



Evaluation of the impact and effectiveness of the Naphthine Measures

Final Report

30 September 2024



Acknowledgements

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.0	Executive summary	5
1.1	Background	5
1.2	Overview of key findings	7
1.3	Recommendations	8
2.0	Evaluation methodology.....	10
3.0	Have the Naphthine Measures effectively achieved their policy objectives?	12
3.1	Measure One – Increase in Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding	12
3.2	Measure Two – Demand-driven CSP funding for Indigenous regional and remote students.....	17
3.3	Measure Three – Regional Research Collaboration Program	20
3.4	Measure Four – Refocusing the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program.....	24
3.5	Measure Five – Regional University Study Hubs	30
3.6	Measure Six – Establishing a Regional Partnership Project Pool Program	42
3.7	Measure Seven – Tertiary Access Payment.....	46
3.8	Measure Eight – Fares Allowance	51
3.9	Measure Nine – Regional Education Commissioner	54
4.0	Contribution to the Naphthine Goals.....	58
4.1	Bridging the tertiary education gap between RRR and metropolitan students.....	58
4.2	Driving productivity and growth for regional Australia	60
4.3	Increasing the research capacity of regional universities	60
5.0	The Australian Universities Accord.....	61
6.0	What design elements should be considered for future measures?	63
7.0	Conclusion	65
Appendix A:	Stakeholders that participated in an interview.....	66

Glossary of acronyms

Term	Definition
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank
ATEC	Australian Tertiary Education Commission
CGS	Commonwealth Grant Scheme
CSP	Commonwealth Supported Places
CUC	Country Universities Centre
EARUCP	Eastern Australia Regional University Centre Partnership
EFTSL	Equivalent Full Time Student Load
HECS	Higher Education Contribution Scheme
HECG	Higher Education Continuity Guarantee
HEC MGBA	Higher Education Course Maximum Basic Grant Amounts
HEIMS	Higher Education Information Management System
HEPPP	Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
NT YEAH!	Northern Territory Youth Engagement in Allied Health
RRC	Regional Research Collaboration
RRR	Regional, Rural and Remote
RPPPP	Regional Partnership Project Pool Program
RUSH	Regional University Study Hub
RUSH Network	Regional University Study Hubs Network
SES	Socioeconomic Status
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TAP	Tertiary Access Payment
USG	Uni Hub Spencer Gulf
VET	Vocational Education and Training

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Background

The final report of the National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Napthine Review) was released on 28 August 2019. The Review highlighted the city-country divide in participation and attainment rates for tertiary education, and found that those living in regional, rural and remote (RRR) areas were less than half as likely as their city counterparts to obtain a bachelor's degree or higher by the time they are 35 years old. The Napthine Review also found that students from RRR areas were less likely to complete secondary schooling and face additional challenges in successfully transitioning to university and completing their studies. This was reflected in the higher attrition rates for RRR students compared to their metropolitan peers.¹

On 19 June 2020, the Australian Government announced a \$400 million package of measures (Napthine Measures) to support RRR tertiary education in response to the Napthine Review, under the Job-ready Graduates (JRG) package. The measures were intended to achieve the three 'Napthine Goals' – bridging the gap in participation and attainment between RRR and metropolitan students, driving productivity and growth for regional Australia, and increasing the research capacity of regional universities. The measures, outlined in **Figure 1** below, consist of a range of initiatives that have provided funding to universities and students, supported partnerships for the delivery of higher education outreach activities, and funded the establishment and operations of new Regional University Study Hubs and the Regional Education Commissioner role.

In April 2024, the Department of Education, on behalf of the Hon Fiona Nash, the Regional Education Commissioner, engaged [Allen + Clarke Consulting](#) to undertake an evaluation of the Napthine Measures. The purpose of the evaluation is to examine the effectiveness and impact of the Napthine Measures by considering the success of individual measures against their policy objectives, as well as evaluating the measures together to understand their potential collective contribution to the Napthine Goals. The evaluation provides recommendations on actions that could be taken by the Australian Government to reduce the disparity between RRR and metropolitan students in tertiary education outcomes and focused on the design and implementation of future measures.

The Australian Universities Accord has commenced a process of higher education reform in Australia. This evaluation also explores the relevance of the Accord to the Napthine Measures and identifies changes to individual measures that will arise from the reform process.

The evaluation used a multi-method approach which included analysis of qualitative data from stakeholder consultations, literature review and stakeholder submissions, and quantitative analysis of tertiary education data.

¹ [National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy](#), Department of Education, Australian Government. Accessed 28 June 2024.

Figure 1: The Napthine Measures

University Funding
1. An increase in Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding for regional university campuses 2. Enabling Indigenous students from regional and remote areas to access demand-driven Commonwealth-supported university places 3. Enhancing the research capacity of regional universities through a Regional Research Collaboration Program 4. Refocusing the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program to apply to a higher education provider's share of domestic undergraduate students from regional and remote areas
Regional University Study Hubs Funding
5. Strengthening and expanding the Regional University Study Hubs Program
Funding for Regional University Study Hubs and Universities
6. Establishing a Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program to enable universities and Regional University Study Hubs to deliver higher education outreach initiatives in regional and remote Australia
Student Funding
7. A \$5,000 Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) to encourage and assist regional and remote students to access tertiary study immediately following Year 12 8. Improving the Fares Allowance to reduce the waiting time for first year payments to support students to visit home during their mid-year break
Regional Education Commissioner
9. Establishing a Regional Education Commissioner to oversee implementation of the Napthine Review response, and report to the Government on regional education

1.2 Overview of key findings

This evaluation found that the Naphthine Measures have been implemented in accordance with their policy objectives and have been generally supported by universities and other tertiary education stakeholders. Stakeholders viewed the measures collectively as a significant commitment to progressing higher education participation and attainment in RRR areas, and as an important contribution to generating sustainable change across the national higher education system to support the needs of students from RRR areas. This evaluation has found that the Naphthine Measures have provided important and highly valued funding for regional universities and regional students, and that individual initiatives hold significant promise as a driver and facilitator of tertiary enrolment for students from RRR areas.

Implementation of some measures was delayed by environmental factors including the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2022 Federal Election, while for some measures implementation was delayed by local factors including staff capacity and turnover, university research infrastructure and local capital works processes.

Limitations in national higher education data, and inherent challenges associated with attributing change in complex environments to particular initiatives, means it is not possible for this evaluation to measure the impact of the Naphthine Measures on tertiary education enrolment and attainment in RRR areas. This is compounded by the broader tertiary education environment in Australia in recent years, in which student enrolment has been impacted by factors including the COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living pressures.

1.3 Recommendations

There are 12 key recommendations arising from the evaluation.

University funding measures

- 1 **The Australian Government should ensure that the implementation of per-student funding contributions under a needs-based funding model adequately responds to the cost of higher education delivery in regional Australia.** Regional universities continue to face significant headwinds in terms of student enrolment and costs, and it is important that sufficient funding is available to support excellence in research and teaching, and to ensure financial sustainability.
- 2 **The Australian Government should implement measures to support more timely release of higher education funding and enrolments data.** Reducing the current one-year delay in data release will support higher education planning, research and evaluation.
- 3 **The Australian Government should consider expanding the eligibility of future programs similar to the RRC Program to include students completing masters degrees.** This step will support recruitment and enhance program impact.
- 4 **The Australian Government should continue to support research and research infrastructure in RRR areas, with a focus on building long-term capacity and aligning research with industry priorities.** This focus will support the delivery of sustainable, high-quality research by regional universities that supports economic development.

Regional University Study Hubs

- 5 **The Department of Education should progress the collection and analysis of data on student experience, participation and attainment of students studying with support of the Hubs.** This could be undertaken by encouraging participation by all Hubs in the survey developed by the RUSH Network. Consideration should also be given to obtaining data on course completion of Hub students by linking data from the Hubs with data from education providers, through Unique Student Identifiers.
- 6 **The Department of Education should undertake analysis of data on tertiary education participation in RRR areas, with and without a Regional Study Hub.** Given the significant expansion of the Hubs network since Cohort One, including through the relevant Naphthine Measure and in response to the Accord, it would be timely for the Department of Education to consider undertaking follow up research of the full Hubs network. The ABS's annual Survey of Education and Work, and the 2026 National Census, may provide opportunities for this data analysis.

Funding for Regional University Study Hubs and Universities Funding

- 7 **Higher education outreach activities should seek to build upon the RPPPP model of multi-stakeholder partnership to drive impactful higher education outreach.** This model holds significant promise for breaking down organisational silos, fostering cost-effective outreach and catalysing transformational change.

Student Funding measures



8

The Department of Education and Services Australia should implement measures to increase accessibility and awareness of the TAP. This should include raising awareness through targeted social media and simplifying the application process to reduce levels of application rejection.

9

The Australian Government should broaden the TAP eligibility criteria to include students taking a gap year and other non-traditional pathways. This amendment will provide greater flexibility and reflect the variety of pathways through which RRR students enter higher education.

10

The Department of Education and Services Australia should collect data on student experience of applying for and receiving the TAP, and impacts of the TAP on influencing student decision-making and increasing higher education access. These steps will improve understanding of the impacts of the TAP and identify areas for potential future improvement.

11

Services Australia should increase awareness of the Fares Allowance payment and provide guidance on the application process through targeted social media campaigns. Greater awareness and clarity relating to eligibility and application processes is likely to increase the uptake of the Fares Allowance.

Regional Education Commissioner

12

The Commissioner should consider establishing regular higher education virtual roundtable sessions with universities and other key stakeholders. These sessions will facilitate open dialogue, allowing stakeholders to share their needs, challenges and feedback directly with the Commissioner.

2.0 EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The evaluation sought to answer six key evaluation questions, each developed based on the overarching Naphthine Goals and evaluation aim.

Figure 2: Methodology

Aim
Assess the Naphthine Measures individually against their policy objectives, and collectively as a set of measures, in order to understand their contribution and progress toward three key 'Naphthine Goals'
Naphthine Goals
Bridging the gap in participation in and attainment of tertiary education between regional, rural, and remote (RRR) and metropolitan students
Driving productivity and growth for regional Australia
Increasing the research capacity of regional universities
Key Evaluation Questions
1) What progress has been made toward halving the disparity levels between RRR and metropolitan students?
2) Have the Naphthine Measures effectively achieved their policy objectives?
3) To what extent have the Naphthine Measures contributed to the Naphthine Goals?
4) Should changes or adjustments be made to the Naphthine Measures?
5) What design elements should be considered for future measures?
6) What has been the impact of the environment in which the Naphthine Measures have been implemented?

The evaluation adopted a comprehensive approach to data collection, as detailed below. Key sources of data are outlined in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Data sources informing the evaluation

Evaluation information sources	
	Desktop analysis 60 documents were reviewed including the National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy, the Australian Universities Accord final report, annual reports prepared by the Regional Education Commissioner, reporting related to specific Naphthine Measures, and written submissions from stakeholders.
	National tertiary education data A range of Australian Government tertiary education datasets were reviewed.
	Stakeholder consultation 22 interviews were held with over 50 stakeholders including Department of Education staff responsible for specific measures, other Government representatives, regional development-focused organisations, Regional University Study Hubs, universities, Universities Accord members, advocacy organisations, higher education peak bodies and research organisations. Appendix A provides a full list of consulted organisations.

2.1.1 Evaluation strengths and limitations

A key strength of the evaluation was the comprehensive, mixed-methods approach to document review and stakeholder consultation. A total of 60 documents were reviewed, and over 50 individuals from a range of relevant organisations participated in the consultation process.

As explored further throughout this Report, there are some limitations of the data that should be acknowledged. In particular, there are limitations in the available quantitative data relating to national tertiary education enrolments and attainment, and in qualitative data relating to student experience with the Naphthine Measures. Evaluating the impact of the Naphthine Measures has also been limited by the relatively short time periods they have been in operation for, with the package of measures announced in 2020 and variable timing of implementation across the Measures.

These considerations, and the inherent complexity and range of factors affecting student decision-making, have impacted the ability of this evaluation to directly attribute the Naphthine Measures individually or collectively to changes in participation in and attainment of tertiary education between RRR and metropolitan students.

3.0 HAVE THE NAPHTHINE MEASURES EFFECTIVELY ACHIEVED THEIR POLICY OBJECTIVES?

This section provides background, analysis, findings and recommendations in relation to each of the nine Naphthine Measures, as well as an assessment of the progress of each measure against relevant key performance measures outlined in the Department of Education's Performance and Data Framework on the progress of tertiary programs and initiatives for regional and remote students.² This approach supports evaluation of whether the defined policy outcomes for each measure have been achieved or are on track to being achieved.

3.1 Measure One – Increase in Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding

3.1.1 Background

This measure funds more Commonwealth-supported places (CSPs) at universities through Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS) funding. A proportion of this funding increase is designed to support universities with regional campuses to be financially competitive and meet the needs of their local communities. Distribution of CGS funding is determined by the estimated distribution of non-medical bachelor level enrolments by campus regionality for individual universities. Funding increases under this measure are as follows:

- 3.5% per year for regional campuses
- 2.5% per year for campuses located in high-growth metropolitan areas
- 1.0% per year for campuses located in low-growth metropolitan areas.³

Note: This funding was applied on a 'commencing' basis with growth tapering in. Full growth rates apply from 2024.

The Department of Education advised that the distinction between high-growth and low-growth metropolitan campuses is determined using population projections from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, and the most recent Australian Statistical Geography Standard to determine campus regionality. Any campus located in a metropolitan area (Statistical Area 4) that has a higher than average 15–19-year-old population growth is classified a high growth metropolitan campus, all other metropolitan campuses are classified as low growth.

² Department of Education (2024). Performance and Data Framework: The Department's approach to overseeing and reporting on the progress of tertiary programs and initiatives for regional and remote students, including measures implemented in response to the Naphthine Review. Not publicly available.

³ For example, if 95% of University A's non-medical bachelor enrolments are at regional campuses, then 95% of their funding is indexed by 3.5% in 2024. University A's remaining non-medical bachelor enrolments are at a low-growth metropolitan campus and a growth rate of 1% will be used to index the remaining 5% of their funding envelope.

3.1.2 Findings

This measure has been implemented in a staged approach as intended, with Department stakeholders citing that the full funding growth rate of 3.5% for regional campuses has been applied as of 2024. Although implementation of this measure occurred as intended, the broader higher education environment was challenging during this period.

