;
- As a generality, many small populations will have lesser opportunities for corporate sponsorships although this is not always true if mining is part of the local economy;
- The nature of small remote communities means that local government and town authorities are more integral to establishing RUCs in these areas.

Further, for sustainability these models will need to rely heavily on existing infrastructure and human resources for success. Fortunately, the CUC is very often surprised at how well-suited existing infrastructure and human resources are for RUC educational development in these communities.

The CUC submits that the circles indicate potential remote Queensland regional RUC models built on collaborating communities that will capture many of the locations in Figure 1 that have expressed interest and need in an RUC model to improve higher educational access and success. There is an opportunity to strategically provide educational support through these circled regions in Queensland, and analogous circumstances likely exists in other states with large areas of geographically very remote country (for instance South Australia and Western Australia).

One such region as indicated is Central Western Queensland (**'CWQ'**), which is comprised of seven local government regions working under a regional organisation of Councils called Remote Area Planning and Development (**'RAPAD'**). The CUC has been concept designing with RAPAD how a remote, low population RUC model might successfully and sustainably be established and operated in the CWQ RAPAD area as a pilot for other remote and lowly populated regions of Australia. If the pilot is successful, then the model can be replicated and scaled across other areas of remote Australia.

The seven RAPAD shires cover CWQ and total 320,000 square kilometres, or nearly one and a half times the size of Victoria. In that vast region, the population is only 10,500 people posing a challenge for higher educational access and support.

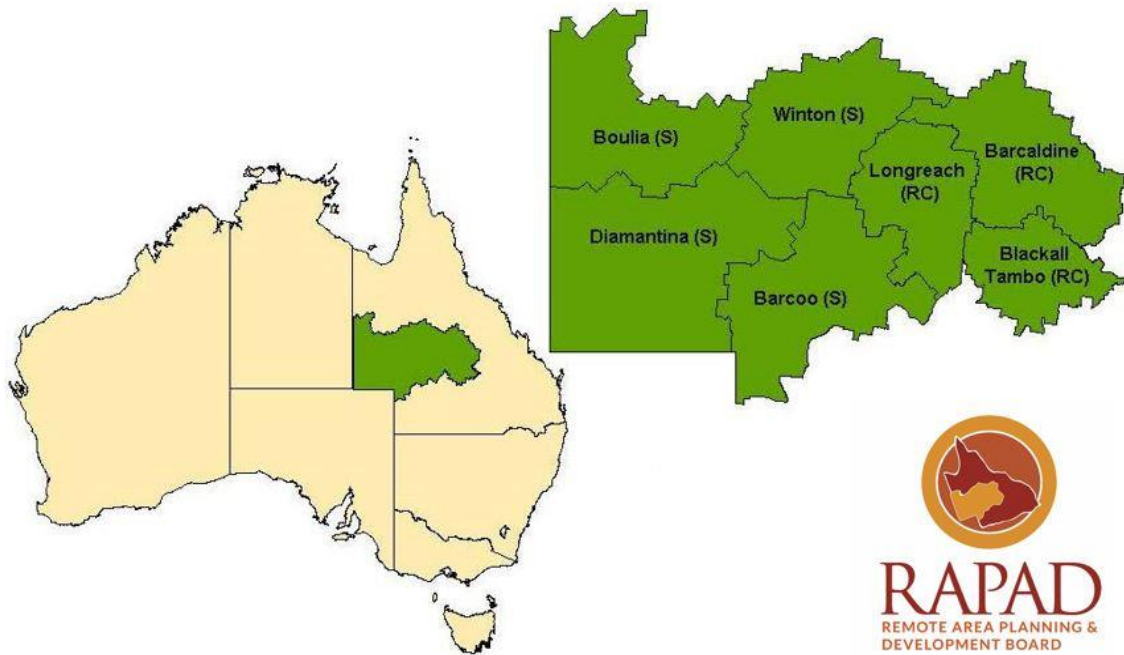


Figure 4 - The seven RAPAD shires in CWQ are in total about one and a half times the size of Victoria with a population of only 10,500 people.

