

19 December 2022

Mary O’Kane
Chair, Australian Universities Accord
Higher Education Division
Australian Government Department of Education

Re: Submission to the Universities Accord – Terms of Reference

Dear Mary and the Australian Universities Accord Panel,

Thank you for the invitation to provide feedback on the priority issues outlined in the Terms of Reference for the Review.

The Country Universities Centre (CUC) is a network of 18 Regional University Centres across NSW, Queensland, and Victoria. Each Centre is locally owned, governed and operated for the benefit of their local community and supports all students from any university in Australia. Students who utilise the CUC can receive face-to-face academic support, study spaces, exam support, access to high-speed internet and technology, wellbeing support, and a local learning community of other students.

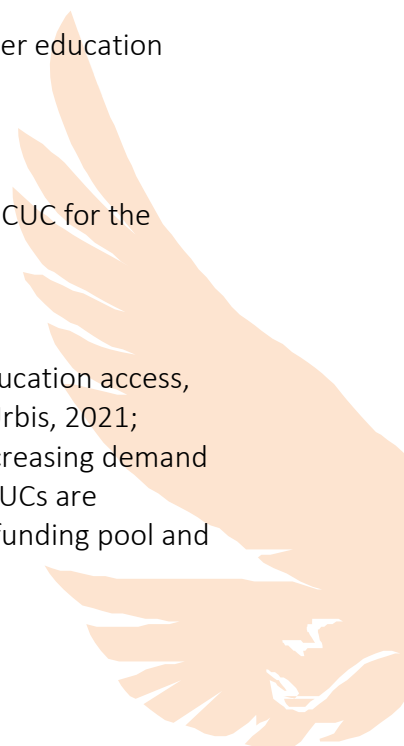
We want to provide feedback on the Terms of Reference with the lens of regional, rural, and remote higher education – specifically on the Regional University Centre Program. While the suggestions made below speak generally to the Terms of Reference, the three focus areas the CUC would like to comment on are:

1. Access and opportunity.
2. The connection between the vocational education and training, and higher education systems.
3. Meeting Australia’s knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future

Each of the points below provide brief context and a recommendation from the CUC for the Panel to consider.

Expand the Regional University Centre (RUC) program

Regional University Centres (RUCs) have made an immense impact on higher education access, participation, retention, and support for regional students (Stone et. al., 2022; Urbis, 2021; DESE, 2021; King et.al., 2022). As a result of this success, the CUC is receiving increasing demand from regional communities who are looking to establish a local RUC; however, RUCs are currently funded under a standalone Commonwealth program which limits the funding pool and



ability for a greater number of communities to establish a Centre. There are opportunities to expand the development and sustainability of RUCs by embedding them as part of the broader higher education sector and funding mechanisms. This will further increase access to higher education in regional communities across Australia.

Recommendations:

- *Expand the Regional University Centre program to enable more regional communities to develop local access to higher education.*
- *Embed Regional University Centres into the broader higher education sector by inclusion in any future iterations of the Higher Education Support Act and other funding streams including HEPPP/IRLSAF.*

Low-Population Model of Regional University Centres – Higher Education and VET

Regional University Centres have been demonstrated to improve access, participation, and success for regional people in addition to training locals for the jobs and skills required in their communities (Urbis, 2021; DESE, 2021). However, only select regional communities have an RUC and in smaller communities an RUC is not a viable option in its current form. The CUC has worked with the RAPAD region of councils in Central-Western Queensland to develop a pilot low-population RUC model that works as a cluster across multiple towns and incorporates TAFE/VET. This community-led model can be further developed and expanded in rural and remote locations that do not have large populations or current access to VET if, for instance, no local TAFE campus exists. RUCs can play a pivotal role in supporting both university and VET students in smaller communities and facilitate seamless transition across both study pathways for local students, often utilising existing infrastructure. Creating a low-population RUC model incorporating VET across Australia will have a demonstrable impact on access, retention, and workforce development in rural communities.

Recommendation: *Expand the Regional University Centre program its current form and explore low-population models that incorporate vocational training within smaller RUCs.*

Reinstate Demand Driven Funding (DDF) for equity students

The current CSP capped funding environment and JRG policy settings inhibit the ability to widen access and opportunities for marginalised people within regional Australia. During its implementation from 2012 to 2017, Demand Driven Funding (DDF) made significant increases in the participation of students from equity groups: Indigenous undergraduate student enrolments had more than doubled increasing by 105%; enrolments of undergraduate students with a disability had increased by 123%; enrolments of students from regional and remote areas had increased by 50%; and enrolments from students from low socio-economic status backgrounds (LSES) rose 66%).

One of the weaknesses of the DDF (2012 to 2017) was the high attrition rates that public universities experienced in 'opening up higher education' (Norton, 2020). In addition to

reinstating DDF, the CUC strongly advocates for a concurrent review of HEPPP/IRLSAF funding to incorporate Regional University Centres as a mechanism to support the retention of equity students in regional communities under any demand driven policy setting.

Recommendation:

- *Reintroduce Demand Driven Funding for targeted equity groups.*
- *Redesign HEPPP/IRLSAF to enable Regional University Centres to be eligible for student retention funding.*

Redesign Widening Participation to be more equitable for regional Australia.