Declining student enrolment

Evaluation stakeholders consistently highlighted that the number of students choosing to undertake tertiary education has decreased since this measure was introduced. Data provided to the evaluation by the Department of Education indicates that Table A (public universities) providers' CSP EFTSL fell from 651,340 to 608,101 from 2021 to 2022 – a decline of 6.6%.⁴

Analysis of EFTSL data at selected regional universities indicates that from 2020-2021, EFTSL increased by less than half a percentage point, then decreased from 2021-2022 by followed by an approximately 8% decrease from 2021-2022.⁵ CSP EFTSL numbers for selected regional universities, and all public universities, are outlined in **Table 1**. Data for 2023 and 2024 was not available before the completion of this evaluation.

Table 1: Total public university and selected regional university EFTSL, 2020-22⁶

	2020	2021	2022
Charles Darwin University	6,061	6,204	5,717
Charles Sturt University	13,752	13,801	13,261
Central Queensland University	10,301	10,530	9,229
Federation University Australia	5,444	5,484	5,051
James Cook University	7,713	7,709	7,154
Southern Cross University	7,708	7,571	6,889
The University of New England	11,073	10,500	9,279
University of Southern Queensland	11,099	11,030	10,082
University of the Sunshine Coast	9,968	10,681	9,930
Selected regional university EFTSL	83,119	83,510	76,592
Total EFTSL for all public university providers	638,204	651,340	608,101

⁴ Based on publicly available data collated by the Department of Education for the purpose of this evaluation.

⁵ For the purposes of analysis in this section of university enrolments, the following universities were included: members of the [Regional Universities Network](#) (Charles Sturt University, Central Queensland University, Federation University, Southern Cross University, University of New England, University of the Sunshine Coast, University of Southern Queensland), and other universities with regional-based main campuses including Charles Darwin University and James Cook University.

⁶ Based on publicly available collated by the Department of Education for the purpose of this evaluation.

Some university stakeholders reported that regional university student enrolments have continued to decline, although one Queensland-based regional university representative suggested that positive ‘green shoots’ had recently been evident.

Evaluation stakeholders generally attributed the decline in student enrolments to the impacts of COVID-19 travel restrictions and lockdowns, and increased cost of living pressures. One university stakeholder attributed the decline in mature age student enrolments to their reluctance to take on HECS debt in a context of rising costs of living. Collectively, these factors were perceived to have driven shifts in the labour market, with people choosing employment over further education.

Several regional university stakeholders suggested that current CGS funding fails to sufficiently account for the significant costs associated with maintaining campuses in regional areas. Regional university stakeholders also expressed concerns about the Department of Education’s delayed release of higher education data, suggesting that this undermines the ability of universities to provide timely and accurate analysis and planning.

Data limitations: complex data environments and publication delays

While this measure has been delivered as intended, it is not possible to quantify the impact of CGS changes on regional education participation or attainment due to a range of factors including:

- complexity with distinguishing the impact of specific funding measures given there were several concurrent changes to overall funding arrangements, alongside introduction of the other Naphthine Measures
- delays in the release of national education enrolments and funding data.

Stakeholders indicated that a further limitation in evaluating the impacts of CGS funding changes relates to definitions of what constitutes ‘regional.’ A university peak body suggested that some self-identified ‘regional’ universities did not receive a 3.5% increase despite providing courses in RRR areas.

It's a geographical definitional question more than anything, and one of the key weaknesses in tertiary education policy is that there are about 80 different definitions of regional... Based on where a university was or where the campus was, they got caught out, or they got very lucky depending on how that geographical line was drawn. – University peak body stakeholder

The Australian Universities Accord identified the importance of increased CSG funding to address the ongoing higher education access and attainment gaps for people living in RRR areas and recommended that the transition to a new funding model should include a specific element to address the equity issues and increased costs associated with delivering higher education in RRR areas.

At the time of preparing this report the Department of Education was undertaking consultation on the design of future higher education funding models, including needs-based funding.

3.1.3 Recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Australian Government should ensure that the implementation of per-student funding contributions under a needs-based funding model adequately responds to the higher cost of higher education delivery in regional Australia. Regional universities continue to face significant headwinds in terms of student enrolment and costs, and it is important that sufficient funding is available to support excellence in research and teaching, and to ensure financial sustainability.

Recommendation 2

The Australian Government should implement measures to support more timely release of higher education funding and enrolments data. Reducing delays in data release will support higher education planning, research and evaluation.

3.1.4 Evaluation against key performance measures

✓ Target has been achieved or is on track	✓ Uncertain – insufficient evidence/data to draw conclusion	✗ Target has not been achieved and is not on track
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Key performance measures or targets	Progress
Increased funding to universities in regional and high-growth metropolitan areas	✓
Increased student enrolment at target universities	✗
Increased education attainment rates in regional areas	✓
Participation and attainment rates of regional students increase relative to metropolitan Australia	✓

3.2 Measure Two – Demand-driven CSP funding for Indigenous regional and remote students

3.2.1 Background

The introduction of demand-driven CSP funding for Indigenous regional and remote students aimed to increase access to higher education for Indigenous regional and remote students through the provision of CSPs for bachelor-level courses other than medicine. The primary objective of this measure is to provide greater choice and support self-determination.⁷ Following Priority Action 3 from the Accord Interim Report, in January 2024, demand-driven funding was expanded to all eligible Indigenous students, regardless of location.⁸

3.2.2 Findings

This measure has been implemented as intended and stakeholders were largely supportive of its aims. However, it was not possible to determine this measure's impact against its key performance measures due to limits with baseline and implementation data for the post-2022 period, alongside the intersection of complex funding mechanisms and environmental factors impacting student enrolments.

Declining student enrolments

There was limited data available on Indigenous CSPs to support this evaluation. Data provided to the evaluation by the Department of Education indicated that \$46.8 million was provided for approximately 3,940 EFTSL for all regional and remote First Nations Students in Table A universities in 2023. No data was provided for CSP EFTSL funding allocations for 2021, 2022, or 2024.

Regional universities generally expressed support for the measure and indicated that they had experienced an increase in total enrolments during the first year of implementation. However, it was not possible to directly attribute this increase to this specific measure given the range of drivers for individual student enrolment. Furthermore, university and Department of Education stakeholders identified a decline in Indigenous student enrolments since 2021 driven by broader environmental factors. These external factors, including COVID-19 and cost of living pressures, have limited the impact of this measure against its key performance measures.

⁷ To align with the measure name, the term 'Indigenous' has been used during discussion of the Demand-driven CSP funding for Indigenous regional and remote students measure. Elsewhere in the report, the term 'First Nations' has been used in accordance with the Australian Government guidance on culturally appropriate and respectful language for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Australian Government, [Australian Government Style Manual](#). Accessed 11 July 2024.

⁸ [Australian Universities Accord Interim Report](#) (pg.12), Department of Education, Australian Government. Accessed 4 July 2024.

I think there are a lot of other things out there that are impacting on student enrolments rather than just the availability of university places for them to take up... when this measure was introduced, it sent an important message but sustaining that message is a challenge. – University stakeholder

Reflecting this, Higher Education Equity Performance Data (HEEPD) demonstrates a decline in Indigenous regional and remote undergraduate students. For Indigenous undergraduate students whose first address is in regional or remote areas, total enrolled students declined by 3.5% from 7,585 to 7,319 between 2021⁹ and 2022,¹⁰ while when defined by permanent home address, enrolments for this equity group fell by 5.5% from 7,191 to 6,801 over the same period. While these figures suggest a small decline relative to the 6.6% decline in overall CSPs EFTSLs during the same period¹¹, it is not possible to draw a direct comparison as HEEPd does not specify which students were enrolled in a bachelor degree and subsequently offered a CSP under this measure.

Demand-driven funding

Data relating to previous demand-driven funding for Indigenous students suggests it can play a positive role in increasing enrolment. Under the previous demand-driven system operating from 2009 to 2017, commencing Indigenous student numbers increased by 95% from 3,006 to 5,867.¹² During that same period, the number of commencing domestic undergraduate students increased by 42% from 202,229 to 286,412.¹³ When this funding initiative ceased, the growth of Indigenous students plateaued, with 5,687 students in 2017 and 5,801 in 2018.

Some university and sector stakeholders suggested that a weakness of the demand driven CSP funding measure is that it applies only to bachelor's degree enrolments. Stakeholders advised that this targeted approach may have the perverse outcome of encouraging universities to enrol students in bachelor's degrees when it may have been more appropriate for these students to commence an enabling course or a diploma. Stakeholders also pointed to relatively low levels of year 12 attainment among Indigenous Australians and low retention rates from years 7-8 to year 12 as ongoing barriers to increasing degree enrolments.¹⁴

Some university stakeholders were critical of the demand-driven funding measure, noting that it did not suit the current tertiary education context characterised by declining student enrolments.

We certainly saw an impact the first year that it was introduced. There was a jump in our enrolments... We're not so sure if it's going to be sustained based on the change in enrolment patterns that we've seen this year. I think one of the issues over the past couple of years is that we're under enrolled. The demand driven argument is a little bit moot. I think it's a good strategy

⁹ Department of Education (2021) [2021 Section 11 Equity groups](#). Accessed 4 July 2024.

¹⁰ Department of Education (2022), [2022 Section 11 Equity groups](#). Accessed 4 July 2024.

¹¹ Data provided to the evaluation by the Department of Education.

¹² Data provided to the evaluation by the Department of Education.

¹³ Data provided to the evaluation by the Department of Education.

¹⁴ The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) reports that in 2021, 68% of Indigenous Australians aged 20-24 had attained year 12 or equivalent, and the national apparent retention rate for Indigenous students from year 7-8 to year 12 was 59%. AIHW, [Education Outcomes for young people](#). Accessed 5 July 2024.

to have, I don't know if it's having an ongoing impact on growing enrolment though. – University stakeholder

Data limitations

Evaluation stakeholders identified several data limitations which make it difficult to determine the impact of this measure. Given the range of factors that impact student enrolments outlined elsewhere in this Report, it is not possible to determine whether students were undertaking tertiary study because of the provision of a CSP under this measure or because of other factors. Limitations in the data collected by universities relating to Indigenous student course choices or experience, and lack of effective data sharing arrangements, are further limitations identified during this evaluation.

To optimise future evaluation, the Department's Performance and Data Framework flagged that expanding data collection to include qualitative insights from students who have benefited from this policy could provide a more holistic understanding of its impact. The Framework also suggested capturing data from year 12 school leavers would help assess whether there has been an increase in aspirations for higher education. The evaluation did not find evidence of progress in capturing this qualitative data.¹⁵ The Department of Education has indicated that evaluation of this program is in early stages of planning.

3.2.3 Recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Australian Government should ensure that the implementation of per-student funding contributions under a needs-based funding model adequately responds to the cost of higher education delivery in regional Australia. Regional universities continue to face significant headwinds in terms of student enrolment and costs, and it is important that sufficient funding is available to support excellence in research and teaching, and to ensure financial sustainability.

Recommendation 2

The Australian Government should implement measures to support more timely release of higher education funding and enrolments data. Reducing the current one-year delay in data release will support higher education planning, research and evaluation.

¹⁵ Department of Education. Performance and Data Framework: The Department's approach to overseeing and reporting on the progress of tertiary programs and initiatives for regional and remote students, including measures implemented in response to the Napthine Review. Not publicly available.

3.2.4 Evaluation against key performance measures

✓ Target has been achieved or is on track	✓ Uncertain – insufficient evidence/data to draw conclusion	✗ Target has not been achieved and is not on track
Key performance measures or targets		Progress
Increased student enrolment at target universities		✓
Comparing increase in First Nations student participation with broader student population		✓
Surveys to assess aspirations over time		✓

3.3 Measure Three – Regional Research Collaboration Program

3.3.1 Background

The Regional Research Collaboration (RRC) Program funds research collaboration between regional universities, industry and other higher education providers. It aims to build the research capacity of regional universities, increase numbers of postgraduate students and research staff in regional universities, foster sustained collaborations and partnerships with local employers and industries, and contribute to national research priorities.

The RRC Program received an initial funding commitment of \$87.3 million. Of this amount, \$39.6 million was allocated to 11 projects over two rounds. During round one, six universities received total funding of \$19.94 million. These projects included:

- Federation University Australia – [Research Centre for New Energy Transition](#)
- Central Queensland University – Development of Hydrogen Applications for Regional Industries
- University of Tasmania – Boosting research capability to develop value-added products for the food and wood industries in regional areas
- Charles Darwin University – [Research Institute for Northern Agriculture and Drought Resilience](#)
- University of New England – [Manna Institute](#)
- Charles Sturt University – Next Generation Water Engineering and River Management Hub.

A further five universities received \$19.66 million in funding in 2022. These projects included:

- Charles Sturt University – [Training Hub promoting Regional Industry and Innovation in Virology and Epidemiology \(THRIVVE\)](#)
- Federation University Australia – Transforming chronic health outcomes through digital innovation

- La Trobe University – Next Generation Protected Cropping in a Regional Manufacturing Facility — a Cannabis Exemplar (NexGen)
- University of Southern Queensland – [Sustainable Industry Manufacturing Planning for Long-term Ecosystems Hub \(SIMPLE Hub\)](#)
- University of Tasmania – Building capacity in Regional Australia to enhance Australia's Economy through research, training, and environmentally sustainable production of critical metals.

The RRC Program was discontinued in December 2023. All 11 projects funded will continue until their completion without any additional funding under this program. The remainder of the programs uncommitted funds were included in the Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook Education reprioritisation measure. These savings were redirected to fund other Government policy priorities in the Education portfolio, including implementation of immediate actions from the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report.¹⁶

3.3.2 Findings

The RRC Program has been largely successful in meeting its key performance measures and has contributed to meeting the Naphthine Goals of driving productivity and growth for regional Australia and increasing the research capacity of regional universities. Research funded under this measure has supported progress in key research areas and supported the creation of cross-sector partnerships.

Some stakeholders raised concerns about the impact of the December 2023 funding cuts on the ongoing viability of activities and partnerships established under this measure. Stakeholders also described several impediments to the success of this measure, including implementation delays resulting from COVID-19 and research capacity limitations within regional universities. Several projects are ongoing, and with none of the funded projects having yet been formally evaluated there was limited data available to this evaluation beyond anecdotal data provided by stakeholders.