The area CWQ supported by this proposed remote RUC model includes iconic Australian towns such as Longreach, Barcoo, Blackall, Winton, Boulia, Bedourie, Birdsville and Jundah.



Figure 5 - The vast area and towns within the CWQ RAPAD region to be supported by the CUC's pilot remote and low population RUC model

### Student Demand for the Model

2021 Census data indicates the CWQ region has a low average Bachelor Attainment of 11.8%, ranging from an extremely low 6.9% (Boulia Shire) to 14.1% (Longreach), compared to a national average of 26.3%. Vocational attainment is also lower than national average, but not by anywhere near as large a margin as higher education.

However, year 10 school completions in the area from the school population of 428 secondary school students is at a very reasonable level of 82%. At levels less than 75%, the CUC would consider focus should be on increasing successful secondary education rather than tertiary education, but at a

rate of 82% of secondary students completing year 10, the local educational environment has sufficient foundations for locally increasing tertiary opportunities and support. However, despite a very satisfactory body of students completing year 10, educational support both in tertiary courses and pathways will be particularly vital as only 49% of senior school students in remote and very remote areas achieve at or above the benchmark in math, science and reading (compared with 74% in major cities and 68% in regional areas)<sup>1</sup>.

Shire	Population	Indigenous	University Students	Vocational Students	Bachelor Attainment	Vocational Attainment
Longreach	3647	6.1%	79	63	14.1%	27.8%
Barcaldine	2849	7.7%	57	30	11.7%	25.3%
Blackall Tambo	1905	5.8%	21	18	9.2%	23.5%
Winton	1129	7.3%	9	17	9.4%	23.4%
Bouli	458	30.1%	7	3	6.9%	25.4%
Barcoo	308	8.4%	5	0	10.9%	27.0%
Diamantina	266	21.8%	0	10	14.9%	22.2%
Total	10562	8.10%	178	141	11.80%	

Table 1: 2021 Census Data indicates a very low bachelor attainment in CWQ

There were 178 students who responded on Census night 2021 to be residing in CWQ and currently studying at university, with a further 141 in participating in vocational training despite there being no TAFE campus in the entire CWQ region.

Of the current 178 higher education students in the region, 78% are mature age (over 25 years of age). In CUC Centres across other regions, approximately 60% of students are mature age indicating a potential for more potential students under 25 years of age to be encouraged into higher education in the CWQ region through the presence of a local CUC model.

Due to the absence of any current TAFE or university campuses in the region, the CUC has projected out student demand for a regional centre that supports both higher educational and vocational study within a CUC platform. Based on experiences elsewhere, census and other demographic information is suggestive of the following student demand for utilisation of a CWQ CUC model of RUC

<sup>1</sup> 3 Lamb, S., Huo, S., Walstab, A., Wade, A., Maire, Q., Doecke, E., Jackson, J. & Endekov, Z (2020), Educational opportunity in Australia 2020: who succeeds and who misses out, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne: Mitchell Institute.

