

18 August 2023

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

Dear Professor O’Kane and the Australian Universities Accord Panel

Geraldton Universities Centre (GUC) welcomes the intent of the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report of “growth through equity”.

As the original Regional University Centre (RUC) in Australia and having spent 20 years specifically addressing regional university participation and growth, we offer this submission addressing some identified initiatives under the panel’s consideration. We believe there are opportunities to further leverage the GUC model (and other RUCs) to meet the challenge of increasing enrolments and success of students from underrepresented groups. We also highlight some of the specific challenges facing regional WA in this regard.

For clarity, when referring to the **GUC model** we mean the study facilities and general supports found in smaller regional study hubs, AND the course specific, face-to-face academic tutorial support provided at GUC. It is this ability to form partnerships with universities to support cohorts of students that sees GUC consistently graduating 40-50 local people a year to help meet the professional skills needs of our region, staffing local hospitals, schools, agencies and businesses.

The need to provide a campus model experience with course specific academic support through an RUC is particularly important in WA where there are no regionally headquartered universities.

Universal Learning Entitlement (pgs 9 and 43)

GUC is most supportive of the Universal Learning Entitlement concept with a priority element of it guaranteeing Commonwealth supported funding for all equity students. It’s hard to see how “growth through equity” would be anything other than a slogan without it.

We highlighted the benefits of guaranteed equity student funding in our terms of reference submission with other campus model RUCs and GUC’s discussion paper response:

- It would ensure growth models for universities are centered on recruitment, retention and completion of equity students.
- It would underpin innovative support arrangements (like GUC has in place with partner universities). This extends the RUC program to allow for course related academic support that produces retention and completion outcomes on the ground for students and communities.
- It can lead to efficient third party fee-sharing arrangements based on EFTSL (Commonwealth Supported Place and Student Contribution) as demonstrated by the GUC model.

Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia put forward a comprehensive definition of equity students. For clarity, regionally based students studying online with a metropolitan based university, while being supported at an RUC, must be included in any definition of equity students.

“Encouraging and incentivising new models of delivery and collaboration to increase tertiary education in regional and underserved areas” (p14)

The GUC model is the example of what is possible to increase tertiary education in regional areas. Our partnerships with CQUniversity, UniSQ and Curtin University allow for the following course models where all students enrol into the online version of the partner’s course but also receive:

- Bachelor of Education – 2 hour face-to-face tutorial per unit per week plus professional placements sought and supervised in local schools.
- Bachelor of Nursing - 2 hour face-to-face tutorial per unit per week or clinical intensive (3 days) run at GUC and adjoining TAFE simulated nursing wards PLUS clinical placements sought and supervised in local hospitals and agencies.
- Bachelor of Social Work – facilitated study sessions, first and second year residential schools (5 days) run at GUC, professional placements in local agencies supported by CQUniversity.
- Bachelor of Psychological Science – first 3 years of the psychology pathway supported with face-to-face, unit specific tutorials weekly.
- Bachelor of Accounting/Business – weekly course specific facilitated study session with industry professionals.
- STEPS bridging program – 2 hour face-to-face tutorial per unit per week. N.B. Without a student contribution and two of the STEPS units falling into the lowest Commonwealth contribution funding band (ie \$1,147) GUC supports this course at a loss. However, we know that if ever there is a time that students need support, it’s when they are building their skills and confidence through bridging. **Urgent attention is needed to adequately fund bridging courses if equity students are to be supported to gain university entrance.**
- Indigenous Tertiary Enabling Course – sourcing local ITAS tutors for students, on-site Aboriginal student support and access to GUC’s dedicated Aboriginal studies space.
- Curtin UniReady In Schools – under a cost recovery basis from our two public secondary schools, Year 12 students come to GUC one day per week for local tuition in the online bridging units so they achieve university entrance by the end of Year 12.

We augment online with face-to-face classes because it delivers results. Our retention and completion rates echo that of metropolitan universities even though many of our students are from multiple equity categories.

GUC’s partnerships were established during the demand driven system and the cultivated strength of the partnerships have survived the introduction of “caps” and the Pandemic (but only with Ministerial intervention to release more Commonwealth Supported Places for Geraldton). It is a fact that other campus model RUCs have found it difficult to achieve adequate fee sharing arrangements for course support models in the capped system, but the universal learning entitlement may ease that.

It is likely though that more incentives will be needed. Transparent **needs-based funding models (pg 11)** that adequately reflect the additional costs of supporting regional students on country would also serve as additional encouragement for universities to enter these partnerships. Loadings should apply per student and never be capped. The more funding there is to share, and the more this funding can be aligned to where the services for students are delivered on the ground, the better the outcomes that can be expected.