Successful implementation of RRC projects

University stakeholders highlighted the RRC Program's value in supporting the establishment of research partnerships, supporting local workforce development in key areas of regional development, and building regional university research capacities. The evaluation found evidence of industry buy-in, with stakeholders reporting that projects secured co-funding from industry partners who matched or exceeded grant funding. This co-funding suggests the financial viability of at least some projects and highlights the potential of research to stimulate economic activity.

One project received \$10 million of industry buy-in from an initial \$3 million allocation... Most of these projects have expanded with matched grant funding. – Department of Education representative

¹⁶ The Commonwealth of Australia (2024). [Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook 2023-24](#). Accessed 29 August 2024.

University, Department of Education and other education sector stakeholders identified examples of projects that have directly addressed regional needs, including the Round One example provided in the case study below.

Case study: Next Generation Water Engineering and River Management Hub

Under Round One of the RRC Program, Charles Sturt University received \$3.6 million to establish the Next Generation Water Engineering and River Management Hub. In alignment with national research priorities ‘soil and water’ and ‘environmental change’, this project aims to develop solutions to current and future problems impacting Australia’s inland waterways, including poor water quality and diminishing fish stocks. Specific projects underway include:

- a partnership with a German university to implement a best-practice design for a fish-safe hydro power station
- working alongside local Indigenous people to restore traditional fish management strategies and techniques in the Northern Murray-Darling Basin
- implementing a community-led fish tagging program
- field-testing a ‘fish pump’ to provide fish migrations to large dams.

Project partners include Australian and international industry and university stakeholders including the University of New South Wales, local businesses, and local Indigenous Elders. Funding has been used to support eight research positions.

Delays, funding and sustainability

The RRC Program experienced delays in design finalisation and implementation, which were generally associated with rolling out the program during the COVID-19 pandemic, research and infrastructure capacity gaps in recipient universities, and delays in procuring research equipment from overseas.

*We found success if the expertise was already at the university, and we just expanded on it... compared to a lot of ones where they had to attract and employ staff. One of the biggest delays is the supply chains and infrastructure... if you want to do great stuff with industry, you've got to have infrastructure. I remember one in particular, the equipment from overseas took one year or more to arrive, which led to delays in the project and their activities and then achieving the milestones. – **Department of Education representative***

University and peak body stakeholders suggested that the impact of RRC was undermined by short-term funding arrangements and recent funding cuts, with subsequent job and service losses in regional areas.

*These programs take time... this is not something that you click your fingers and all of a sudden, more regional kids are going to uni... cutting funding is incredibly short-sighted. – **University stakeholder***

RRC was a small program in terms of the budget, yet the impact was phenomenal. One program received \$3 million... yet the impact of that program was huge. It has no funding as of the end of this year, so that program is going to fall. That is going to mean job losses, not to mention all of the impacts that that was having in terms of training mental health professionals to work in regional Australia. – University stakeholder

Department of Education representatives advised that the impact of funding cuts has been offset for some projects through access to funding from the Trailblazer Universities Program, which is a \$370.3 million initiative funding research over the period 2022-23 to 2025-26.¹⁷

Potential expansion to masters level students

Several evaluation stakeholders commented on challenges with expanding postgraduate student research enrolment in regional universities. Stakeholders suggested that it is challenging to incentivise further research-focused higher education compared to industry-based employment, given cost-of-living pressures and low unemployment rates. Stakeholders suggested that extending RRC Program guidelines and funding to include masters degree students may have more effectively supported recruitment and enhanced the impact of the program.

3.3.3 Recommendations

Recommendation 3

The Department of Education should consider expanding the eligibility of future programs similar to the RRC Program to include students completing masters degrees. This step will support recruitment and enhance the program's impact.

Recommendation 4

The Australian Government should continue to support research and research infrastructure in RRR areas, with a focus on building long- term capacity and aligning research with industry priorities. This focus will support the delivery of sustainable, high-quality research by regional universities that supports economic development.

¹⁷ Department of Education (2024) [Trailblazer Universities Program](#). Accessed 9 July 2024.

3.3.4 Evaluation against key performance measures

✓ Target has been achieved or is on track	✓ Uncertain – insufficient evidence/data to draw conclusion	✗ Target has not been achieved and is not on track
Key performance measures or targets		Progress
Funded project objectives and outcomes are achieved		✓
Funded regional institutions develop their research strengths, particularly through skills development		✓
Projects have contributed to local and regional priorities		✓
Helped address challenges associated with undertaking research in regional institutions		✓
Increase in research staff and postgraduate students through the funded project		✓

3.4 Measure Four – Refocusing the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program

3.4.1 Background

The Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP) supports universities to implement outreach activities and strategies that promote and raise the aspirations of people from RRR areas, low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, and First Nations backgrounds.¹⁸ It also aims to improve retention and completion rates for these cohorts.

While originally intended to be allocated based on the number of enrolled students from low SES background, under this measure, from 2021 the HEPPP funding formula was revised to provide funding based on proportional enrolments across three population cohorts:

- people from regional and remote Australia (45%)
- people from low SES backgrounds (45%)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (10%).¹⁹

To address the cumulative effect of disadvantage that some students face, the new HEPPP funding formula counts students who belong to more than one of the target groups more than once. Additionally, HEPPP's categorisation and reporting of activities now occurs across four higher education lifecycles: access, pre-access, participation and attainment and transition out. Previously, HEPPP funding focused solely on access.

¹⁸ Department of Education (2024) [Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program](#). Accessed 8 July 2024.

¹⁹ Data provided to the evaluation by the Department of Education.

Funding is allocated to providers each calendar year through a proportional formula based on their respective share of undergraduate students from each of the three cohorts. Universities have discretion about how they spend HEPPP funding across their predominant population cohorts and the identified lifecycles.

A previous evaluation of HEPPP conducted in 2017 found evidence that the program achieved its objective of increasing the total number of people from low SES backgrounds who access and participate in higher education. It found that outreach activities had successfully shifted low SES students' perceptions of the feasibility of attending university and had improved their ability and capacities through academic supports.²⁰

3.4.2 Findings

This measure has been implemented as intended, with universities delivering an increased number of outreach activities targeted at RRR students. While universities and other stakeholders generally provided positive feedback relating to HEPPP, limited reporting or other data was available to support analysis of the impacts of HEPPP activities in higher education participation, attainment and experience.

Given the financial pressure regional universities face due to stagnant student numbers and the increased costs associated with delivering tertiary education, timely and sustained HEPPP funding was described by universities as important to their financial sustainability. One regional university stakeholder stated that their university was not financially viable without HEPPP support.

Increase in activities targeted at RRR students

There is limited evidence that this measure led to an increase in outreach activities targeted at RRR students. Data provided to the evaluation by the Department of Education indicates that the percentage of HEPPP-funded activities for 2021 and 2022 targeted at RRR students rose from 63% to 74%. The Department of Education has indicated that data for 2023 HEPPP-funded activities and expenditure will be assessed in the third quarter of 2024.

The count and proportion of activities and expenditure on annual HEPPP-funded activities targeted at RRR students compared with all cohorts is outlined in **Table 3**.

Table 3: Count (activities and expenditure) of HEPPP-funded activities targeted at RRR students compared to all cohorts

Cohort type	2021		2022	
	Number of activities	Expenditure (\$ million)	Number of activities	Expenditure (\$ million)
RRR cohort	562	\$95.5	659	\$102.7
All cohorts	890	\$130.9	900	\$139.6

²⁰ ACIL Allen Consulting (2017) [Evaluation of the HEPPP: Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program](#), prepared for the Department of Education. Accessed 9 July 2024.

During consultations, some Department of Education and university stakeholders identified an increase in pre-access and participation activities in alignment with HEPPP's goals of increasing aspirations and participation, although no quantitative data was available to substantiate this.

Diversification of activities and impact on student retention

Stakeholders generally advised that the diversification under this measure of HEPPP's funded activities and cohorts has provided universities with greater implementation flexibility, ensuring that activities are catered to the specific needs of different communities, thereby aiding retention and completion.

Whilst HEPPP's previous focus on access alone may have resulted in more limited, event-based outreach activities, there is evidence to indicate that this has changed. Data provided to the evaluation by the Department of Education suggests that a broad range of activities are funded across each lifecycle, including but not limited to skill development initiatives, scholarships, placement grants, internal institutional development, and outreach events. This was supported by university stakeholders during consultations, who suggested that HEPPP supports delivery of a diverse range of measures, such as grants for nursing students undertaking unpaid placement, and on-country and culturally appropriate support mechanisms to address educational preparedness for remote and very remote First Nations students. Additionally, a previous evaluation of HEPPP found evidence that it successfully increased low SES students' academic preparedness.²¹

Changes in funding allocations

University stakeholders generally welcomed increases in HEPPP funding. Most universities (both metropolitan and regional) have experienced an increase in HEPPP funding since this measure was implemented.

Some evaluation stakeholders raised criticisms about the measure. A peak body representative claimed the current HEPPP funding model is inconsistent, with some universities receiving lower amounts of funding than others despite having a high concentration of students from identified priority cohorts. Several stakeholders cited the University of Western Sydney as an example. Despite having the highest number of low SES students of any university in NSW, from 2020 to 2024, HEPPP funding for Western Sydney declined by 51%, falling from \$11.24 million to \$5.47 million.

HEPPP allocations for a selection of universities are provided at **Table 4**.

²¹ ACIL Allen Consulting (2017) [Evaluation of the HEPPP: Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program](#), prepared for the Department of Education. Accessed 9 July 2024.

Table 4: HEPPPP allocations for 2020 to 2024 for selected regional universities²²

Provider	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Charles Darwin University	\$1,404,967	\$1,873,057	\$2,507,878	\$3,385,357	\$3,961,035
Charles Sturt University	\$5,308,121	\$6,043,560	\$6,836,942	\$7,589,787	\$9,445,039
Central Queensland University	\$5,219,652	\$5,587,401	\$6,410,943	\$6,720,531	\$8,306,663
Federation University Australia	\$2,196,972	\$2,327,168	\$2,193,944	\$2,314,939	\$2,547,110
James Cook University	\$3,183,819	\$3,629,134	\$3,807,293	\$4,559,363	\$5,596,864
Southern Cross University	\$2,441,314	\$2,696,869	\$3,087,715	\$3,378,868	\$4,068,315
The University of New England	\$3,629,322	\$4,369,426	\$4,682,058	\$4,958,840	\$6,362,707
University of Southern Queensland	\$4,871,044	\$5,002,396	\$5,182,361	\$5,555,186	\$6,611,445
University of the Sunshine Coast	\$2,481,336	\$2,736,894	\$3,138,903	\$3,469,696	\$3,799,078
Western Sydney University	\$11,235,523	\$10,296,563	\$9,019,401	\$7,866,834	\$5,465,313
Total	\$41,972,070	\$44,562,468	\$24,844,715	\$49,799,401	\$56,163,569

²² Department of Education (2024) [2010-2024 Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program \(HEPPPP\) Participation Allocations](#). Accessed 4 July 2024.

HEPPP funding insufficient to meet needs of universities and equity cohorts

Several university stakeholders suggested that current HEPPP funding allocations were insufficient to meet the access and participation needs of students in their regions or to cover the costs associated with delivering pre-access outreach activities in very remote areas, such as the Torres Strait Islands.

*One of the major hurdles to student completions in critical areas such as nursing, allied health and teaching is the successful completion of student placements. Too often this represents a key attrition trigger for students, particularly low SES students, who need to pause or give up paid work and sometimes relocate in order to complete the required hours. While we allocate some of our HEPPP funding to help students in need, it does not meet demand, and the allocation is exhausted quickly at the beginning of every year. – **Regional university stakeholder***

Funding formula and data delays

University stakeholders identified issues with the current HEPPP formula and data, including its complexity and time delays associated with the release of data. HEPPP funding allocations are communicated to universities in the fourth quarter of the prior year, with regional universities indicating that this creates challenges in terms of activity planning and staff employment contracting.

Some universities described the calculation process as complex and said it was not feasible for them to accurately predict what level of funding they will receive. This phenomenon could be driven by several factors including the limited resourcing and analytical capabilities for strategic planning in smaller, regional universities.

*This year we didn't know until April-May what our funding allocation would be for this year. It makes it hard to take a strategic approach to it. – **University stakeholder***

On the other hand, the Department of Education indicated that HEPPP allocations are communicated to universities in November/December of the preceding year. The Department of Education also described HEPPP calculations as being relatively straightforward, and suggested that universities should be able to accurately predict what their funding allocation will be for a year based on enrolment numbers.

*Universities can determine their likely HEPPP allocation because the actual total funding pool is well known. And so while we are delayed universities can engage in some moderate or modest strategic planning...and realistically now that the formula has finished its transition, you probably won't see too much in the way of variation each year. – **Department of Education representative***

The Department of Education suggested that HEPPP reporting mechanisms enabled the Department to establish clearer understanding of university HEPPP activities, although it is unclear whether these benefits have been passed onto universities, research and advocacy stakeholders.

Short funding cycles and their impact on outreach activities and employment

University stakeholders highlighted the HEPPP's one-year funding cycle limited their ability to provide sustained outreach, undertake long-term strategic planning, and provide staff with long-term contracts. University stakeholders advised that this undermines their ability to improve participation, success, and retention rates through sustained relationship building and to retain and grow outreach program delivery knowledge and skills. It was recommended that HEPPP transition to a multi-year allocation approach to provide stability and enable long-term planning and evaluation of outreach programs.

HEPPP as a recruitment tool

Several regional universities expressed concerns about the potential for well-resourced metropolitan universities to use HEPPP funding to 'poach' higher-performing students from regional areas by offering more substantial scholarships. Stakeholders suggested metropolitan universities would gain financial and non-financial advantages, and that this could further exacerbate capacity and resource gaps faced by regional universities.

HEPPP could incentivise metro universities to poach students from the regions. I'm not saying that's definitely happening, but there's opportunity for metro universities to do that... for example by offering bigger scholarships for equity group students to basically come to that university...and then gaining funding for those students. - Regional university stakeholder

A Hub stakeholder suggested that HEPPP was ineffective, as it was being misused by universities as a recruitment tool rather than to meet community needs. This was attributed to the competing financial pressures and institutional demands placed on universities.

