

19 December 2022

**Taree Universities Campus: part of the Regional University Centres Program funded by DESE  
Submission for Review of Australia’s Higher Education System**

The primary focus of Regional University Centres (RUC’s) is to ensure students living in regional areas have equitable access to higher education. For access to be equitable all degree disciplines must be available ‘locally’ without the need to move ‘off country’, or away from employment or family networks, to further their studies and career opportunities via skill development.

Regional University Centres are a key community asset for employers, who are operating, or looking to establish themselves, in regional areas. Regional Australia has become strongly dependent on a non-resident workforce; hence acute worker and skills shortages are now being experienced. The presence of an RUC services employer confidence in ensuring they can access a skilled workforce to develop their business. This facilitates economic growth for regional areas to develop and flourish into the future.

A high priority is that The Accord needs to recognise the important role the growing number of RUC’s establishing themselves in rural, regional, and remote areas play in supporting learning and creating opportunities for ‘local’ regional students. For example, *Taree Universities Campus*, a local not-for-profit organisation in the LGA of the MidCoast NSW, provides study hub facilities and registered student support, but also academically supported courses with partner universities that offer online courses.

The following is feedback driven by experience at Taree Universities Campus to the Review of Australia’s Higher Education System for each of the seven priority areas.

Meeting Australia’s knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future

**Regional University Centres are local and operate within trusted and familiar community networks, placing them in a strong position to work strategically to develop regional businesses and industry.** Research shows that people who gain qualifications in regional areas are more likely to stay and work in regional areas. Regional towns report difficulty in attracting and retaining skilled workers; growing our own workforce, especially in regional Australia, will help to reduce dependency for workforce supply on non-residents, especially service workforce needs (i.e., education, health).

In the current employment climate Universities are not filling their student number caps because paid jobs in this time of workforce shortages can be more attractive than tertiary education.

Access and opportunity

**Equity in access to affordable post-school education – tertiary or vocational – in regional areas could significantly increase the nation’s resources of human capital.** Statistics point to large resources of untapped human capital in non-metropolitan areas. People who gain qualifications in regional areas are more<sup>1</sup> likely to stay and work in regional areas.

**The highest priority for student equity and access to higher education for under-represented groups is to assess the effectiveness of different modes of learning delivery modes.**

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<sup>1</sup> Engaging young people in regional, rural and remote Australia (Ann Davie, 2015)

Key areas to address include:

- Offering online course delivery in study areas identified as a priority for meeting regional skills demands – for example allied health has been deemed a skilled workforce lacking in the MidCoast NSW yet there is scarcity in the offering of Allied Health degrees in an online mode.
- Support for lectures in RUC's will also provide variation to solely online learning. This will mean a need to reassess TEQSA requirements for such centres.

#### Investment and affordability

**Providing guaranteed suitable ongoing funding for core operation of regional study centres is fundamental.** Changes to university funding overall should consider Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPP) funding which is currently only available to regional universities not those in the Regional University Network.

Consideration should also be given to **funding for costs of student placements**, whether regional or metropolitan. This issue is multi-faceted:

- Placement in regional areas fosters intention for qualified students to work in a regional area. Placement that is compulsory for Nursing and Teaching, should also be facilitated/encouraged for other degrees, such as Accounting, Engineering for example. In our community Accounting and Engineering (and many others) are identified skills gaps. A student on placement can transition to an employee and be secure in knowing their qualifications have set them on a career path.
- Cost of compulsory placements is a key stressor for students. Removing the need to relocate beyond the LGA, that is, prioritise placements to be local to their study location, and fund the costs of wages lost or childcare costs borne by the student whilst completing placement.
- Student access to a "Placement Coordinator" to oversee placement arrangements with employers and a debrief whilst and after completing placement with both the student and the employer. The work placement coordinator needs to be funded as a local role with community/employer connections.

#### Governance, accountability and community

**Increased regional funding, directed to the regions themselves, will facilitate more direct and planned benefits to that region**, reducing the focus on universities governance in funding allocations.

#### The connection between the vocational education and training and higher education systems

**Priority should be placed on vocational and training programs that are specifically focused on assisting people who may not have experienced higher education before or have been away from education for an extended period.** Many regional areas have limited visibility to the various pathways into tertiary and vocational education. Moreover, vocational training has been downsized in many locations, leading to further skills shortages and diminished pathways and career opportunities. There is need for expanding outreach into regional communities to support people who may be looking to enter higher education. This will help garner further options to transition people into higher education.

### Quality and sustainability

There is now widespread recognition that online tertiary study in isolation from learning support is hard resulting in a high non-completion rate. The support provided by RUCs to regional students is, for many students, crucial for completion of their course of study.

**Additional CSPs are not required when unemployment rates are low in the current time of workforce shortages** with potential students choosing to work and earn, rather than learn through tertiary education. Allocating 20,000 new Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) was not needed in the current employment climate with many universities presently under their caps.

**The current times and circumstances further provide impetus for more equity in tertiary educational opportunities, especially for those in regional Australia.**

Anecdotally, many of those students who are on university campuses are not returning to current learning modes (e.g., lecture halls and tutorials) although they still yearn for the collegiality of campus life.

Careers advisors in schools are not having 'off class' time and therefore do not have capacity for developing university/community/employer connections. Teacher shortages add pressure to their timetable when they are called in for face-to-face teaching roles in class rather than advisory roles. This leads to high school students with a low aspiration for further studies who suffer a lack of awareness of career opportunities for their future.

### Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability

**Increase a direct stream of partnerships funding and research pools like the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP) that can foster genuine collaboration to meet regional demands and outcomes.** This alleviates the need from CSPs. Expanding access to HEPPP funding through the RPPPP has already shown the benefit of widening the net in the outreach space.

**Increased programs that foster aspiration building.** Exposing students to broader workforce choices can increase and sustain workforces regionally as students cannot be what they cannot see.

Taree Universities Campus appreciates the establishment of the Accord to review and recommend reforms into higher education and we welcome the opportunity of collaboration with further discussions on these matters during the Accord Panel's review process if necessary.

Kind regards,



Donna Ballard  
Chief Executive Officer

