



Geraldton Universities Centre

response to the

National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy Framing Paper

The Geraldton Universities Centre (GUC) provides this response to the National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy Framing Paper as an independent, not-for-profit, incorporated body, supporting university courses in Geraldton, WA on behalf of its partner universities. A brief background to the Geraldton Universities Centre is provided as well as direct responses to the challenge areas identified in the framing paper. It is important to note that in late 2018, the Federal Government allocated funding for the establishment and maintenance of 16 regional university study hubs throughout Australia, citing the GUC model in the Higher Education Reforms Package in which the funding announcement was made.

Background

Incorporated under the Geraldton Institute Inc (GII), a membership of some 25 representatives from key local community, industry and government agencies, GUC's mission is to provide opportunity for all with a range of high quality, supported university programs that build regional capacity.

GUC values community, partnerships, aspiration, equity and excellence. These values are upheld by strong governance, led by a regionally based board elected from the GII membership and committed to meeting the demands of the Mid West community by:

- Utilising the best possible technology for high quality online experiences, always accompanied by local face-to-face support.
- Ensuring that the programs delivered to students at the GUC provide equity in terms of quality, services and value for money.
- And, ensuring that the agreements with university partners be mutually beneficial.

Importantly, GUC is not a university, nor a campus of a university. The higher education awards achieved by students are offered and conferred by GUC's university partners, CQUniversity, the University of Southern Queensland and Curtin University.





These university partners value the Centre's support for students and therefore share a percentage of the EFTSL (Equivalent Full Time Student Load) funding they receive from student fees and Commonwealth Supported Places for GUC to provide services locally. All arrangements are governed by a formal service level agreement between GUC and the university provider.

Since changing to its independent structure in 2010, student numbers have increased three-fold. Around 300 students are currently studying at the Centre in 11 different programs, being supported administratively, pastorally and academically. Studying in mixed-mode, these students are enrolled as distance students and access online curriculum from university partners while attending face-to-face tutorials or intensive blocks of tuition at GUC. Academic support tutors are sourced from local industry experts, and are vetted and approved by our partners, ensuring they meet all standards required for tutors on that program of study. A small number of students study other distance programs by supported distance education, receiving all the study hub and support services of GUC but without tutorial support.

More than 150 students have graduated from new courses at GUC since the restructure in 2010, going on to provide the professional workforce Geraldton and the Mid West region needs to service the community.

Framing Paper Challenges

Challenge A: There are fewer study options available in RRR areas

1. What opportunities exist to expand options for further study in RRR areas?
2. What potential is there for universities, vocational training providers and other service providers to better work together in RRR areas, including opportunities to expand service offerings and better support articulation between VET and higher education?

The Commonwealth Government has acted to expand university hubs like GUC's, providing funding for 16 hubs throughout Australia to either be established or maintained. With a proven track record in the provision of supported university education for RRR students through this approach, GUC has been assisting some of the newest proponents to establish their distinctive regional presence. Along with the Governance, Quality and Access Branch of the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training, we believe there is much to be gained by hubs communicating, working and learning from each other. To this end, GUC has proposed a conference/workshop of all hub proponents in 2019 in Geraldton.





Success factors:

GUC has identified some key factors behind our ability to create a successful, sustainable hub:

1. Independence and community driven governance – It's the difference between being told what your community needs from those outside it to being directly in touch with what the community needs and being accountable and committed to deliver it. The passion, experience, skills set, connections and long term commitment of Geraldton Institute Inc members and their elected GUC Board has guided the GUC through many headwinds and maintained the vision to achieve success. Similarly, locally based, long term Directors supports relationship building and positive partnerships.
2. Seed funding – GUC could not have got to the point of sustainability without government support for infrastructure, new course development and services. As you will see in this paper, funding for key support services needed in RRR areas is a constant challenge and will be for all new regional hubs.
3. Sharing values with university partners – our university partners have values like inclusiveness and engagement that clearly resonate with us and deliverables that we can act on, like increasing access for Aboriginal students.
4. Active industry involvement – helping GUC to identify and build the regional capacity they need, industry has provided unpaid expertise to select and develop courses to meet local needs, and then going on to supply the tutors (paid) necessary to provide the face-to-face support for students.

This latter point of tutorial support is very important for a number of reasons:

- It is what the community wants and students need – the community demands “real” university where students can meet to form social networks while cementing their learning with face-to-face tutorials.
- GUC does not have to replicate a full academic staff - with mixed-mode distance education, GUC employs sessional tutors from local industry, vetted by us and approved by our university partners, willing to provide a couple of hours a week of their time to tutor. It would be almost impossible for GUC to otherwise find and fund full time academics.
- While academic support is vital to student achievement, it is also key to the GUC's ability to cut a deal with university partners for a significant share of EFTSL. Given this is





how GUC funds itself, it is not only absolutely essential to GUC's financial sustainability, it also means the Commonwealth Government is receiving exceptional value for money. The Commonwealth per student funding is shared by the university providing the online curriculum and the hub providing the administrative, academic and pastoral support.