A partnership approach

Several university and sector stakeholders suggested that more HEPPP funding should be dispersed through the type of outreach partnership model established through the Regional Partnership Project Pool Program (RPPPP). The RPPPP model was perceived to more effectively support students to remain in their communities and engage in higher education through Study Hubs. Stakeholders indicated that shifting HEPPP funding to a more community-focused partnership model would support the impact and sustainability of outreach efforts and increase cost effectiveness by reducing the need for university staff to travel to RRR areas.

3.4.3 Evaluation against key performance measures

✓ Target has been achieved or is on track	✓ Uncertain – insufficient evidence/data to draw conclusion	✗ Target has not been achieved and is not on track
Key performance measures or targets		Progress
Count and proportion of annual university delivery of HEPPP-funded activities which target RRR students – increase in availability of support		✓
Overall participation, success, retention and completion rates for students from each of three cohorts		✓

3.5 Measure Five – Regional University Study Hubs

3.5.1 Background

Regional University Study Hubs, previously referred to as Regional University Centres, are facilities that aim to improve access to tertiary education for students located in RRR communities. Hubs provide study spaces, IT infrastructure, and a range of administrative, academic skills and support services for RRR students where they are – encouraging aspirations for, and pathways to, successful attainment of tertiary courses without requiring them to relocate.²³

Early examples of Study Hubs, which predate the Regional University Study Hubs program, include the Geraldton Universities Centre which has been in operation since at least 2001²⁴, and the Cooma Universities Centre, now called CUC Snowy Monaro, which opened in 2013.²⁵ As of July 2024, there are 46 Study Hubs located or establishing across RRR Australia.²⁶ The Australian Government's response to the Universities Accord Interim Report includes a commitment of \$66.9 million to establish up to 20 new Regional University Study Hubs and up to 14 new Suburban University Study Hubs.²⁷

²³ Department of Education, [education.gov.au - Regional University Study Hubs](https://education.gov.au/regional-university-study-hubs); Regional University Student Hubs Network, [regionaluniversitystudyhubsnetwork.edu.au - About](https://regionaluniversitystudyhubsnetwork.edu.au/about). Accessed 3 July 2024.

²⁴ Geraldton Universities Centre, [guc.edu.au - History](https://guc.edu.au/history). Accessed 3 July 2024.

²⁵ CUC Snowy Monaro, [cucsnowymonaro.edu.au – Our Story](https://cucsnowymonaro.edu.au/our-story). Accessed 3 July 2024.

²⁶ Department of Education, [education.gov.au - Regional University Study Hubs](https://education.gov.au/regional-university-study-hubs). Accessed 3 July 2024.

²⁷ Regional Education Commissioner (2023) [Regional Education Commissioner Annual Report 2023 - Department of Education, Australian Government](#) (pg. 78); [Australian Universities Accord Final Report Document - Department of Education, Australian Government](#) (pg. 119). Accessed 3 July 2024.



In 2021, \$21 million was allocated to strengthening the existing Regional University Study Hubs program. This commitment included the establishment of eight new Hubs determined through a third grant round, referred to as 'Cohort 3'. This commitment also included the establishment of the Regional University Study Hubs (RUSH) Network. This evaluation focuses on Cohort 3 Hubs and the RUSH Network, though its findings may be relevant more broadly to Hubs established before and after introduction of the Naphthine Measures.

The Higher Education Information Management System (HEIMS) data study, conducted in 2022 by the Department of Education's Regional Policy Team in response to the Naphthine Review, provides a useful signpost with regards to the impact Hubs can have on supporting tertiary education participation. This study compared trends in student numbers in regions with Cohort 1 Hubs with student numbers in regional and remote areas and Australia overall.²⁸ This study demonstrated generally positive trends in student growth relative to population change in areas with Cohort 1 Hubs when compared with regional and remote areas and Australia overall non-Hub areas and provides guidance on the positive outcomes that can be expected from Cohort 3 Hubs established under this measure.

3.5.2 Findings

The evaluation found that the Hubs and RUSH Network established under Cohort 3 have achieved their policy objectives. There is evidence of strong student usage of Hub facilities and participation in a range of activities hosted and facilitated by Hubs. Further, the evaluation has found that the ability of Hubs to operate independently and meet the needs of their own communities has been central to their effectiveness.²⁹

Hubs established under this measure play a range of important roles in supporting and enhancing student education experience and providing pathways into study and employment. While data is predominantly anecdotal and a comprehensive survey of student experience in Hubs has yet to be undertaken, there was widespread perception among stakeholders and in progress reporting indicating a positive and impactful student experience.

²⁸ Department of Education (2022) HEIMS Data Analysis of the RUC Program – Cohort 1 Centres (Not Publicly Available). Accessed 3 July 2024.

²⁹ In August 2024 the New South Wales Department of Education published an evaluation of Country University Centres in NSW. Given timing of the release of this report, it was not considered in scope of the Naphthine Measures evaluation report. UNSW Social Policy Research Centre (2024) [Country Universities Centre Program Evaluation: Final Report](#).

Cohort 3 Hub establishment

As detailed in **Figure 4** and **Table 5**, seven out of the eight Cohort 3 Hubs are confirmed to be operational as of July 2024.

Figure 4. Timeline of Cohort 3 Regional Study Hubs Openings

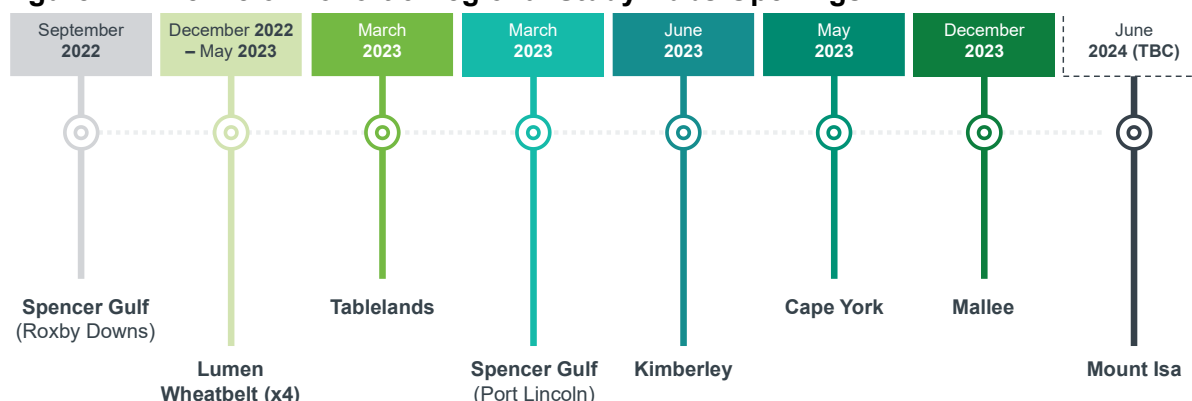


Table 5. Cohort 3 Regional Study Hubs opening dates

Hub	Operating Organisation	Opening Date
Roxby Downs	UniHub Spencer Gulf	September 2022
Lumen Wheatbelt (four Sites – York, Wongan Hills, Merredin, Narrogin)	Lumen Wheatbelt Regional Study Hubs	York – December 2022 Wongan Hills – February 2023 Merredin – April 2023 Narrogin – May 2023
Tablelands University Centre	Vocational Partnerships Group	March 2023
Port Lincoln	Unihub Spencer Gulf	March 2023
Cape York	Country Universities Centre	May 2023
Kimberley Universities Centre	Pilbara Kimberley University Centres	June 2023
Mallee	Country Universities Centre	December 2023
Mount Isa	Country Universities Centre	June 2024

Cohort 3 establishment challenges

Cohort 3 Hub opening dates and transition from opening to routine operation have been impacted by environmental factors – including COVID-19, the 2022 Federal Election and the resulting change of government – and locally specific factors such as finding a suitable location and recruiting and retaining staff. For example, the Mount Isa Hub experienced delays with local capital works processes and experienced challenges with staff turnover.³⁰

Climate concerns and weather events also impacted the establishment and operation of Cohort 3 Hubs. Cape York reported damage to their Hub site due to a cyclone in December 2023 which rendered a meeting room unusable.³¹ Similarly, the Kimberley Hub identified cyclones and flooding as a key risk and which contribute to the set-up cost of physical facilities.³² Increasing frequency of extreme weather events related to climate change are relevant considerations, especially in RRR contexts where there may be reduced access to tradespeople and materials required for repair works.

Enablers

Hub stakeholders and available Hub progress reports highlight several enablers of effective and timely Hub establishment under Cohort 3. The majority of Cohort 3 Hubs were established with the support of organisations who were already supporting or managing other Hubs. In consultations, Hub stakeholders connected to broader organisations such as Uni Hub Spencer Gulf (USG) and Country Universities Centre (CUC) Central indicated that the ability to adapt existing governance structures and receive advice was critical for efficient and timely establishment. Several Hubs were able to engage local student cohorts and advertise services through ‘soft openings’ in a local library or community setting before securing their permanent venue, leading to strong growth in student registrations following the Hub becoming operational.

Student registrations

There are increasing numbers of current (‘point in time’) student registrations recorded for each operational Cohort 3 hubs, indicating a positive trend. Overall, student registrations in Cohort 3 Hubs increased from 254 in September 2023 to 489 in May 2024³³. As detailed in **Figure 5**, Hub Progress Report data³⁴ reviewed for this evaluation indicates that:

- Six out of seven Hubs have reported increasing registrations since their opening date.
- Five out of six Hubs that opened before the end of 2023 met or exceeded their anticipated student registration projections.
- Four out of these six exceeded their anticipated registration projections for the year 2025 within one year of operation.

³⁰ Regional University Study Hubs Program Milestone 4 Progress Report (2024) Mount Isa (Not Publicly Available)

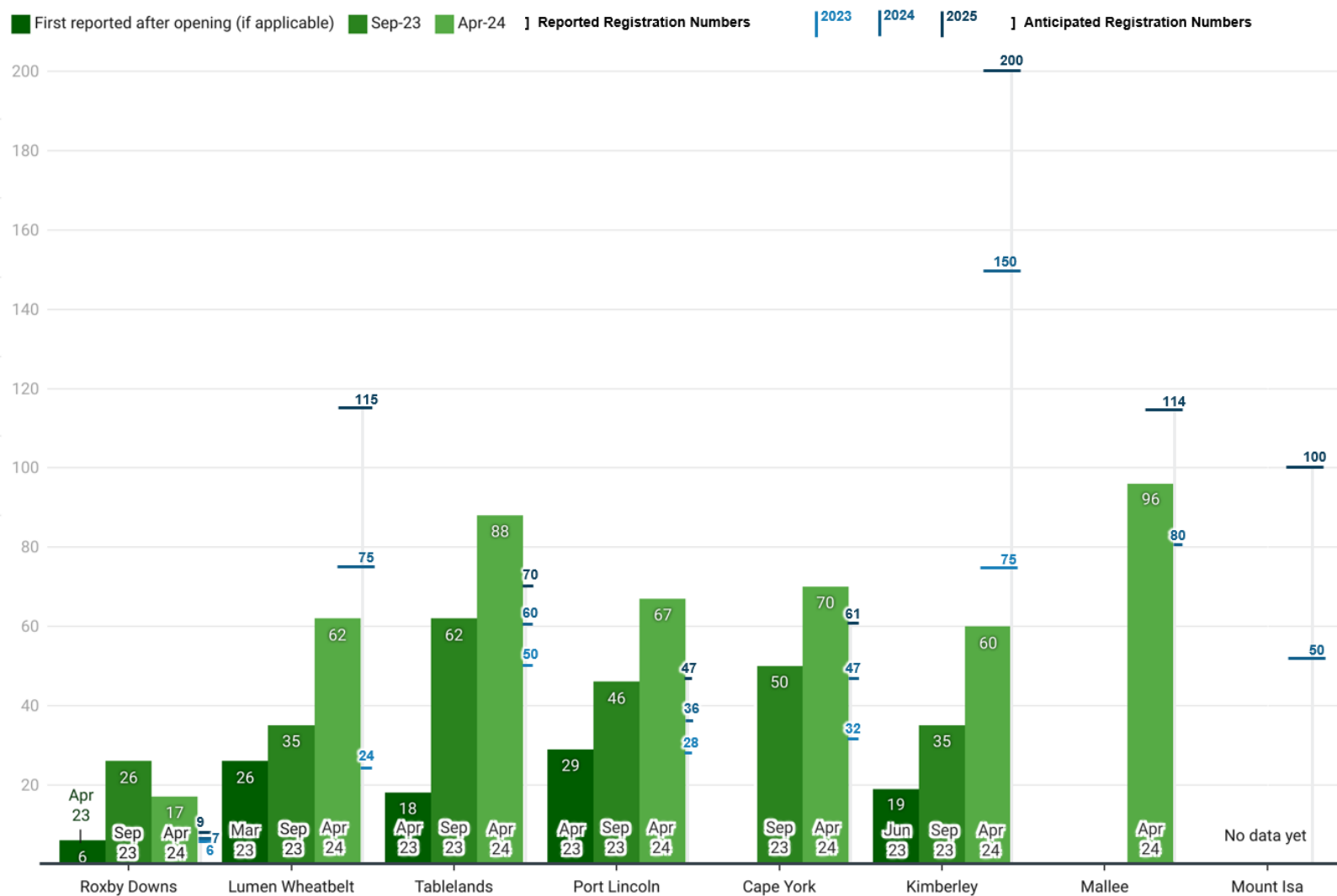
³¹ Regional University Study Hubs Program Milestone 5 Progress Report (2024) Cape York (Not Publicly Available)

³² Regional University Study Hubs Program Milestone 4 Progress Report (2023) Kimberley (Not Publicly Available)

³³ Department of Education (2024) Provided Data for Regional University Study Hubs Program Current Registered Students - May 2024, Cohort 3 Hubs (Not Publicly Available)

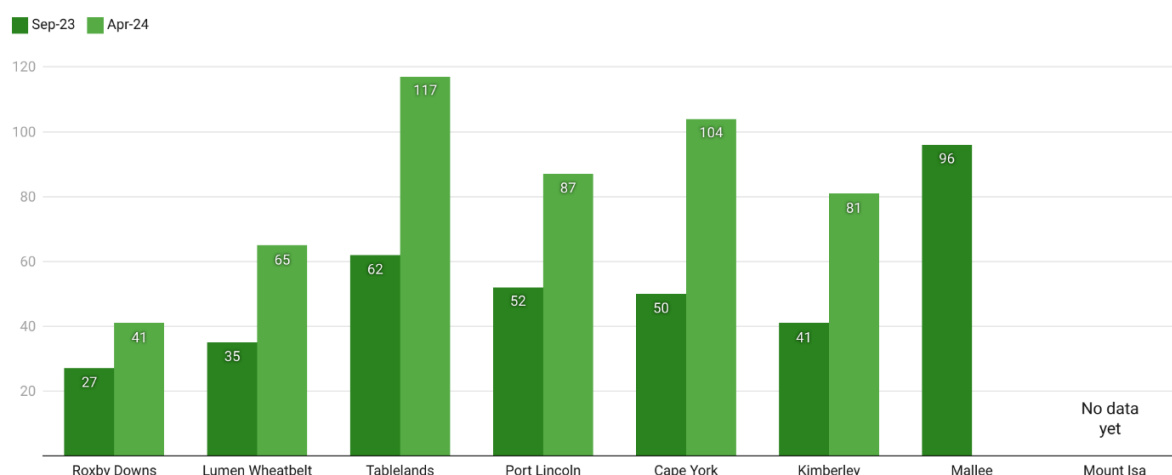
³⁴ Regional University Study Hubs Program Current Registered Students - Course Information Student Data Reports (2023) Cohort 3 Hubs (Not Publicly Available)

Figure 5: Cohort 3 Regional Study Hubs reported current student registrations



Source: Student enrolment data drawn from Milestone Progress Reports & Student Data Progress Reports • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 6: Cohort 3 Regional University Study Hubs cumulative student registrations over time



Source: Student enrolment data drawn from Milestone Progress Reports & Student Data Progress Reports • Created with Datawrapper

Cumulative student registration numbers (**Figure 6**) also indicate an overall upward trend. A potential factor to monitor going forward is whether registered students plateau as Hubs reach maturity, depending on the population size and remoteness of the area of Hub services. This trend may be evident in the slowdown of registrations for Roxby Downs from September 2023 to April 2024.

