

## **INQUIRY INTO FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NSW TERTIARY EDUCATION SECTOR**

**Organisation:** Country Universities Centre

**Date Received:** 24 July 2020

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# Submission into the inquiry into the future development of the NSW tertiary education sector



Portfolio Committee Number 3 – Education

24 July 2020

The Country Universities Centre (CUC) is a not-for-profit organisation which empowers regional, rural and remote communities by increasing access and success in higher education opportunities. It is a network of regionally located study communities equipping students with the technology, facilities, and academic and pastoral support needed for students to thrive and succeed.

The success of the CUC in supporting regional students to access, participate and benefit from higher education has been recognised through the support of the NSW Government, Commonwealth Government, local governments of participating communities, cornerstone universities, corporate sponsors and other philanthropists which have all contributed towards expanding the CUC. In return, the CUC has endeavoured to provide higher educational opportunities for regional people without having to leave their networks of family, friends and work, to slow the emigration and drain of youth from regional to metropolitan areas, and to provide regional workforces with the knowledge and qualifications for future development and challenges.

The evidence is early, but the signals are that the CUC is succeeding in its mission.

The CUC welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission into the Committee's Inquiry into the future development of the NSW tertiary education sector. In particular, the CUC wishes to address the following terms of reference of the Inquiry:

- (a) *Tertiary education's economic development role, especially university campuses and Country University Centres (CUCs) in regional NSW;*
- (b) *The mission of NSW universities with a particular focus on the role of universities to serve specific geographic communities; and*
- (i) *The recent experience with online learning and lessons for the further development of alternative models of tertiary education service delivery.*

## Introduction to the CUC Model



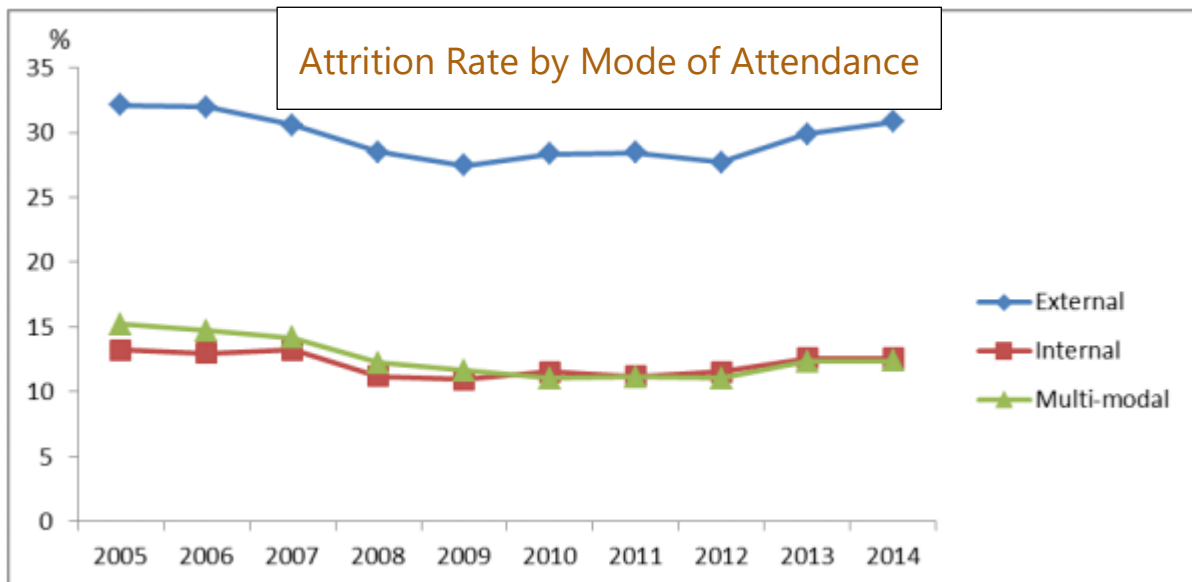
CUC Snowy Monaro in Cooma, 2018

The CUC is a model designed and developed by regional people for regional people and communities to reach their potential in higher education. It empowers students to remain in their communities and workplaces with their families and friends and still have opportunities to be supported for success in pursuing a higher education.