Challenges

There are however, many challenges in sustaining a regional university hub and it is important that these are not underestimated. The economics of student numbers that work in larger metropolitan centres just do not apply in smaller regional areas and thin markets become even more pronounced the more rural and remote you go. Geraldton has a population of around 40,000 people to produce the sustainable 300 students studying across the 11 programs GUC offers.

Further, thin markets can lead to quick saturation of the student market for a course or difficulties in finding a sufficient cohort every year, something that is necessary if you are to at least break even on the costs of academic staffing and resourcing to provide face-to-face support.

Not all communities will have the same availability of suitably qualified professional staff to tutor in programs so options for face-to-face support might not always be possible, therefore limiting the EFTSL share likely to be negotiated with university partners. This means less money in the hub budget, limiting opportunities to provide a comprehensive range of support services and achieve financial viability.

Similarly, not all communities will have the same capacity to generate the grassroots passion and drive from their membership to build a successful community owned tertiary education centre. Certainly the corporate knowledge that has built up in the GUC Board and management over many years cannot be replicated overnight.

The need to negotiate legal agreements around the complexity of differing EFTSL rates for different courses, determining the levels of services that may or may not be needed for different courses or provided at different hubs, and costing that out appropriately so that a hub may ultimately be sustainable, takes considerable knowledge and experience. That's before creating policies, procedures and ultimately operational services to successfully support the students on the ground in a community. Therefore support for project officers, managers and Boards at new hubs will be critical from the Government, more established hubs and universities.





Government policy

The model is highly dependent on Government policy and predicated on the uncapped, demand driven model for university places. It is vital that this remains. Negotiating a percentage share of EFTSL funding is only attractive if it increases places for the university partner.

In funding new hubs, the Government should consider policies that allow hubs to become self-sustaining and/or commit to recurrent operational funding. Hubs in smaller communities, unless privately sponsored, may never totally achieve sustainability through share of EFTSL. Given hubs support distance students (and under the current government funding arrangements must provide access to students from any Australian university, not just those they have an agreement with), Government could consider compelling universities to share a percentage of their EFTSL with the hub if a student registers for access.

Alternatively, hubs could be supported through a direct regional hub loading per student. This would not affect university partners and the EFTSL share hubs negotiate with them. It would certainly assist hub sustainability if they had a direct line of recurrent funding.

There has also been some suggestion that proposed performance linked payments to universities may provide some avenue for hubs to be supported. However, the onus of proof may be overly complex or burdensome for very small hub operators who are already charged with the difficult task of retaining and supporting students that have come from areas of disadvantage, and therefore face greater challenges to complete. Potentially the Government could reward universities who partner with regional hubs and share EFTSL in their efforts to raise RRR student's performance, further incentivising the sector to work with RRR communities.

There are all sorts of student support services that are needed and can best be delivered by not for profit organisations on the ground in RRR areas, but the financial support must be forthcoming from governments directly (or via universities) to enable it to happen.

VET pathways

Regional university hubs can provide an excellent liaison point between vocational training providers and their university partners to provide articulated pathways for local students from Cert IV and Diploma courses into Associate Degree and Bachelor programs. Already close to a third of GUC students come through a TAFE pathway and generally, courses that have both a traditional university entry pathway and a TAFE pathway, provide better overall enrolment





numbers and are therefore more sustainable. In Geraldton, students completing Diplomas of Early Childhood and Care, Conservation and Land Management, Accounting, Enrolled Nursing and Community Services/Counselling can all receive up to a year's credit going into Bachelor degree courses offered by GUC's partners and supported at the Centre.

It should be noted that such students generally require additional support in the early stages at university, especially with academic writing as, with their credited advanced standing, they tend to go straight into second year university units. Recognising this, GUC provides additional academic writing workshops for these students and ensures through the administrative support process, that students are clear about the expectations at university level.

Whether through a TAFE pathway or non-traditional entry like work experience or CQUniversity's STEPS bridging program supported at the Centre. Flexible entry pathways are critical in regional areas. More than 200 students have achieved university entrance through STEPS in Geraldton since 2012, 13 of whom have been Aboriginal.

Challenge B: Relocating RRR students face significant financial, emotional and social challenges

3. What financial supports work best for students from RRR backgrounds, including those who choose to relocate?
4. What forms of support might be useful in helping students from RRR backgrounds to continue with their tertiary study?
5. How can universities assist RRR students to feel like they belong on their campus?