Hub usage by non-university students

Hubs are being utilised by a range of secondary and non-university ('VET or Other') tertiary students.

- Of students registered for Cohort 3 Hubs, 35% are undertaking 'VET or Other' courses, while 65% are undertaking bachelor's degree or higher courses³⁵.
- Additionally, while not specific to Cohort 3, data provided to the evaluation by the Department of Education indicates that over 160 secondary students were reported to be engaging with Hubs nationwide as of November 2023³⁶. Based on results of a June 2024 survey provided to the evaluation by the Department of Education, one Cohort 3 Hub reported that 10 to 30 secondary school students are using their facilities³⁷.

Several stakeholders expressed reservations about the use of Hubs by secondary school students. Advocacy group stakeholders expressed concerns regarding situations where children may be sharing Hubs spaces with adults, while others identified challenges related to exceeding student registration capacity and being unable to support the demand for secondary and vocational students:

³⁵ Department of Education (2024) Provided Data for Regional University Study Hubs Program Current Registered Students - May 2024, Cohort 3 Hubs (not publicly available)

³⁶ Department of Education (2024) Provided Data for Regional University Study Hubs Program - Secondary School Students (not publicly available)

³⁷ Department of Education (2024) Regional Hubs – School Student Survey Response Summary (not publicly available)

There's definitely a need for Cert III qualifications in our town, and there's definitely a need for secondary students to use our centre too, but we don't have the space to do it and we don't have the staffing resources in our current budget to do that either. – Hub stakeholder

Hub activities

Progress report data provides details of the array of activities undertaken by Cohort 3 Hubs.³⁸ Hubs generally provide study spaces with videoconferencing computers and high-speed internet for registered students. Hubs host small group engagements and events to engage local industry stakeholders, undertake outreach to secondary schools, and support engagement with cultural and community groups. Hubs provide direct support for students through facilitating tutoring and academic skills training, establishing buddy services and assisting students with their placements. Short courses and workshops coordinated by Hubs covers a diverse range of themes, and Hub staff have participated in mental health focused events such as headspace Work and Study Month and self-care and meditation workshops.

Progress reports have also demonstrated Hubs' efforts to build partnerships with institutions and industry. Examples include engagement with local health services to build the health workforce, First Nations-focused business engagement, work experience to support employment pathways and local industry engagement (for example, building, farming, parks and wildlife councils), conversations with industry to address workforce needs (for example, in mining, education and childcare) and engagement with industry advisory groups (for example through a 'visiting experts' program).

Case study – Roxby Downs Childcare Project

In 2023, UniHub Spencer Gulf Roxby Downs outreach worked together with local partner the Roxby Downs Children's Centre, industry partner BHP, and academic partner Central Queensland University to facilitate participation in a Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care.

This project was developed in response to an identified workforce shortage for qualified early childhood educators in Roxby Downs. The initiative involved 10 students and resulted in positive employment outcomes, with six out of those 10 now employed by the partnered centre.

In progress reports, Roxby Downs detailed this as a successful first round of the project and indicated an intention to build upon its success by running it again in the future.

This initiative has supported improved childcare services and workforce enablement for parents in the region, particularly women. The Roxby Downs April 2024 Progress Report suggests that *'the continuation of this project signifies a sustainable commitment to addressing ongoing local needs and fostering long-term community development'* and that the project showcases a *'strong community-industry partnership.'*

³⁸ Regional University Study Hubs Program Current Registered Students Progress Reports and Operational Plans (2022-2023), Cohort 3 Hubs (not publicly available)

Case study – Lumen Wheatbelt EvokeAg Students

Lumen Wheatbelt Regional University Study Hubs and EvokeAg, an Asia-Pacific agrifood industry event focused on innovation and technology in agricultural practices, partnered to provide students with the opportunity to attend the EvokeAg event.

Agriculture is a major industry in the Wheatbelt, Western Australia. In 2024, EvokeAg was held in Perth. Lumen Hub approached the Wheatbelt Development Commission and Regional Development Australia Wheatbelt for funding to cover expenses for students to attend the event. After securing funding, Lumen promoted the event to their students and processed applications for those interested.

Through this partnership, three students were supported to attend the event alongside the Director of the Lumen Hub. This collaboration demonstrates the ability of a Study Hub to foster student engagement with industry, thereby supporting positive student experiences and aligning study with local industry needs.

Diversity of models

The evaluation found a significant degree of diversity among Hub operating models and activities, which is critical to the Hubs being able to cater to the specific needs of students and communities.

Evaluation stakeholders described that Hubs generally belong to one of five models: Country University Centre members, 'hub and spoke' arrangements, regional development-focused Hubs, First Nations-run Hubs, and vocationally focused Hubs which can serve as pathways to university.

*While we're federally or state funded in in some areas, it's our local board and the centre managers that are making the decision, and that's really massive. It's not like a cookie cutter type setup. – **Hub stakeholder***

*Don't cookie cutter the hubs. Because they do what they do really well when they reflect their community – **Hub stakeholder***

Variation in operational and governance structures in Cohort 3 Hubs has arisen from the Hubs having different overarching management arrangements. The Hubs in Cape York, Mallee and Mount Isa are supported by CUC, but are at different phases of maturity due to local factors and differing levels of remoteness. The Lumen Wheatbelt Hub consists of multiple small sites across four geographically dispersed locations, while Kimberley Universities Centre operates as part of a hub and spoke model with non-Cohort 3 Pilbara Hubs.

Despite both being run under the auspices of Uni Hub Spencer Gulf (USG), USG Port Lincoln and USG Roxby Downs operate different outreach models. Where the Port Lincoln Hub operates out of a dedicated study space facility that students can visit, the Roxby Downs Hub does not have its own physical centre and is instead based out of a community driven coworking space, with Hub staff driving out to remote areas to engage with industry.

Any policies and procedures and things like that are well supported through our network. Certainly, we don't feel like we're on our own – we're very well supported. – Hub stakeholder

Influence of Hub locations

Inner regional Hubs were regarded by some stakeholders as more cost-effective than those in less populated areas, as they were more straightforward to establish than more remote Hubs and serviced a larger population base. On the other hand, stakeholders also suggested that any assessment of the effectiveness of a Hub should factor in both local contextual factors (for example Hubs existing in regions deemed 'thin markets') and general equity considerations. A Hub placed in a more remote or economically disadvantaged community may initially appear expensive and have a seemingly small student pool but may have a more significant positive impact on reducing inequality of higher education outcomes in the area over time.

Independence and the role of universities

Independence in relation to governance, priority setting, and operations have underpinned the ability of Hubs to effectively address the needs of local students and industry. However, stakeholders indicated that there is some tension around the role played by universities in governance and operations of Hubs. Several regional universities and representative bodies suggested that universities should be able to 'lead' a Hub and have more control over Hubs in their region. However, most university stakeholders and non-university stakeholders emphasised that the Hubs should be 'provider neutral' and should be able to collaborate and partner with education providers in ways that benefit students. The evaluation consistently heard that access to Hubs should not be limited by the institution at which a student is enrolled. It was consistently reinforced that Hubs should be able to adapt to any range of partnership opportunities as needed and should be supported to maintain their primary aim of supporting any student to complete any tertiary course of their choosing.

*The fact that universities cannot lead a hub is a massive shortcoming.
– University peak body stakeholder*

Regional universities are difficult to work with because they think they should be running the hubs. If universities run Hubs they will solve University problems, not student problems. – Hub stakeholder

Regional University Study Hub Network

The RUSH Network was established in 2021 through this Naphthine Measure to help facilitate a community of practice across all existing Hubs.³⁹ The Network is led by the Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES) at Curtin University along with Geraldton Universities Centre, a long-established Regional University Study Hub, and Country Universities Centre, an umbrella organisation affiliated with a number of Regional University Study Hubs.

The RUSH Network has progressed a range of initiatives to support Hub staff and promote the use and access of Hubs across Australia, including monthly webinars, hosting a website and Teams chat, and a Hubs bootcamp (for new hubs) to support engagement and professional development.

What we do is work in the background to make sure everyone has access to the same information to ensure the playing field is as even as possible.
– **RUSH Network stakeholder**

Hubs stakeholders generally advised of positive engagement with the RUSH Network, with the majority of hubs interacting with the Network in some way. The RUSH Network collaborated with a range of different Hub models and with the CUC. RUSH Network's engagement with Hubs also presents an opportunity to collect qualitative data on student experience and usage by particular Hub cohorts, including through the survey for Hub users developed in 2024 which may help bridge the current data gap in relation to student experience in Hubs.

There appears to be scope for further development of a community of practice and opportunities for Hubs to engage with and learn from each other. Stakeholders suggested that the role of the RUSH Network could be further expanded, or that CUC could play a stronger role in this regard.

It really would be valuable for all the hubs to have a level of connection and support... each individual community in the early days was kind of out on their own and there's a lot they can learn kind from each other and benefits.
– **University stakeholder**

Challenges associated with high registration numbers

Higher than anticipated student enrolments have also placed pressure on staff and facilities. While high student interest is ultimately positive, the evaluation found that higher than anticipated student numbers have created challenges for Hubs in terms of available space and funding. Some local councils have helped reduce this pressure by offering spaces with reduced or minimal rent. During consultations, University and Hub stakeholders suggested that existing infrastructure could be more effectively utilised for Hub establishment, including public libraries and TAFE facilities. Stakeholders suggested that leveraging existing facilities

³⁹ Regional University Student Hubs Network, regionaluniversitystudyhubsnetwork.edu.au - About. Accessed 24 June 2024.

would support the establishment of Hubs and the sustainability and resources of existing facilities.

The centre is regularly supporting up to a dozen students a day (5 a.m.-midnight) and has been close to maximum capacity several times during peak times around exams. – Hub progress report

Cultural safety

One advocacy stakeholder expressed concerns about potentially inconsistent and inadequate approaches to cultural safety at Hubs. However, progress reports for Cohort 3 and consultation with Hub stakeholders suggest that there is a commitment to reducing risk in these areas. In consultations, Cohort 3 Hub stakeholders expressed the need for application of local understanding and community knowledge in their approach to cultural sensitivity and inclusivity, and that this concern was central to their day-to-day operations.

Measuring impact

There was a widespread perception among stakeholders and in progress reports which points to a positive and impactful student experience. Hubs stakeholders shared additional examples of this in consultations, for instance:

- Kimberley Universities Centre reported a group of mature age students who did not graduate high school were being supported into a new career path in project management and rail qualifications they would not otherwise have felt empowered to pursue.
- Port Lincoln Hub advised that a group of eight first-year nursing students were connected by the Hub and frequently used the study space to review course material and connect as a group.
- Cape York Hub detailed that within the first year of operation, over 80 students in a remote town of less than 3,000 people were coming in to use their 'distraction-free' facilities to support online study.

We have fundamentally increased the number of students studying at university. Our focus is on getting more kids to do ATAR. – Hub stakeholder

Students can graduate in their own town – they can walk down the main street in their regalia – Research stakeholder

However, there remain gaps in data and there would be benefits for Hubs and the Department of Education to have access to better data in relation to student experience, Hub utilisation, and the impacts Hubs are having on education enrolment and attainment:

Key metrics such as utilisation rates, access to services, and specific services being used are not tracked or reported back to the member institutions. This data gap presents a major challenge in assessing the effectiveness and impact of RUSH in meeting the Napthine Goals. -- University peak body stakeholder

3.5.3 Recommendations

Recommendation 5

The Department of Education should progress the collection and analysis of data on student experience, participation and attainment of students studying with support of the Hubs. This could be undertaken by encouraging participation by all Hubs in the survey developed by the RUSH Network. Consideration should also be given to obtaining data on course completion of Hub students by linking data from the Hubs with data from education providers, through Unique Student Identifiers.

Recommendation 6

The Department of Education should undertake analysis of data on tertiary education participation in RRR areas, with and without a Regional Study Hub. Given the significant expansion of the Hubs network since Cohort One, including through the relevant Napthine Measure and in response to the Accord, it would be timely for the Department of Education to consider undertaking follow up research of the full Hubs network. The ABS's annual Survey of Education and Work, and the 2026 National Census, may provide opportunities for this data analysis.