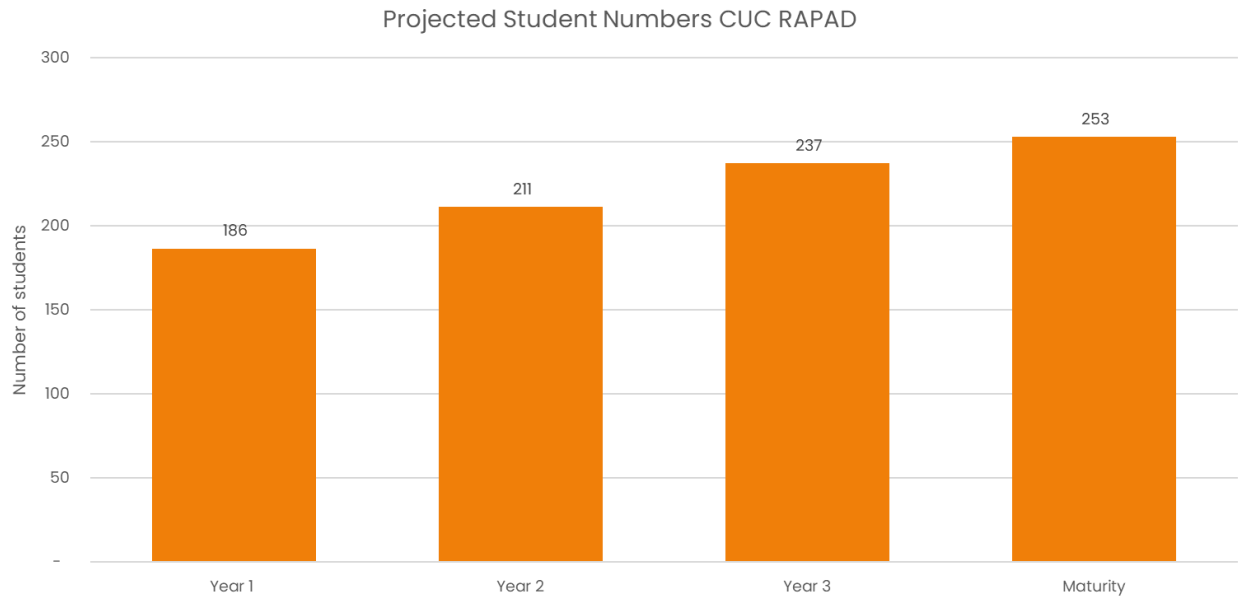


Figure 6 - Student Demand for a CUC model covering CWQ across both vocational and higher education is expected to be reasonable<sup>2</sup>

The CUC suggests the modelling indicates very worthwhile potential student numbers across the small populations and remote geography of the Central Western Queensland region.

### Breadth of Support Model

No university or TAFE teaching and/or learning facilities currently operate in the CWQ region. There appears to be only one Registered Training Organisation which is owned by the RAPAD organisation of councils in CWQ, and which is focussed upon training council employees.

Moreover, in the Boulia, Diamantina and Barcoo Shires there are no secondary schools, such that students have to either relocate or study through distance education primarily provided by Longreach School of Distance Education and Mt Isa School of the Air.

There are also many distance education students in the rural areas too far from the schools in Longreach, Barcaldine, Blackall and Winton to travel in every day. Further, as these secondary schools are low in student numbers, only narrow curriculums can be taught resulting in many secondary students attending these schools to be studying single subjects through distance education.

The CUC suggests that a local RUC model in CWQ will have technology, connectivity, staffing and a learning community capable of supporting students in the following sectors:

- Higher education;

<sup>2</sup> Please note that student number modelling is indicative only and should not be relied upon, and projected CUC student numbers are based on experience elsewhere which may be subject to different local factors and which may not be repeated in the CWQ region.

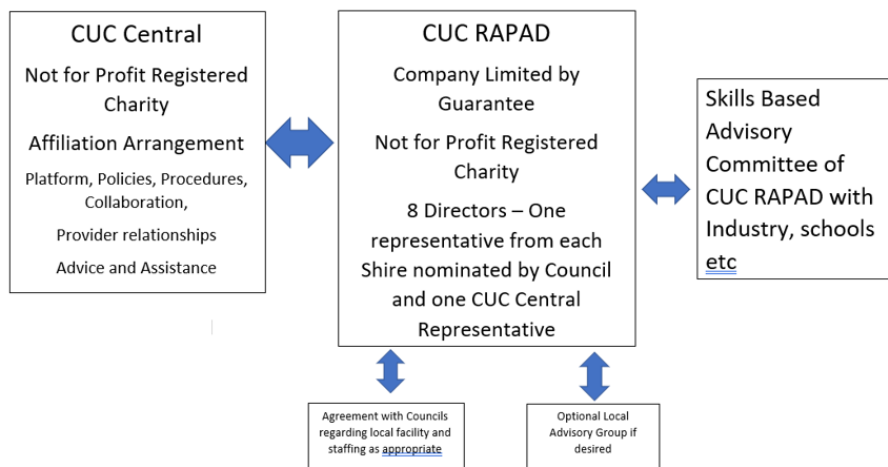
- Microcredentials, short courses, and professional development for lifelong learning;
- Vocational education and training, with an initial emphasis on online learning but a capacity to also support face to face learning in the medium term;
- Distance education school student support, particularly in the shires of Boulia, Diamantina and Barcoo that have no secondary schooling, but also to single subject distance education students in the remaining shires with small secondary schools.