Clearly, one way of decreasing the significant financial, emotional and social challenges of having to relocate for study is to bring the study to the people as we have been describing through regional university hubs. But in the absence of a hub (or even where there might be one), students studying externally may be required to travel to a main campus for residential schools. Travel bursaries to undertake residential schools at university campuses (whether they be regional universities or metropolitan) would certainly ease the burden. Aboriginal students can already apply for 'study away from base allowance' if they are registered for Abstudy.

If a similar scheme could be extended to all students (especially if they already meet Centrelink requirements for Youth Allowance or Austudy) then that would provide further practical financial assistance.

It may also encourage more RRR external students to take STEM courses as it is often these courses that have laboratory components that must be completed face-to-face in residential schools where there are appropriate laboratory facilities and expertise.





Challenge C: Raising aspirations for tertiary education

6. What actions would help to raise aspirations and support informed career choices for students from RRR backgrounds?

It is difficult to build aspiration for tertiary education in a RRR area if students don't genuinely think this is an available or achievable option. Regional hubs help fill that gap if a regional university campus isn't feasible or available. On top of GUC's general promotional efforts through traditional and digital/social media, GUC staff provide outreach services in the local community to build aspiration for university. This includes talks and expo booths at local schools, facilitating student and/or parent visits to GUC, Open Days and providing GUC facilities for community and corporate events to build awareness of a local university option.

GUC's student support officer works closely with the local Secondary Schools' Follow the Dream (FTD) program for achieving Aboriginal students and some GUC education students have engaged in mentoring programs. This involvement has seen four students from FTD go on to study at GUC.

Opportunities may also exist in communities to build aspiration around major industry or regional initiatives. For example, CSIRO's Square Kilometre Array multi-billion dollar radioastronomy project in the Mid West may present opportunities for our community to encourage active engagement in science and engineering activities as it develops.

Challenge D: RRR often experience multiple forms of disadvantage

7. What practical steps can be taken to support RRR students who experience multiple forms of disadvantage?
8. How can we better support Indigenous people from RRR areas to access and succeed in tertiary education?

Disadvantaged groups remain under-represented in tertiary education and there is a need for continuous effort to reduce barriers for regional and remote students to access higher education. Community led, regionally based university hubs like GUC play a direct and tangible role in increasing this participation.

Students with disadvantage, no matter what the cause of that disadvantage, tend to seek face-to-face support. While there is plenty of online support available through university websites, GUC's experience is that many students don't look for it, realise it would even be there or feel comfortable to access it that way.





Support people on the ground (for Aboriginal student support as well as the full range of pastoral supports for all students) can guide students through the process of using online services but having that intermediary first is critical. The ability to continuously fund such support people is the issue.

GUC has students with a range of disabilities and mental health issues that we have helped navigate the university system to achieve learning accessibility plans that make it possible for them to participate, and achieve, with our university partners – and, importantly, stay home with their support networks while doing so.

Once again, flexible entry pathways are extremely important for those that have come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Around half the students studying at GUC enter via a non-traditional method (ie non-ATAR) through TAFE pathways, work experience and CQUniversity's STEPS bridging program.

Aboriginal Student Support

Around 8% of GUC's current students are Aboriginal and we are aiming for parity with Geraldton's Aboriginal population of 10%. We achieve this, not just by being on country, but through actively reaching out to the community with a student support officer and working with successful school based programs such as Follow the Dream.

Once enrolled, Aboriginal students continue to be very strongly supported administratively and pastorally by GUC staff as well as the excellent relationships we have built up with our university partners' Aboriginal student support teams. Support includes everything from being a general sounding board, to assisting with scholarships, to advocacy on student's behalf. Importantly, we also source and support additional tutorial assistance funded under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy. Where possible, this additional tutorial assistance is provided face-to-face rather than relying on online tutors as this is what our students request.

Feedback from our Aboriginal community also tells us that Aboriginal specific courses and dedicated culturally safe spaces are needed in the region. Many Aboriginal people in regional areas work within industry and have a lot of knowledge but not necessarily the qualification to go with it. This limits career growth. Acknowledging this, GUC has recently begun working with Curtin University's Centre for Aboriginal Studies to investigate whether dedicated Aboriginal enabling and degree courses (with flexible, holistic entry requirements) could run in Geraldton. Such courses run with intensive residential schools. Once again, sustaining student numbers is a





critical issue but we are working towards, at the very least, having some of the residential schools run in Geraldton, accompanied by support at GUC in between these intensives to keep student on track.