3.5.4 Evaluation against key performance measures

 Target has been achieved or is on track  Uncertain – insufficient evidence/data to draw conclusion  Target has not been achieved and is not on track	
Key performance measures or targets	Progress
Number of Hubs established and supporting students	
Increasing numbers of student registrations/access at each Hub	
Student experience	
Percentage of student enrolments and completions in regions where a Hub exists compared with other regions	
Whether students would have engaged in study without the existence of a Hub	
Success and attainment rates	

3.6 Measure Six – Establishing a Regional Partnership Project Pool Program

3.6.1 Background

The Regional Partnership Project Pool Program (RPPPP) is a \$7.2 million commitment to support collaborative outreach partnership projects between higher education providers, Regional University Study Hubs and local communities. These partnerships aim to support the higher education aspirations of RRR students.

This initiative was delivered through a two-phase co-design and delivery process. During the first phase in 2022, six consortiums received funding of \$704,628 to design and propose outreach projects. The six project teams comprised 21 Hubs and 33 universities working with local communities across Australia. Two of these went on to receive implementation funding totalling \$6.5 million, with delivery commencing in July 2023:

- Northern Territory Youth Engagement in Allied Health (NT YEAH!), which received funding of \$1.4 million and is led by Flinders University, aims to support First Nations RRR youth to consider an allied health higher education pathway. NT YEAH! has established four partnerships involving two universities and two allied health networks.
- Eastern Australia Regional University Centre Partnership (EARUCP), which received funding of \$5.1 million and is led by the University of Technology Sydney and Country Universities Centre, involves Hubs and universities working with local communities to deliver targeted outreach projects across Queensland, New South Wales, and Victoria. EARUCP has established 32 partnerships involving 15 Hubs and 17 universities.

3.6.2 Findings

RPPPP is being delivered in line with its stated policy objectives. Evaluation stakeholders were generally supportive of the measure, suggesting that it is fostering the establishment of sustainable cross-sector partnerships and provides a means for universities to conduct cost-effective and appropriate outreach in RRR areas. Stakeholders advised that RPPPP-funded projects are improving the capacity of universities to form and sustain partnerships and are reducing the need for universities to visit RRR centres to provide outreach activities directly.

Quantitative data on the impact of RPPPP against its key performance measures and the broader Napthine Goals is limited, as key performance indicators (KPIs) and evaluation plans have only recently been developed and were not available for this evaluation.

Eastern Australia Regional University Centre Partnership

EARUCP aims to support students and their parents or carers to make informed decisions about post-school education and career pathways, and to develop their self-efficacy and capacity in navigating these options. Led by the University of Technology Sydney and Country Universities Centre, this initiative includes 15 Study Hubs and 23 university members across Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory.

EARUCP has developed 17 sub-project programs through a multi-phase process of community co-design and sustainable partnership co-development, with projects linked to universities based on expertise and resourcing needs rather than geography.⁴⁰ Data from the second EARUCP Progress Report, covering the period 29 September 2023 - 29 February 2024, indicates that 21 schools were engaged in outreach activities, with 1,628 student/participant engagements across 64 outreach sessions.⁴¹ The delivery of outreach activities under these sub-projects commenced in schools in Term 1 of 2024.

EARUCP identified their alignment with several recommendations from the Accord:

- targeted, place-based and community-focused approaches *“tailored to the particular circumstances of a place and [involving] people from different sectors across the community could help to effectively target under-representation in higher education”*
- support for programs that promote collaboration and coordination to contribute to improved system-level outcomes – *“new programs should incentivise collaborative consortia-led or regionally developed networked approaches that separate outreach from marketing and student recruitment and prioritise widespread coverage of initiatives across Australia.”*⁴²

The EARUCP has also established five communities of practice based on key themes that emerged during the first phase of the partnership:

- Nurturing aspirations
- Parental engagement
- Skills development
- Broadening career education
- Community engagement and culture of learning.⁴³

NT YEAH!

The evaluation was advised that NT YEAH! is still in an early development stage due to the complexities associated with establishing programs in remote Northern Territory settings. One regional university stakeholder suggested there is potential for learnings to emerge from this program on the role of self-determination and approaches that involve Elders formulating student pathways, and the impact that this will have on tertiary participation and attainment.

⁴⁰ University of Technology Sydney and Country Universities Centre. Project Overview. Not publicly available.

⁴¹ University of Technology Sydney and Country Universities Centre. Project Overview (pg.8). Not publicly available.

⁴² [Australian Universities Accord Final Report Document](#) (pg.130), Department of Education, Australian Government. Accessed 4 July 2024.

⁴³ University of Technology Sydney and Country Universities Centre. Project Handbook & Governance Guide. Not publicly available.

Breaking down silos

Several stakeholders, including a Hubs stakeholder involved in the delivery of the EARUCP, indicated that the community-focused partnership approach was breaking down silos between universities, Hubs and communities. It was suggested that this approach had potential to be ‘transformational’ by fostering ‘equal partnerships in co-design of resources with shared responsibility for place-based delivery’ rather than consisting of ‘transactional partnerships’ between universities and Hubs.

The impact has been some of the transformative relationships and partnerships amongst the universities and regional university centres. So, you have an education model that effectively involves community groups on the ground – **Advocacy group stakeholder**

The partnership approach has proven quite effective. What we are seeing is that participants in these programs are forming quite strong networks across hubs, unis, and other allied organisations. The fact these networks exist across multiple unis means that there is a degree of sustainability that is independent from reliance on government funding.
– **Department of Education representative**

Stakeholders also suggested that RPPPP-funded outreach was grounded in local needs rather than being used by universities as a recruitment tool; a critique which was raised during the evaluation by several stakeholders regarding universities’ use of HEPPP and other outreach-based funding.

CUC hold funding and distribute across Hubs who then deliver and design programs in conjunction with universities. This is the antithesis of HEPPP...
– **Hub/EARUCP stakeholder**

A university stakeholder suggested that a strength of EARUCP was that it was able to promote Hubs as a means of supporting university participation, thereby increasing their use and contributing to achieving the Napthine Goals.

Student aspirations and capacity

One university stakeholder suggested that RPPPP’s focus on expanding student aspirations instead of building capacity is inappropriate. It was suggested that building student ambitions without also building the academic and psychosocial skills required to complete a university degree was ‘setting them for failure.’ This, in turn, could create pressure on attainment and success rates amongst RRR students, undermining the broader intention of the Napthine Goals.

The policy is really well-intentioned...but what we have to change is the academic performance of kids, and that’s the only way we can get the upswing. So, we’ve been saying for a number of years now that we’re creating the next big problem for Indigenous people because oftentimes they are not completing their degree, and there’s a huge HECS debt that they carry forward so that burden plays into their working careers.
– **University stakeholder**

3.6.3 Recommendations

Recommendation 7

Higher education outreach activities should seek to build upon the RPPPP model of multi-stakeholder partnership to drive impactful higher education outreach. This model holds significant promise for breaking down organisational silos, fostering cost-effective RRR outreach and catalysing long-term transformational change.

3.6.4 Evaluation against key performance measures

✓ Target has been achieved or is on track	✓ Uncertain – insufficient evidence/data to draw conclusion	✗ Target has not been achieved and is not on track
Key performance measures or targets		Progress
Breadth, quality, and sustainability of success partnerships		✓
Short-term quantitative and qualitative impact on regional and remote students as determined by project context (e.g., local high school student retention and higher education transitions)		✓
Impact on higher education aspiration		✓
Overall commencement and participation rate for regional and remote, and First Nations higher education students		✓

3.7 Measure Seven – Tertiary Access Payment

3.7.1 Background

The Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) is a \$177.8 million commitment over four years to provide one-off payments of up to \$5,000 to support RRR students who are moving away from home to undertake tertiary education. This measure is designed to mitigate the financial burden associated with relocation and encourage RRR students to pursue tertiary study.⁴⁴ This measure was also originally intended to encourage RRR students to access tertiary study in the year immediately following Year 12, rather than taking a gap year.

To be eligible for the TAP, a student must be from an inner regional, outer regional or remote area and be moving to study at a tertiary education provider that is at least 90 minutes away from their family home by public transport.⁴⁵ The TAP can be used to cover costs associated with study, including for instance rent or bond for accommodation, household bills, groceries, textbooks or other study supplies. The payment is disbursed only after the census date, typically six weeks into the semester.

TAP was initially administered by universities, though in 2022 administration shifted to Services Australia.

3.7.2 Findings

The TAP has been implemented as intended and is achieving its stated aims, with increases in TAP applications and approvals since 2021 and a strong view among evaluation stakeholders that the measure is playing a positive role in enhancing access to education for RRR students. The evaluation found that TAP has played a role in elevating the importance of equity for RRR students to a national level and addressing disparities associated with the financial stress of relocating to undertake tertiary education. The TAP also provides an important foundation that universities can build upon through further targeted funding.

There remain opportunities for the Government to increase access to the TAP by raising awareness about this measure, simplifying the application process and removing eligibility restrictions.

Uptake of the TAP

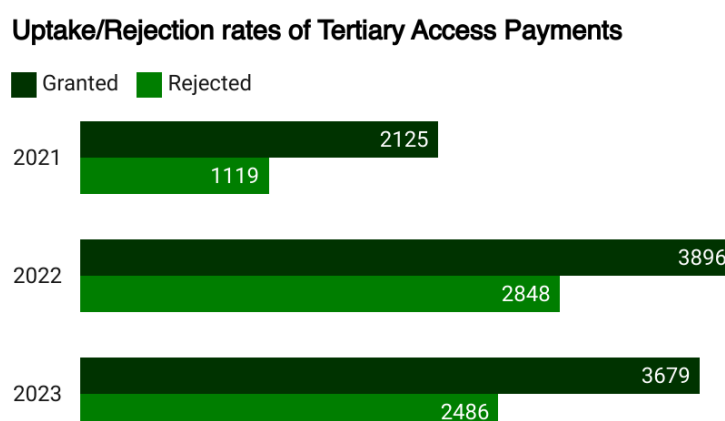
Data provided to the evaluation by the Department of Education indicates that TAP applications more than doubled between 2021 and 2022, rising from 3,224 to 6,744, before declining to 6,165 in 2023. The rise from 2021 to 2022 may have been a result of the expansion of the TAP to students from inner regional areas at the commencement of 2022, though there is insufficient data to support this conclusion.

⁴⁴ [National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy](#) (p.47), Department of Education, Australian Government. Accessed 28 June 2024.

⁴⁵ Department of Education (2024), [Tertiary Access Payment](#). Accessed 5 July 2024.

Figure 7 illustrates the uptake and rejection rates of TAP applications for 2021-23. Rates of rejection were 34%, 42% and 40% over these three years.⁴⁶

Figure 7. Uptake of tertiary access payments



The Department of Education indicated that the most common reason for application rejection was failing to provide necessary information, such as enrolment status and parental income details. The consistently high rejection rates over this period suggest that additional education and support are needed to help students understand eligibility and application requirements. Efforts to increase TAP uptake and improve administrative efficiency and the student experience during the application process could include enhancing awareness through social media and other channels and simplifying the application process.

This has previously been identified as a priority evidenced by Action 12 from the Naphthine Review which called for improvements in promoting online access to financial support information to provide students and families with clearer information on the support available for tertiary studies.⁴⁷ Stakeholders echoed this need for increased awareness, suggesting there was a need for improvements in communication and guidance around the application.

Administration of TAP

TAP was initially administered through universities. In 2021, the administration of the TAP was split, with universities handling the administration for students studying at universities, while Services Australia managed it for VET students and higher education students studying at non-university higher education providers. Following an evaluation of the TAP in 2021, which recommended changes to the program's administration to mitigate the risk of inefficiencies in this dual payment model, in 2022 the administration of TAP was fully shifted to Services Australia. Stakeholders generally supported this shift, noting that it alleviated the administrative burden on universities and fostered consistent and efficient decision-making and administration.

⁴⁶ Data provided to the evaluation by the Department of Education

⁴⁷ [National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy](#), Department of Education, Australian Government. Accessed 20 June 2024.

Timing and eligibility requirements

The evaluation identified issues relating to the timing of payments and the eligibility criteria, which undermined the measure's effectiveness in supporting students.

Currently, the timing of TAP payments requires students to cover relocation costs upfront. This delay requires students to find immediate funds to manage their relocation expenses. Stakeholders generally indicated the existing payment schedule does not align with the practical needs of students moving for tertiary education and does not align with the policy intent of the measure.

The eligibility criteria of the TAP also present a barrier to uptake. At present, to qualify for the payment, students must begin their tertiary education immediately after completing Year 12. This requirement excludes those taking a gap year, a common practice among RRR students (including for the purpose of gaining eligibility for independent youth allowance payments). This criterion reduces the potential impact of the TAP on encouraging and supporting students from regional areas to pursue higher education.

A university stakeholder told the evaluation that:

*I had a phone call the other day from a distressed mum whose daughter applied and got rejected without explanation. Overall, the stories we've had about 'non-success stories' have been about people needing to take a gap year to fund going to university to build savings or to have a year off. They have been excluded. The wait time is an issue. – **University stakeholder***

These findings align with findings from Australian Universities Accord's Final Report, which recommended two changes to enhance the effectiveness of the TAP:⁴⁸

- Adjust the policy settings to remove the requirement to commence an eligible course within 12 months following the completion of Year 12 (or equivalent)
- Amend the timing of payments to provide timely assistance with the costs of relocation for tertiary study before moving.

These recommendations were further supported by the Regional Education Commissioner 2023 Annual Report.⁴⁹

TAP data limitations

Beyond the available data, there were limitations in assessing the TAP's impact on improving education participation and attainment. University stakeholders consistently indicated that they were unaware of the impact of TAP due to lack of data being shared back with them by the Government or students.

⁴⁸ [Australian Universities Accord Final Report Document](#) - Department of Education, Australian Government, pg. 275. Accessed 2 July 2024

⁴⁹ Regional Education Commissioner (2023) [Regional Education Commissioner Annual Report 2023](#) - Department of Education, Australian Government. Accessed 2 July 2024

This finding underscores the need for improved data collection and performance metrics to effectively assess the TAP's success in enhancing university access for RRR students. The current KPIs focus on administrative aspects, which, while important, do not provide a complete picture of the program's impact. Developing and implementing KPIs that measure the program's outcomes and its contribution to increasing tertiary participation rates among RRR students would support more comprehensive evaluation.