Whilst in larger, more populated regions the RUC Program has concentrated on higher educational support, in this very remote and small population model the facilities and learning community can be very beneficially broadened such that the Centres become true focal points of lifelong learning for their communities.

## Governance Model

As with other RUCs, the governance structure for the model is to establish a company limited by guarantee as a registered charity. However, unlike other CUCs, the Board will be representative rather than skills based due to the extremely large geographic spread. Each of the seven local Councils of RAPAD will nominate one Board director, which together with one director from CUC Central (bringing the experience and expertise derived from across the CUC network) will form a Governance Board with representation dispersed across the region.

**Governance Model for CUC RAPAD**



*Figure 7 - The Governance Model includes a representative Board affiliated with the CUC Network advised by a skills-based Committee*

However, to compensate for the variation of a representative rather than a skills-based Board, a skills based Advisory Committee will be formed drawing from education and industry people in the CWQ region.

The model will be affiliated into the CUC network to gain the expertise and experience of the other 18 CUC Centres and central CUC organisation.

The governing company will also have agreements with each of the seven Councils regarding usage of Council infrastructure and staffing (as to which see sections on Staffing Model and Facilities below).



Each Council director can be informed by a optional local advisory body within each of the seven Shires or informally by local stakeholders (school principals, health services, chambers of commerce etc).

## Staffing Model

As with other CUC Centres, the model will be managed by a full time Centre Manager with CEO-type responsibilities and accountabilities across all staff and facilities. The Centre Manager will promote and facilitate the provision of tertiary (and secondary) education through effective student engagement and support, active collaboration with the local communities and management of the Centre infrastructure.

Within the region several geographically dispersed part time Education Services Coordinators will be engaged to service sub-regions of CWQ, which in aggregate will amount to 1.6 to 2 full time equivalents depending on initial student numbers. The Education Services Coordinators will be responsible for providing a comprehensive range of services in their locality to build participation, persistence, and retention in tertiary education. The Education Service Coordinators will work collaboratively with the Centre Manager and local Councils through an equity model of student support, providing academic and foundation skills advice, well-being and motivational support to enhance student success, growth, and retention in tertiary education.

Role	Employment	Location	Reports to
<b>Centre Manager</b>	1 FTE permanent	On-site/ occasional off-site travel to multisite centres	Chair
<b>Education Services Coordinators</b>	1.6-2.0 FTE in aggregate	On-site/occasional off-site travel to multisite centres	Centre Manager
<i>Co-shared Council Staffing</i>	<i>Part time/Casual in each facility location</i>	<i>On site, smaller facilities</i>	<i>Centre Manager</i>

Due to the distances in the region, the Centre Manager and Education Service Co-ordinators will provide face to face support to the maximum extent possible but will inevitably also be providing remote support where face to face is not feasible.

However, each Council will provide a local Council employee who will be able to be present for on-site face to face contact with students during business hours Monday to Friday in each of the eight proposed facilities. These staff members could, for instance, be library staff where the CUC facility is co-located in a library, or Visitor Information Centre staff where the CUC facility is co-located in a Visitors Information Centre (see Facilities section). These staff will be trained by the CUC Central

organisation to deal with basic student needs and enquiries and be able to triage more complex student needs and enquiries back to the Centre Manager or local Education Services Co-ordinator.

Through the co-shared council staffing, each facility location in the region will have significant face to face staffing contact available during business hours. The CUC has already piloted this staffing model successfully in geographically very remote Dirranbandi (population 600) where a CUC facility is co-located in a Rural Transaction Centre delivering state government services and utilises trained Rural Transaction Centre staff to provide basic student support with more complex needs triaged back to dedicated CUC staff in larger St George (an hour away) who also provide regular weekly visits.