One size does not fit all in regional Australia.

Different regions/states may need targeted incentives to ensure they have the courses and opportunities for their local people to upskill to meet new industry demands. Leveraging investments in RUCs could also provide new and exciting innovations. Examples include:

- Making courses fully accessible for regional students in WA - GUC could support even more local students and run even more courses in the supported mode described above if they were available within WA. Currently WA universities rarely offer courses with residential schools/intensive blocks so regional students are locked out of courses with skills development, clinical or laboratory requirements. Commonwealth incentives for WA universities to rewrite curriculum could change the game for regional students and RUCs in WA. (See Attachment A for summary of this proposed initiative).
- Collaborative funding pools – just as the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program encouraged collaboration between RUCs and Universities to develop outreach and aspiration raising activities (albeit \$7mil was inadequate), a similar approach could be used for grants in the course delivery space to encourage more innovative models targeting regions and workforce need. The lack of population in WA's regions (particularly north of Perth) and no regionally headquartered university in WA needs to be considered when designing eligibility rules and assessing proposals so regional WA is not inadvertently discriminated against.
- **Cooperative Skills Centres (pg 74)** – GUC supports incentives/grant programs for skills centres as described in the interim report to address new industry needs in regions (eg for Hydrogen and renewable energy hubs). RUCs should be included in eligibility for any such funding as we are already well connected to local/regional industry, TAFE and universities and totally invested in seeing local people being able to upskill and our communities progress.

Regional National University (p14)

GUC is intrigued by the notion of a National Regional University. Depending on the model, this may provide an avenue for larger RUCs like GUC to become a campus of the Regional National University and further expand opportunity and aspiration for our community to attend university. We would certainly be open to participating in any feasibility study.

Reducing financial burden on students (pg 11)

GUC strongly supports the Accord's consideration into providing remuneration for mandatory work placements. The WA Education Department's Preservice Development Program may provide an example, offering \$250 (metro) - \$350 (regional) per week for students on placement.

Eligibility and rates for youth allowance and Austudy have to be considered in the mix of this Accord so students are not living below the poverty line or being forced to work more hours than allows for a successful study regime. We can devise all the programs and wrap around supports in the world, but "growth through equity" cannot be achieved if these students cannot afford to live while studying.

Yours sincerely



Natalie Nelmes
Director

Redesigning university courses to cater for regional workforce in WA

This initiative would see WA university courses in areas of workplace need redesigned to better provide access for regional students.

- Redesigning Bachelor courses of regional workforce need (eg engineering, midwifery, allied health, secondary education in STEM teaching areas, etc) to be **fully** accessible to regional students staying in the region for the duration of their study.
- Achieving this through online courses with the **inclusion/creation of once a semester residential schools** in Perth or the regions (typically 3-5 days) to meet practical skills development and/or accreditation requirements in these courses. These models already exist in regional universities in Queensland and New South Wales.

Leveraging of Commonwealth investment in WA's emerging RUC Network

The Commonwealth Government has funded 5 Regional University Centres (RUCs) based on the successful Geraldton Universities Centre model established in 2002. GUC has been joined since 2018 by the Pilbara Universities Centre (Karratha and Port Hedland) and Great Southern University Centre in Albany, with new centres in Broome and the Wheatbelt funded to establish in 2023.

- These RUCs provide a mechanism to build aspiration and actively recruit students in regions – small numbers of students in each location making overall for viable cohorts.
- These RUCs provide study spaces as well as the administrative, pastoral and a range of academic supports to help regional students studying otherwise online courses to succeed.
- Exploration (and testing) of innovative delivery models involving RUCs are now possible which may include academic support, regional work experience and/or professional/clinical placements.
- Importantly, RUCs provide an opportunity to increase Indigenous student participation rates. Already 8% of students at GUC identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and 6% of graduates are Aboriginal.

With the support of the RUC network, if WA universities offered the courses in the online with residential school mode, we could be **educating people in the regions, that want to stay living and working in the regions**, staffing those professional roles for the long term.

GUC is proof this works. In the past 5 years alone, GUC has produced 224 graduates including 112 registered nurses, 62 teachers and 38 psychology or social work graduates. The vast majority have gone on to work in Geraldton or other regional locations.

So much more could be achieved however, both in Geraldton and throughout regional WA, if there were a wide range of regional student-friendly courses provided by WA universities that could be supported at RUCs.

GUC has been allocated Commonwealth Supported Places which it cannot use (potentially \$1.2million worth a year) because there is insufficient university product accessible from WA universities. While acknowledging university is a Commonwealth funding responsibility, there is a role for the State to play in supporting the creation of this university product in WA that will allow regionally based university students to access a broader range of courses to meet state workforce need.