Many regional, rural, and remote Australian communities have only received limited or no access to Widening Participation activities, while schools in metropolitan areas have been over-served by universities (Austin, 2021). The Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP) has allowed Regional University Centres to lead community-led outreach programs in partnership with universities to nurture aspirations and pathways to pursue higher education and VET. This provides cost effective and locally relevant outreach and widening participation programs, and regionally focused partnerships that enable every student to access both Widening Participation activities and tailored career advice. RUCs are well positioned to continue acting as the lynchpin between communities and universities for widening participation activities into the future.

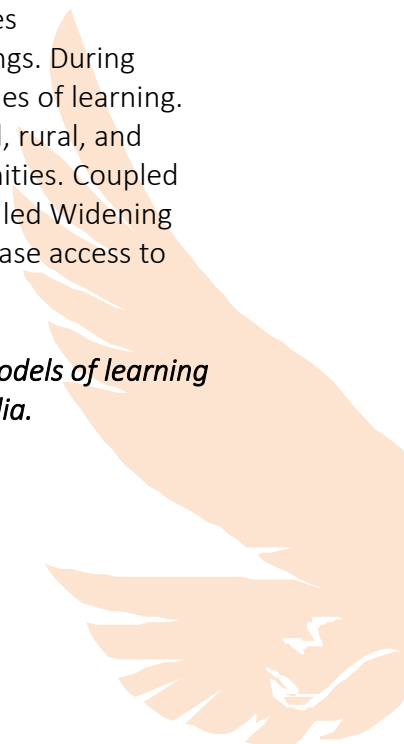
Recommendations:

- *Expand the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP)*
- *Review the 'Partnerships' component of HEPPP to explore how Regional University Centres can be better included.*
- *Include Regional University Centres as eligible for any future iteration of the HEPPP/IRLSAF widening participation funding formulas.*

Incentivise universities to continue developing online learning

In 2021, CUC students studied 861 unique courses from 39 Australian universities demonstrating that regional students value choice and diversity in course offerings. During covid, universities transitioned much of their education online and blended modes of learning. This increase in flexibility and quality of online education has benefitted regional, rural, and remote Australians providing access to expanded courses and learning opportunities. Coupled with a reinstatement of Demand Driven Funding and Regional University Centre led Widening participation activities, further normalising online learning will significantly increase access to higher education for regional people.

Recommendation: Incentivise universities to continue with online and blended models of learning to maintain and expand access to higher education for people in regional Australia.



On Country student support for First Nations students

Equity support programs like the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) should be reconsidered and expanded so they can be accessed directly by Regional University Centres that are best placed to deliver the services on Country for regional First Nations students who are studying online or remotely. This has occurred on a small scale at CUC Far West in Broken Hill NSW but has potential to be embedded in First Nations student support practice within higher education and the Regional Universities Centre program.

Recommendation: Alter the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) to allow Regional University Centres to access funding to support first nations students on Country.

Regional Student Placements and Workforce Transitions

Student placements are a significant barrier to completion of higher education in regional Australia. Students studying through small regional campuses or online face challenging university requirements to complete their degree. For students in outback locations, this may mean travelling days to a metropolitan placement. Often these students could meet their placement requirements in the local community, however most universities do not allow this to occur. Regional University Centres are well positioned to alleviate these challenges by facilitating local placements if students are permitted to do so by universities. By utilising local connections Regional University Centres can ensure student retention, success, and ultimately employment in the local workforce.

Recommendation: Create requirements that ensure universities must allow regional students to complete their placements in their local community if they choose.

Standardise Enabling Programs and Alternative Pathways

Students are increasingly accessing alternative entry pathways and enabling programs to transition to higher education with just 26% of school leavers using the ATAR as the admission pathway to university (Mitchell Institute, 2020). These enabling programs are essential to providing access to higher education for people who may not have completed school, or who are mature-aged students. While universities have enabling programs, access to these in regional Australia is limited and universities often use these as recruitment tools for their specific institution. There is an absence of state-based or national alternative pathway and assessment measures – often resulting in students having to navigate diverse university-driven alternative entry programs or being funnelled into a specific institution. This disadvantages students who do not have any family experience with navigating higher education. Regional University Centres are well positioned to facilitate enabling programs locally; however, without consistency in the curriculum or ability for these programs to be recognised across institutions, it presents another barrier for regional people to access higher education.

Recommendation: Development of national or state-based standards on enabling programs to ensure institutional transferability and/or a national or state-based alternative assessment framework and university entry program.

Simplify scholarship and incentive schemes

CUC students have experienced barriers in accessing scholarship and incentive schemes, such as the Tertiary Access Payment Scheme, as the current support initiatives for regional students are complex and cumbersome to navigate. This complexity creates inefficiencies and barriers for students to access the support they require to succeed in higher education and dissuades many regional students from commencing study. A review of the financial scholarship support mechanisms and the barriers to students applying is required at a national level.

Recommendation: Review financial support and incentive schemes for regional students to simplify the application and selection process

The CUC strongly believes that to create an equitable higher education system for regional Australia local communities must be placed at the centre of any future design. Thank you for your time and the review. If you have any questions regarding the CUC submission, I would be very happy to discuss these with you.

Kind Regards,



Chris Ronan
Director, Equity and Engagement
Country Universities Centre

