

# Country Universities Centre Response to the National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy Framing Paper Regional Education Expert Advisory Group

The Country Universities Centre (CUC) supports the initiative of the Federal Government to develop a strategy for supporting Regional, Rural and Remote students to be successful in Higher Education. Below, the CUC addresses a number of Challenges presented in the Expert Advisory Group's framing paper.

## Challenge A – Fewer Study Options Available to RRR Students

The CUC is a not-for-profit network of regional study hubs (RSH), established with the aim of making higher education more accessible for communities in regional and remote areas. In 2019, the CUC will operate eight RSH locations across NSW, in populations ranging from 7 000 (Cooma) to 23 000 (Goulburn).

One of the biggest challenges faced by regional and remote students is the absence of a 'campus' environment and its associated support and benefits. The CUC delivers supported learning to these students, providing them with access to campus level technology, facilities, tutors, supportive administrative and academic staff and a network of fellow students.

The CUC seeks to develop quality learning communities in regional towns through:

- Providing access to technology and campus-like facilities, including 100mbps internet connectivity
- Supporting students with academic tutors, administrative assistance and pastoral care
- Providing advice on study pathways and opportunities, including scholarships
- Developing networks of students within the region
- Enabling higher education opportunities for youth to remain in the community and be successful
- Encouraging local academic and professional networks to wrap around the students and assist transition into the workforce.
- Supporting local high value jobs for the increasing knowledge economy

The CUC model supports students in participating communities studying any degree at any university, with the following advantages:

- All students have equitable access to the community driven facilities, and not just a subset of students studying particular courses at particular universities;

- The potential number of students accessing the facility is maximized, increasing the value of the facility to the community and optimizing the student environment and study support opportunities through a greater student base;
- Communities are delivered a more diverse array of knowledge and qualifications, enriching the community;
- Students have choice and the ability to gravitate towards enrolling in the higher quality course providers, and away from low quality educational provision, incentivizing universities to “beat the competition” by lifting quality of external study courses;
- Students can respond to local demand for knowledge/qualifications and gravitate into courses with higher local employment opportunities. In the CUC, freedom of study choice has resulted the most popular disciplines studied being Health, Education and Social Work which are three areas with greater employment growth in regional communities, showing freedom of choice at work.

Policy design assisting communities to maintain models which support all students in the location, rather than a subset studying just a few courses at a single university will potentially provide greater and more equitable returns for the above reasons. The challenge is to formulate potential financial models that sustain this model, which inevitably has a more fragmented enrolment pattern than a model that restricts choice by channeling students into just a few courses at one or two universities thereby resulting in greater cohorts in particular courses. It remains a challenge for the CUC to obtain revenues from those universities with only thin numbers of students studying a wide variety of courses in the CUC, and federal policy development incentivizing these universities to be financial contributors to the sustainability of this support model for their students will be very advantageous.

Currently the CUC is funded through a combination of Federal, State and Local Government, corporate sponsorship, and university partnerships. The long term vision of the CUC is to **transition away from government funding, towards a sustainable funding model supported by Australian Universities**. Government policy can assist through sensible policy design to incentivise universities to engage with Regional Study Hubs.

Outlined below are a number of practical policy options that support the CUC and the regional study hub concept, in reference to Challenges A, B and C.

### Allocation of Commonwealth Supported Places with the Federal Government RSH Program

Each of the successful recipients of the Federal Government RSH Program Funding in 2018 were allocated 11.5 commonwealth supported places, increasing to 32 places over 4 years. The allocation of these places has encouraged meaningful discussions with universities, and potential funding arrangements. We encourage the Expert Advisory Group to recommend similar policy positions in the future.

## Performance Based funding

The Federal Government released a discussion paper on Dec 18<sup>th</sup> 2018 titled: Performance-Based Funding for the Commonwealth Grant Scheme. We believe Regional Study Hubs improve the retention and the chances for success for regional students. Measures suggested in the Discussion Paper around performance based funding may encourage universities to look to the CUC and regional study hubs to provide support for their students, and improve their retention and completion rates. This may encourage collaboration and support for the RSH from the universities, who have been somewhat reluctant to engage with the RSH community on a financial level without incentive from government policy.

## Challenge B: Financial, emotional and social challenges for students who relocate.

The facilities of the CUC provide an option for students who do not wish to relocate for study to remain in their home towns. Through the CUC, these students receive academic support and work within a network of university students, whilst maintaining existing social structures and community support.

### Sense of Belonging

Research has shown that in mature-aged distance education students, sense of belonging is best fostered by student-to-student connections (Kahu 2014). These connections are possible at the CUC Centres, and encouraged by educationally purposeful activities arranged by the Centre Managers.

Encouraging and supporting regional study hub programs will continue to provide an option to students who cannot relocate, due to financial, emotional or social challenges.

## Challenge C: Raising aspirations for tertiary education

### Allocation of Enabling Places

Two -thirds of the CUC student cohort are entering university through alternate pathways, rather than direct ATAR entry after school. Access to enabling programs will provide a clear pathway into study for students considering university study. Appropriate academic and administrative support can be provided by the CUC to ease the transition of students into university study.

In response to the Federal Government Discussion paper released 11<sup>th</sup> Nov 2018: Consultation paper on reallocation of Commonwealth supported places, the CUC requests that the allocation of enabling places consider geography of regional and remote students, as well as equity factors such as SES, first in family, and aboriginal heritage. We suggest considering the allocation of enabling places directly to regional study hubs, in a similar manner to the RSH program CSP allocation of bachelor places.

## Challenge D – RRR Students often face multiple forms of disadvantage

Our students often face multiple equity factors that increase likelihood of attrition, including low/medium SES, mature-aged, studying externally, and part-time. A study by Edwards and MacMillan (2015) found that non-metro, part-time students over 25 only had a completion rate (over 9 years) of 43.9%, compared to a national average of 73.6%. The CUC model seeks to support these students, by providing academic and administrative support to students, particularly through the difficult first-year transition into study.

## Challenge F: Implementing and monitoring a national strategy

The CUC outlines below two aspects of this challenge that are relevant to Regional Study Hubs

### Measuring Success

A key outcome of the RSH program is not only to increase levels of Bachelor attainment in regional and remote areas, but also to ensure meaningful employment once students graduate. A practical method to measure these employment outcomes would be to add a question to the Graduate Outcome Surveys: “did the student utilise a regional study hub?”.

### Quality Assurance for Regional Study Hubs

The CUC network has a comprehensive suite of quality assurance measures, ensuring standards of facilities, technology and student support. We caution, however, bringing in formal regulation of the RSH community. For small regional towns, the cost of extensive regulatory requirements may stress RSH’s beyond the point of financial sustainability. The RSH community will meet at the Best Practice in Regional Study Hubs Symposium in November this year, and development of a self-regulating system for RSH will be discussed.

## References

- Edwards, D. & McMillan, J. (2015). Completing university in a growing sector: Is equity an issue? Australian Council for Educational Research
- Kahu, E.R. (2014). Increasing the Emotional Engagement of First-Year Mature Aged Students: Interest and Belonging. *The International Journal of First Year in Higher Education*, 5 (2), pp 45-55.