This approach however is only possible because of the additional funds GUC received from the Government's recent regional hub funding. We will be using the majority of those funds to expand GUC's facilities which will allow us to include a culturally safe space for Aboriginal students. GUC already has an Aboriginal Garden to provide acknowledgement of past graduates which in turn provides aspiration for future Aboriginal students.

Funding

Despite the fact that organisations like GUC can make such a tremendous difference right at the coal face of a regional community, because we are not a university, GUC is excluded from applying for Commonwealth support programs like the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program. The success of GUC, on very limited funds, shows that community based organisations, in regional areas, can deliver excellent value for money and grass roots outcomes, especially for those groups the Government intends to target through these participation programs. If definitions for such programs could be less rigid so that regional hubs were eligible to apply for funding, this would go a long way to ensuring support hits the ground where it's needed. This may also assist sustainability for some of the new centres, providing funding for support staff that does not have to be found through EFTSL share.

Challenge E: Attracting people and jobs to RRR areas

9. How can tertiary education providers further stimulate economic growth in RRR areas?

10. What actions would further strengthen and increase the attractiveness of regional universities?

11. What policies would attract more metropolitan and international students to study at RRR areas, including regional universities and campuses?

Regional university hubs themselves can make a substantial contribution to building the capacity of their regions. GUC's contribution to the local economy is substantial. It conservatively costs \$20,000 a year to relocate and keep a university student in Perth. If the 300 students studying at GUC this year had to relocate to Perth, it would directly draw \$6million out of the local economy. And that's before any multiplier effects or realities such as whole families up and leaving town to go with their student. In addition to plugging a considerable leak, GUC also directly injects nearly \$2million pa from EFTSL into the local economy to pay wages, maintenance, etc.





Further, GUC is providing opportunity for local people to up-skill and build the capacity of the region with the majority of GUC graduates going on to work in Geraldton or regional WA. GUC supplies Geraldton its own teachers, nurses, social workers and so on, performing the essential services a community needs. Engineering officers, accountants and business managers help make local industry and business become stronger and more competitive. And all of this provides the social and economic fabric for other industries to develop.

Supported by local government and industry, GUC has previously run a one-off town planning course when, during previous resource booms, planners were in severe short support, particularly in regional areas. GUC can work with the community to respond quickly!

International

The framing paper makes reference to opportunities for regional providers to attract more international students. It should be noted however that current visa requirements for international students precludes them being distance students, even if they are receiving face-to-face support at a regional hub. There is potentially an opportunity for a Chinese school in Geraldton which would seek university pathways (locally) for their students. A different delivery model with GUC's university partners would have to be reached and meet TEQSA approval if our regional community and our organisation was to benefit from international students. Visits to China by the local Council have highlighted a strong interest in nursing and marine/aquaculture courses in particular. GUC is aware that international students would require accommodation and significantly more support to enhance their understanding of the English language.

Challenge F: Implementing and monitoring a national strategy

12. Would there be value in establishing a National Regional Education Commissioner to oversee the Strategy and, if so, what should their role be?
13. How should success be measured? What goals and targets, including for tertiary education attainment, should be considered both at a national and individual community level?

GUC sees definite value in a National Regional Education Commissioner to keep a constant focus on the educational needs of those in RRR communities and to monitor and assess the success of strategies designed to improve access in the regions. While a national role, it is crucial to acknowledge that a one size fits all approach will never work across regional Australia. A Commissioner could work to build understanding in government and across successive governments) of the nuances in RRR educational needs. Ideally, a Commissioner would travel regularly to RRR communities in all states to build this understanding first hand and could be





based in a regional capital, travelling to Canberra to brief government rather than the other way around (ie being based in Canberra and occasionally going into regional communities.)

There may be a role for the Commissioner to help bridge the knowledge gap and open doors for new regional university hubs, encouraging learning amongst hubs. Hosting an annual regional hub conference for instance would strongly support the work of the Commissioner as well as help hubs to development. The independence of both the Commissioner and hubs though must be paramount. The role of a Commissioner should be to empower communities through knowledge and connections with the universities, not to directly negotiate, set rates or services between the two.

GUC agrees with roles for the Commissioner put forward by the Regional Universities Network to:

- Enhance access, outcomes and opportunities for RRR students and enhance the contribution of regional tertiary education to regional development.
- Report on educational achievement in RRR Australia.
- Inform the development of relevant policies and strategies, including a National Regional Higher Education Strategy and guidelines for regional City Deals

Success of this approach might be measured in:

- Increased participation, retention and completion in higher education by RRR students, both in RRR areas and at larger metropolitan campuses
- Increased participation, retention and completion of disadvantaged groups, especially Aboriginal students and those from lower social economic backgrounds.
- Increased capacity in regional areas, especially in terms of meeting the regional workforce needs.