A 2021 evaluation of the TAP highlighted limitations with regards to data and performance reporting analysis. The 2021 evaluation found that *'While key performance indicators (KPIs) currently exist to monitor TAP administration aspects such as promotion, payment, and reporting, there is a significant opportunity to develop KPIs that track the progress of TAP in achieving its intended outcomes.'*⁵⁰

Beyond some anecdotal evidence provided during consultations, there was no qualitative data available to support understanding of student experience with the TAP and its impacts on student education participation. The potential utility of qualitative student experience data has been noted in the Department of Education's Performance and Data Framework.⁵¹

Incentivising relocation

Several stakeholders highlighted the value of supporting people to stay in their communities when completing tertiary education, as encouraged for instance through Study Hubs. There is a risk that the TAP could disincentivise students from remaining in regional areas, contributing to 'brain drain' and undermining regional economic growth.

There could be more of a focus on providing incentives for students that decide to remain in their region and study (as opposed to relocating and studying on campus) given the cost of living challenges and the shortage of accommodation in regional centres and cities across Australia – Study Hub stakeholder

Conversely, stakeholders also expressed the importance of not limiting the choices of RRR students who wish to study at metropolitan universities. A Government stakeholder suggested that *'Regional students should be able to go to any university they want. If they want to go to Sydney University, that is entirely their choice.'*

⁵⁰ Callida Indigenous Consulting (2021) Evaluation of tertiary access payment, prepared for the Department of Education. (Not publicly available)

⁵¹ Department of Education (2024). Performance and Data Framework (Not publicly available)

3.7.3 Recommendations

Recommendation 8

The Department of Education and Services Australia should implement measures to increase accessibility and awareness of the TAP. It is recommended that this include raising awareness through targeted social media and simplifying the application process to reduce levels of application rejection.

Recommendation 9

The Australian Government should broaden the TAP eligibility criteria to include students taking a gap year and other non-traditional pathways. This amendment will provide greater flexibility and reflect the variety of pathways through which RRR students enter higher education.

Recommendation 10

The Department of Education and Services Australia should collect data on student experience of applying for and receiving the TAP, and impacts of the TAP on influencing student decision-making and increasing higher education access. These steps will improve understanding of the impacts of the TAP and identify areas for potential future improvement.

3.7.4 Evaluation against key performance measures

✓ Target has been achieved or is on track	✓ Uncertain – insufficient evidence/data to draw conclusion	✗ Target has not been achieved and is not on track
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Key performance measures or targets	Progress
Program uptake, number of TAP claims granted	✓
Administrative efficiency	✓
Contribution to overall commencement, participation and retention rates for RRR students	✓

3.8 Measure Eight – Fares Allowance

3.8.1 Background

The Fares Allowance was established to support tertiary students from RRR areas of Australia by subsidising travel costs between their place of study and home. The Fares Allowance aims to alleviate the financial burden of travel and encourages students to maintain connections with their families and communities during academic breaks. The Fares Allowance is administered by Services Australia and covers the cost of the least expensive and most available form of public transport in Australia.

Under this measure, from 1 January 2021 the waiting period for Fares Allowance claims for Youth Allowance and Austudy students was reduced from six months to three months. This change was implemented so that eligible students can access the payment for the mid-year break in their first year of study. This measure consists of a total \$700,000 funding commitment.

3.8.2 Key findings

This measure has been implemented as intended, with the waiting period reduced from six months to three months. The available data in relation to total uptake of the Fares Allowance does not indicate strong uptake or increases since 2021. There is also no data available to demonstrate whether changes under this measure have influenced the timing of Fares Allowance applications and student decision-making, and little data in relation to student experience and the impacts of the measure on education enrolments and attainments.

Uptake

Expenditure data indicates that funding for the allowance has remained relatively modest – with \$91,983 allocated as of August 2021, \$86,721 as of August 2022, and \$86,740 as of August 2023.⁵²

Declining trend of broader student payments and allowances

The number of Austudy and Youth Allowance recipients has been in steady decline for several years, which may directly impact the uptake of the Fares Allowance since eligibility is tied to a student receiving Austudy or Youth Allowance. We understand the Department of Education is undertaking a deeper analysis on the falling numbers of student payment recipients which may provide further insight to possible improvement strategies for this measure. Given the steady declines in tertiary student enrolments in Australia (see [Section 3.1.2](#)), it seems likely that the decline in Austudy and Youth Allowance recipients is a reflection of this trend.

⁵² Regional Education Commissioner (2023) [Regional Education Commissioner Annual Report 2023](#) (pg.79). Department of Education, Australian Government. Accessed 2 July 2024

Challenges in application process

University stakeholders highlighted that student feedback identified difficulties in navigating the Fares Allowance application process including the collation of information needed. Stakeholders advised that anecdotally, the process has become more streamlined in recent years, though there remains room for further simplification to ensure that the allowance is more accessible to all eligible students. Increasing awareness about the Fares Allowance and providing detailed, easily accessible information about how to apply can ensure that more eligible students utilise this support.

Broadening the use of the Fares Allowance payment

As described in the Final Universities Accord Report, unpaid work placements for many tertiary courses poses a significant challenge for students. This issue is particularly acute when placements occur over multi-week blocks away from home, necessitating additional costs for transport and accommodation. These placements often demand that students take time away from paid employment, further adding to financial burden.⁵³ For students from low SES backgrounds, RRR areas, and those with caregiving responsibilities, the financial strain of unpaid placements can be prohibitive.

To support placements, some universities advised that they allocate a portion of their HEPPP funding towards placement grants. Several stakeholders suggested that the Fares Allowance should be broadened to cover travel-related expenses for placements.

*What those students might want support for, though, is to go and do a placement. A nursing placement or a psychology placement or a physiotherapy placement. They want to be able to use that type of financial support for travel to access placements, if the Fares Allowance was more flexible that would be one way of doing that. – **Regional University stakeholder***

The 2024-25 Commonwealth Budget included a \$369.2 million commitment for a Commonwealth Prac Payment to teaching, nursing and midwifery, and social work students in higher education, and \$58.2 million for eligible students in VET, to support the completion of their qualifications. From 1 July 2025 eligible students will be able to access a payment of \$319.50 per week when they are on a mandatory placement. This initiative is expected to contribute to supporting RRR students and achieving more equitable and accessible tertiary education, and will help address concerns raised during this evaluation about placement costs.

⁵³ [Australian Universities Accord Final Report \(2024\)](#). Department of Education, Australian Government. Accessed on 26 June 2024.

3.8.3 Recommendations

Recommendation 11

Services Australia should increase awareness of the Fares Allowance payment and provide guidance on the application process through targeted social media campaigns. Greater awareness and clarity relating to eligibility and application processes is likely to increase the uptake of the Fares Allowance.

3.8.4 Evaluation against key performance measures

 Target has been achieved or is on track	 Uncertain – insufficient evidence/data to draw conclusion	 Target has not been achieved and is not on track
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Key performance measures or targets	Progress
Fares Allowance uptake, particularly within three months of course commencement	 
Improvements in how Fares Allowance has supported students	
Increased uptake earlier in the year	

3.9 Measure Nine – Regional Education Commissioner

3.9.1 Background

The Regional Education Commissioner (the Commissioner) role was established with a \$6 million funding allocation. The role aims to address the educational disparities between RRR and metropolitan areas and was designed to oversee the implementation of the recommendations from the Napthine Review. The Hon Fiona Nash, former Senator for NSW was appointed as the inaugural Commissioner in December 2021.

The Commissioner's role, as outlined in the Napthine Review includes providing comprehensive advice on a wide range of education issues. The Commissioner is tasked with overseeing the Strategy's implementation, engaging with a diverse array of stakeholders including RRR communities, education providers, employers, and government bodies at all levels. This role aims to ensure a national focus on RRR education, training, and research.⁵⁴

One of the Commissioner's primary responsibilities is to improve access, participation and outcomes in tertiary education for students in RRR areas. Additionally, the Commissioner is expected to champion and coordinate efforts, monitor progress, and provide guidance on broader educational matters, spanning early childhood, primary, and secondary education. The Commissioner has published two Annual Reports since the establishment of the role, each providing an overview of the Commissioner's activities and findings from consultations across the education sector.

3.9.2 Findings

The Commissioner's role has been established and this measure is meeting its policy objectives. Stakeholder consultations demonstrated widespread support for the role across the higher education sector. The broad remit of the REC, coupled with the Commissioner's extensive background in public policy, education and regional Australia, was described as instrumental in the effectiveness of the role.

It is not possible at this point to evaluate the impact of the Commissioner's role on reducing the gap in participation rates between RRR and metropolitan students, though the breadth of engagement and advocacy activities undertaken, and evidence of influence in relation to the RRR education policy agenda, suggest that the role has been and will continue to be impactful.

Activities

The Commissioner's Annual Reports provide evidence of a significant amount of stakeholder engagement (282 stakeholders), 18 conferences and roundtable participation and six inquiry responses. The Commissioner has contributed as a member of both the Universities Accord Panel and the National School Reform Agreement Ministerial Reference Group.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Regional Education Commissioner (2024) [Regional Education Commissioner Annual Report 2023](#). Department of Education, Australian Government. Accessed 1 July 2024

⁵⁵ Data provided from the Department of Education for the purposes of this evaluation

Stakeholders commented on the Commissioner's engagement and advocacy efforts, the bipartisan nature of the role and the Commissioner's deep regional experience. They noted the role is generating political traction and elevating the needs of education needs of RRR on the national education agenda. During consultations, stakeholders regularly commented on the Commissioner's role in successfully advocating for a dedicated chapter on rural and regional education in the Accord Final Report.

Reports prepared or commissioned by the Regional Education Commissioner include:

- Annual Reports for 2022⁵⁶ and 2023⁵⁷
- Report on VET delivered to Secondary Students⁵⁸
- Report on Research into support services in RRR areas⁵⁹
- Research into support services in RRR areas – Good practice framework.⁶⁰

Stakeholder engagement

In 2023, the Commissioner engaged with 142 stakeholders, participated in eight conferences and roundtables, submitted six inquiry responses, and contributed as a member of both the Accord Panel and the National School Reform Agreement Ministerial Reference Group.⁶¹

During consultation, stakeholders generally advised that they had directly had positive engagement with the Commissioner.

We are very supportive of the establishment of the role of the Regional Education Commissioner. The Commissioner's engagement over the past few years has been phenomenal, gaining political traction and positively impacting regional Australia. Fiona and her team have been approachable. – Regional university peak body stakeholder

⁵⁶ Regional Education Commissioner (2022). [Regional Education Commissioner Annual Report 2022](#). Department of Education, Australian Government. Accessed 1 August 2024.

⁵⁷ Regional Education Commissioner (2022). [Regional Education Commissioner Annual Report 2022](#). Department of Education, Australian Government. Accessed 1 August 2024.

⁵⁸ Department of Education (2023). [Report on VET Delivered to Secondary Students: Investigating the provision of VET to secondary students in regional, rural, and remote areas](#). Department of Education, Australian Government. Accessed 1 August 2024.

⁵⁹ Department of Education (2022). [Research into support services in RRR Areas – Final Report](#). Department of Education, Australian Government. Accessed 1 August 2024.

⁶⁰ Department of Education (2022). [Research into support services in RRR areas - Good Practice Framework](#). Department of Education, Australian Government. Accessed 1 August 2024.

⁶¹ Data provided from the Department of Education for the purposes of this evaluation



The Commissioner's 2023 Annual Report indicates that the Commissioner met with every regional university during 2023. However, during consultation for this evaluation representatives from some regional universities advised that they had no direct engagement with the Commissioner, and felt that their views were not being adequately considered in the Commissioner's activities and documents. A regional university suggested that

*There needs to be better engagement with regional universities (by the Commissioner and the broader Department) – they need to fully understand what we do and what their needs are. – **University stakeholder***

This view may have been a reflection of the seniority of university representatives consulted for the evaluation differing from those engaged with by the Commissioner.

Remit

The breadth of the Commissioner's role is generally viewed by stakeholders as being positive, and as an important enabler of systemic improvements and 'joining the dots' between different parts of the education system.

*The superpower of the REC role is that it isn't pigeonholed – it works across various levels of the education system (primary and secondary schools, VET, tertiary). – **Government stakeholder***

However, some university stakeholders raised concerns about the difficulty in defining and achieving specific success parameters due to the wide scope of the role, suggesting that a more focused approach may enhance the effectiveness of the Commissioner's role. Achieving consistently high-quality online education in RRR areas was identified by a university stakeholder as an area the Commissioner should focus her efforts on. Several stakeholders also highlighted the importance of the Commissioner in the proposed establishment of the Australian Tertiary Education Commission, describing that her effective engagement with this body would be critical to ensuring that RRR education is an important consideration in its work.

*The struggle is there's a lot of things she could focus on and work on and I guess the question is, should the Commissioner have the discretion to be more focused on certain aspects? – **Regional University stakeholder***

Australian Tertiary Education Commission role

The future of the Commissioner role was widely supported by the stakeholders engaged through this evaluation, and they were interested to see what role the Commissioner would play in the proposed Australian Tertiary Education Commission. The ATEC Implementation Consultation Paper proposes that the Commissioner will be one of several 'consulted officials' who will advise the ATEC Board on matters relating to 'regional, rural and remote education, research, policy, regulatory settings, and national skill needs and shortages.'⁶²

⁶² Department of Education (2024) [Australian Tertiary Education Commission \(ATEC\) Implementation Consultation Paper](#) (pg.3-4) Department of Education, Australian Government.

3.9.3 Recommendations

Recommendation 12

The Commissioner should consider establishing regular higher education virtual roundtable sessions with universities and other key stakeholders. These sessions will facilitate open dialogue, allowing stakeholders to share their needs, challenges and feedback directly with the Commissioner.

3.9.4 Evaluation against key performance measures

✓ Target has been achieved or is on track	✓ Uncertain – insufficient evidence/data to draw conclusion	✗ Target has not been achieved and is not on track
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Key performance measures or targets	Progress
Activity-based data and outputs that point to Commissioner achieving their broader objective of improving outcomes in regional education	✓
Raised profile of regional education and influenced government policy	✓

4.0 CONTRIBUTION TO THE NAPHTHINE GOALS

This section explores the contribution of the Naphthine Measures to achieving the three Naphthine Goals.