## Facilities

An essential part of the model is to have facilities with efficient technology and sufficient connectivity accessible to students. In the CWQ region, this will require making use of already available infrastructure in eight locations across the region. The facilities will be tailored to the size of the local population and likely student demand, ranging from the larger locations such as Longreach to the smaller locations of Bedourie, Birdsville and Jundah. In those smaller populations and to reduce capital requirements and enhance sustainability, the facilities will be located in Council owned buildings and co-share spaces, while in the larger towns, larger spaces will be dedicated to the CUC students and their supports.

The seven local Councils have advised upon and proposed the following locations in their towns for CUC facilities:

- Longreach – the site of the previous Longreach Agricultural College.
- Barcaldine – the Visitors Centre at 149 Oak Street
- Blackall – Old Blackall Hospital Administration Building
- Winton – 68 Elderslie Street, Winton
- Boulia – Boulia Library
- Jundah – Visitors Information Centre/Post Office
- Bedourie – Herbert Street Council Facilities
- Birdsville – Visitors Information Centre or Town Hall

Please see Annexure 1 for photos of these locations.

The CUC Low-Population Model provides the opportunity for the higher education sector to draw on the expertise and success of the CUC and widen participation in the most remote regions of outback Australia.

### Recommendation:

Invest in the low-population regional model of the CUC as a subsection of the Regional Universities Centre Program.

## Annexure 1 – Facility Locations



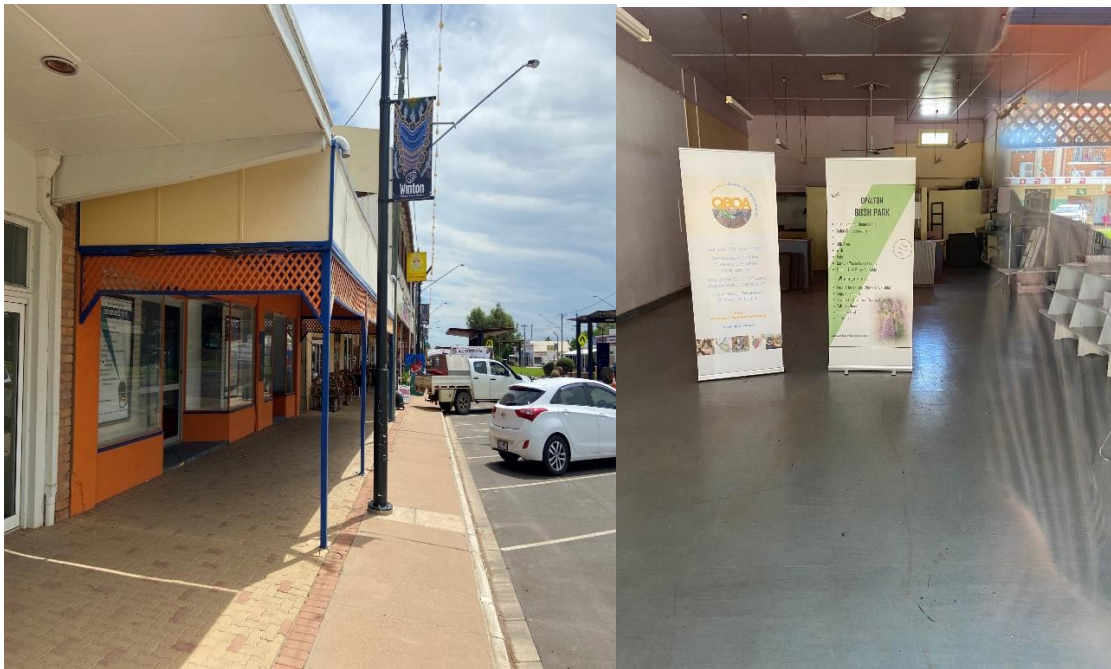
*Longreach Pastoral College*



*Barcaldine Visitors Information Centre*



*Old Blackall Hospital*



*68 Elderslie St, Winton*



*Boulia Library*



*Jundah Visitors Information Centre/Post Office*



*Herbert St, Bedourie*



*Birdsville Visitors Information Centre*

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# Country Universities Centre

DEGREES CLOSER