Towns in NSW with populations under approximately 20,000 find it incredibly difficult to attract and retain direct university investment in the form of a university owned regional campus. As a result:

- Youth in these communities often believe that the greatest chance to be successful is simply to move somewhere else to a larger city or town, where education is more accessible. These youth often do not return, leading to an intellectual and social migration which can be demoralising for youth remaining in these regional communities;
- It's hard to be what you cannot see – if no local people are visibly accessing higher education opportunities in that community then aspiration and expectation of life possibilities diminishes in the local population;
- These communities find it harder to attract and retain high value industries and jobs in the knowledge economy, as there is no local supply of graduates for recruitment;
- Recruitment of professionals and knowledge workers into the area from elsewhere becomes more difficult, as the region is unattractive to professionals, their partners and their families as local higher education and professional development opportunities are scarce. These locations can be perceived by many to be a career dead end;

- Local academic and professional networks, and research into local community issues for local benefit can be difficult to sustain without a hub of higher education learning;
- Those studying externally online in the community have far less chance of completing a degree than those students moving and relocating to a university campus as indicated by the chart below, leading to a sense of inferiority and frustration.



Australian Government, Department of Education and Training, Improving Retention Completion and Success at University 2017 at p32

After many years of seeking but failing to obtain a university campus due to a town population of only 7,000, representatives of Cooma met in 2011 to concept design a community owned and driven model to address these above issues. That model was to create a Centre for all higher educational students in the community and to include the following:

- Computer terminals and Wifi with extremely fast download speeds using 100MBS symmetrical up and down as a base standard;
- Videoconferencing, whiteboards and other educational capabilities, with which students can communicate with university lecturers, tutors and support services;
- Printers, scanners and a textbook library;
- Centre staff who can assist students with general educational or administrative concerns, enrolments or other queries of students, assist with technical expertise in regards to online learning platforms and computer skills, as well as general wellbeing, motivation and study skills;
- General academic and study skills workshops taught by postgraduate qualified and experienced local instructors;
- An environment of study with the collegiate support of local fellow students who, although likely studying different courses at different universities, are often facing similar challenges and stresses of undertaking higher education study;
- Break out meeting rooms and a kitchenette services area;



- Staffing from 8.30am to 5pm each business day, but the Centre to be open to students with swipe card access from 7am to 12 midnight, 7 days a week to maximise accessibility.

In 2013, the Cooma Universities Centre was established (later becoming CUC Snowy Monaro) with the assistance of local industry (particularly Snowy Hydro) and local government. The Centre operated without any state or federal government assistance for its first five years of operation.



Photos of CUC Snowy Monaro (the original CUC), established in 2013

The Cooma Universities Centre enjoyed great initial success and was a source of interest to other regional communities who were similarly too small to attract direct university investment into local higher educational infrastructure. In 2015, the local Cooma Board determined that the model while successful when operating in one town in South Eastern NSW, would be even better if scaled across a number of regional communities to increase interest of universities, governments and statewide regional industry and service providers. A model of several affiliated CUC Centres operating across regional NSW could consolidate the student numbers across all locations, increasing appeal and collaborative opportunities with universities and other stakeholders.

The CUC developed a proposal submitted into NSW Government in 2016 to develop a community driven network of CUC Centres which would aggregate scale across locations such that the whole would become greater than the sum of the parts. Each Centre was to

have a local Board and management that could align that Centre with the needs of the particular local community, but would affiliate into the wider CUC network to obtain the benefits of combined practices, procedures, knowhow, branding, and relationships with universities and other stakeholders.