4.1 Bridging the tertiary education gap between RRR and metropolitan students

The goal of bridging the tertiary education gap between RRR and metropolitan students was fundamental to the Naphthine Review and to the establishment of the Naphthine Measures. While there is insufficient data to support conclusive findings in relation to the impacts of the Naphthine Measures on achieving this goal, this evaluation makes some observations based on baseline data for 2016 and 2021, and more recent education enrolment data.

Analysis of national Census data for 2016 and 2021, and of the Department of Education's Higher Education data collection, indicates that from 2016-2021, higher education attainment rates increased across metropolitan and RRR areas. However, over this period the rate of attainment for major cities increased more than for RRR areas, which increased the disparity during this period. There was also a larger increase in the raw attainment numbers in major cities compared to RRR areas over that period. Table 6 provides higher education attainment numbers for major cities, inner regional, outer regional and remote areas from 2016 and 2021 using the Department of Education Higher Education Statistics Collection.

Table 6. Higher Education attainment numbers for major cities, inner regional, outer regional and remote areas from 2016 and 2021⁶³

Year	Major Cities	Inner Regional	Outer Regional	Remote
2016	881,630	109,696	45,635	11,666
2021	1,123,560 (+27.4%)	130,917 (+19.3%)	52,081 (+14.1%)	12,343 (+5.8%)

Data from the Department of Education's Higher Education data collection and the National Centre for Vocational Education Research demonstrates a similar trend in relation to higher education participation rates, with participation rates for metropolitan areas and all RRR areas increasing from 2016 to 2021, but rates increasing at a faster level in major cities. This resulted in an increase in disparity between RRR and metropolitan areas.

⁶³ Data provided from the Department of Education for the purposes of this evaluation collected from the Higher Education Statistics Collection.

Table 7. Certificate IV and above participation rate disparity between major cities and each regional and remote area⁶⁴

	2016 Disparity	2021 Disparity	2030 Target
Major Cities – Inner Regional	3.4pp	4.3pp	1.7pp
Major Cities – Outer Regional	4.6pp	5.3pp	2.3pp
Major Cities – Remote	5.8pp	6.7pp	2.9pp

Table 8. Certificate IV and above enrolment numbers for major cities, inner regional, outer regional and remote areas from 2016 and 2021⁶⁵

Year	Major Cities	Inner Regional	Outer Regional	Remote
2016	1,135,721	186,386	74,231	13,506
2021	1,425,665	207,793	81,860	14,423
	(+25.5%)	(+11.5%)	(+10.3%)	(+6.8%)

Given that the Naphthine Measures were announced and commenced funding in 2020 and are still being rolled out, the 2016-2021 data can serve as a baseline for exploring trends in participation and attainment. The next national Census is planned for 2026 and will provide national data which will support comparison against the 2016 and 2021 data to determine what progress has been made since 2021 in participation and attainment levels across the country, and whether the gap has been bridged or has continued to increase.

While the available data does not support a conclusive finding in this area, the evaluation consistently heard that since 2000, regional universities have faced consistent ‘headwinds’ in relation to student enrolment. As outlined in [Section 3.1](#), the CSP Equivalent Fulltime Student Load data demonstrates that while there were modest increases in EFTSL for 2020-2021 for regional and metropolitan providers respectively, there were more significant declines from 2021-2022.

One measure that may make a direct and tangible contribution to bridging the gap is the RUSH program. The finding from the study of Cohort One Regional University Centres (see [Section 3.5.1](#)) that that most RUC regions have gone from lagging behind the Australian tertiary growth rate in 2011-16 to exceeding it in 2016-21 suggests that the Hubs established under the

⁶⁴ Data provided from the Department of Education for the purposes of this evaluation collected from the Higher Education Statistics Collection

⁶⁵ Data provided from the Department of Education for the purposes of this evaluation collected from the Higher Education Statistics Collection

Naphthine Measures may have similar impacts in tertiary enrolments and may support bridging the gap between these regions and metropolitan areas.

4.2 Driving productivity and growth for regional Australia

The evaluation found that the Naphthine Measures have involved significant engagement with regional development stakeholders, and alignment with regional development priorities. These factors, combined with the extra funding that the Naphthine Measures have provided to students and a range of tertiary education stakeholders across RRR Australia, suggests that the measures have contributed to the goal of driving productivity and growth in regional Australia. Evaluation stakeholders consistently commented on the relationship between higher education and regional development. A regional development stakeholder described that

Tertiary education is very important for regional development – ensuring we have right ideals in mind and regions are advancing with no one left behind.

While the measures have generally focused on productivity and growth in regional Australia, progress against this goal is particularly illustrated in the following examples:

- Increased CGS funding and refocusing of HEPPP have played an important role in supporting the financial viability and outreach activities of regional universities during a period of downward pressure on university enrolments. This funding has supported regional productivity and growth.
- Research funded through the RRC Program has had a demonstrable focus on regional development and on building regional research and industry capacity.
- The RUSH program has supported infrastructure development and employment in regional areas.
- The Commissioner has engaged extensively with regional development stakeholders, and has supported the integration of regional, development and tertiary education priorities.

4.3 Increasing the research capacity of regional universities

The evaluation found that the Naphthine Measures have effectively increased the research capacity of regional universities. Most notably, the RRC saw investment of nearly \$40 million for research initiatives led by eight universities with regional campuses. While not explicitly tied to research, increased CGS and HEPPP funding have supported broader university sustainability, infrastructure and partnerships necessary to underpin research.

As described in [Section 3.3](#) however, there remain doubts over the financial viability of the research staffing and infrastructure grown through this program. The evaluation heard from a variety of stakeholders across universities, peak bodies and government of limitations in the research capabilities of regional universities, and that compared with metropolitan universities, regional universities sometimes lack capabilities in grant writing and research administration. The evaluation heard that regional universities would welcome further targeted funding to support regional research.

5.0 THE AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES ACCORD

The Australian Universities Accord will have significant impacts on the higher education landscape in Australia. **Table 9** outlines connections between the Naphthine measures, and the Accord's recommendations and the Government's response.

Table 9. Relevance of the Accord to the Naphthine Measures

 Measure is expanding  No notable changes  Measure discontinued in current format		
Measure	Status	Impact of Australian Universities Accord
Increase in CGS funding		The Accord identified shortcomings with the current funding model, and recommended a shift to a needs-based model. The 2024-25 Commonwealth Budget included a commitment to implementing needs-based funding as a core component of funding for higher education teaching and learning, and stated that the plan for implementing needs-based funding will be developed in consultation with the higher education sector. The 2024-25 Budget introduced a new CSP funding system via the Managed Growth Funding System to better meet student demand and support sustainable growth of CSPs with a focus on boosting enrolments by students from underrepresented backgrounds, including First Nations students. Consultation papers on a new Managed Growth Funding system and Needs-Based Funding system were released by the Department of Education in July 2024.
Demand-driven CSP funding for Indigenous regional and remote students		Priority Action 3 from the Accord Interim Report, to expand demand-driven CSPs to all First Nations students regardless of geographic location, was accepted by Government.
Regional Research Collaboration Program		This program was discontinued in December 2023, all 11 projects funded will continue until their completion. The Accord made several recommendations that broadly align with or are supportive of RRCP's objectives. These focused on: cross-sector partnerships (Rec 25(b));

- increasing funding for research to meet the full economic cost of delivery (Rec 28);
- increasing workforce and professional development opportunities (Rec 25(d)), 26(e), 31(d)).

The 2024-25 Budget included a commitment to undertaking a strategic examination of Australia's research and development system to strengthen alignment with Australia's priorities and improve innovation and research and development outcomes.

Refocusing the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program		The Accord noted that HEPPP will be impacted by the shift to a needs-based funding model, as universities will be provided additional funding to support student-centred academic and support services. The July 2024 Needs-Based Funding consultation paper notes that consultations will explore potential reform of other funding for equity in higher education.
Regional University Study Hubs		Priority Action 1 from the Accord Interim Report, to extend the Regional University Study Hubs (and establish a similar concept for suburban locations), was accepted by Government. Locations of an additional 10 Regional University Study Hubs was announced in March 2024, with a further application round still to be conducted.
Regional Partnership Project Pool Programs		The Accord identified the role RPPPP plays in supporting outreach, and highlighted the ongoing need for targeted, place-based and community-focused outreach initiatives (Rec 11).
Tertiary Access Payments		The Accord noted that the TAP is insufficient to cover the full costs associated with relocation. It recommended removing the requirement to commence study within 12 months of school completion and adjusting payment allocation timing to provide more immediate assistance with relocation costs (Rec 39(d)).
Fares Allowance		The Accord noted that the Fares Allowance is insufficient in its current format to cover the full costs associated with relocation. No specific recommendations were made in relation to the Fares Allowance.
Regional Education Commissioner		The Accord proposed additional responsibilities for the Commissioner, including a position on the Board of the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) (Rec 30(g)). Under the current proposal outlined in the ATEC Implementation Consultation Paper, ATEC Commissioners will consult with and draw on the expertise of the Regional Education Commissioner. ⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Department of Education (2024) [Australian Tertiary Education Commission \(ATEC\) Implementation Consultation Paper](#) (pg.3-4) Department of Education, Australian Government.

6.0 WHAT DESIGN ELEMENTS SHOULD BE CONSIDERED FOR FUTURE MEASURES?

The evaluation has identified the following areas for consideration in relation to the design and evaluation of Naphthine Measures, or other measures relating to higher education in RRR areas.

Bridging the gap – a bridge too far?

A theme that emerged through interviews with universities, peak bodies and other stakeholders was that evaluating the impact of the Naphthine Measures by comparing rates of participation and attainment between RRR and metropolitan areas may not be the most useful or appropriate goal. This is because the goal could be said to have been met in circumstances where RRR student participation and attainment had fallen, but metropolitan rates had fallen by a greater amount.

*If you're looking at the gap between metro and rural, regional and remote, you're almost saying you want metro not to gain at all or come backwards. I think that metric is not fit for purpose for what the intent is. You could have metrics going screaming up through the roof in terms of outcomes for rural and regional, but if metros are doing it at exactly the same pace you've still got the same disparity. But it doesn't mean that rural and regional and remote hasn't improved dramatically. - **Education sector stakeholder***

It may be more appropriate for the impact of government initiatives in RRR areas to be evaluated with reference to progress against the baseline in those areas, not through a comparison against metropolitan areas – though there are also limitations to attributing outcomes to measures individually or collectively, as the next section explores further.

Measuring impact

Quantifying the impact of policies and programs in a complex and dynamic environment like higher education is inherently challenging. A key finding of this evaluation is that there are social, economic and policy trends and levers which impact education participation and attainment and are beyond the control of the Department of Education or higher education providers.

These limitations, and the inherent challenges with attributing impact in a complex and changing environment, should be borne in mind in the framing of future evaluations of individual measures and of the Naphthine Measures as a suite of actions. However, there are still steps that can be taken to better understand the impact of specific measures on higher education participation and attainment rates.

The HEIMS data study is an example of research which demonstrates the potential impact of an RRR-focused measure on higher education participation, and which provides a solid evidence base for understanding the foreseeable impact of the RUSH Naphthine Measure. The survey of Hub registrants developed by the Regional University Study Hubs Network also holds promise in terms of generating deeper understanding of the role of Study Hubs in shaping student behaviour with regards to higher education participation, and understanding the role of Hubs in supporting higher education attainment.

In this regard, data collection, and particularly qualitative data in relation to student experience and decision-making, is critical. While qualitative data is regularly referenced in the Department of Education's Performance and Data Framework as an information requirement to support evaluation of the Naphthine Measure, this evaluation has found that such data is generally not available or is anecdotal.

The following examples of data gaps are identified to support strengthening of data collection for the Naphthine Measures:

- While the refocusing of HEPPP led to funding increases for regional universities, there is insufficient data in relation to the impacts of HEPPP-funded activities on raising awareness about higher education opportunities and increasing participation levels to be able to draw evaluative conclusions.
- There is no qualitative data available in relation to student experience of the TAP and Fares Allowance and whether these measures impacted student decision making in relation to undertaking higher education.

7.0 CONCLUSION

The Naphthine Measures were a significant and impactful commitment by the Australian Government to bridging the gap in participation and attainment between RRR and metropolitan students, driving productivity and growth for regional Australia, and increasing the research capacity of regional universities. While there are gaps in the available data which limit the ability of this evaluation to make definitive assessments regarding influence of the measures on higher education participation and attainment, the evaluation has found many examples of individual measures having positive impacts for individuals, higher education providers and communities. Broadly, the Naphthine Measures were welcomed by stakeholders, who highlighted the importance of ongoing efforts to improve higher education outcomes for RRR students.

The Australian Universities Accord, and the Government's response, have altered the higher education landscape. Central to these reforms is the development of a needs-based funding model, which will represent a change from the existing Commonwealth Grant Scheme Funding mechanism. The Accord and the Government's response have generally aligned with the principle of reducing higher education disparities which was at the heart of the Naphthine measures, and have supported the expansion of particular measures, including the through further investment in Regional University Study Hubs and expanding the scope of the Regional Education Commissioner's role. To ensure that learnings are not lost, and the voices of stakeholders positively influence future reform directions, findings and recommendations from this evaluation should be a reference point for future rollout of actions under the Accord.

Appendix A: Stakeholders that participated in an interview

Sector/ stakeholder type	Stakeholder name
Federal government departments and agencies	• Australian Government Department of Education • Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts • Jobs and Skills Australia • RDA Orana • RDA Riverina
Naphthine Review and Australian University Accord stakeholders	• Australian University Accord Panel members • The Hon Dr Denis Naphthine • Regional Education Commissioner
Regional Study Hubs	• Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success, Curtin University • Country Universities Centre • Country Universities Centre Cape York • Kimberley Universities Centre • Lumen Wheatbelt Regional University Centre • Mallee Study Hub • Mt Isa Study Hub • Pilbara Study Hub • Uni Hub Spencer Gulf - Port Lincoln • Uni Hub Spencer Gulf - Roxby Downs
Advocacy bodies	• Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia • Isolated Children's Parents' Association
Additional Regional Universities (non-RUN members)	• Charles Darwin University • James Cook University
Regional Universities (RUN members)	• Central Queensland University • Federation University • University of New England • University of Southern Queensland • University of the Sunshine Coast

**Higher education peak
bodies**

- Universities Australia
- Regional Universities Network
- Regional University Study Hubs Network