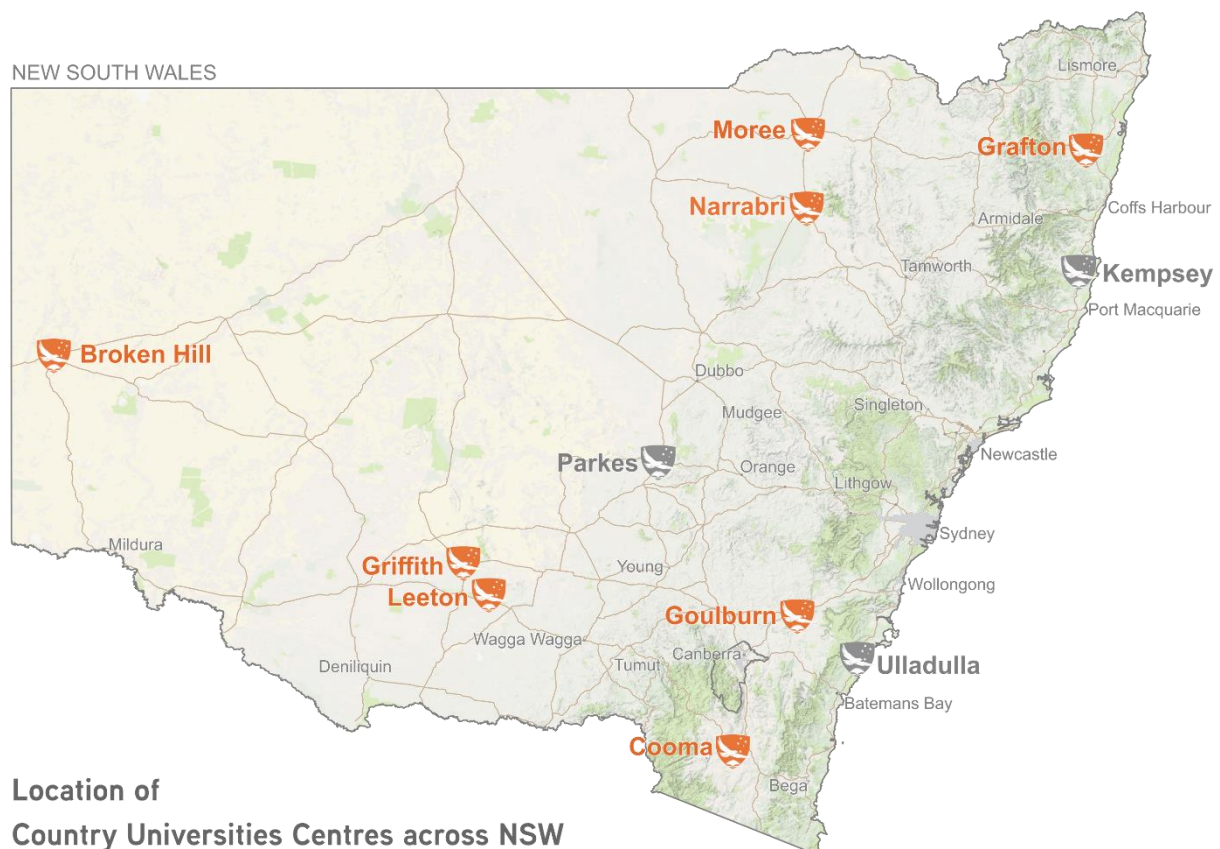
The CUC is extremely proud that today with thanks to NSW Government and



CUC Goulburn established in 2018

Commonwealth Government funding, university and corporate support for the concept of the CUC, seven other regional communities in NSW have established Centres and a further three NSW communities will have established Centres by semester 1, 2021. Many additional communities have approached the CUC for the establishment of a facility in their locality. The CUC strongly believes

that the model is becoming better as it becomes bigger, aggregating together the thin numbers of students that inevitably occur in individual regional communities so as to increase higher education opportunities.

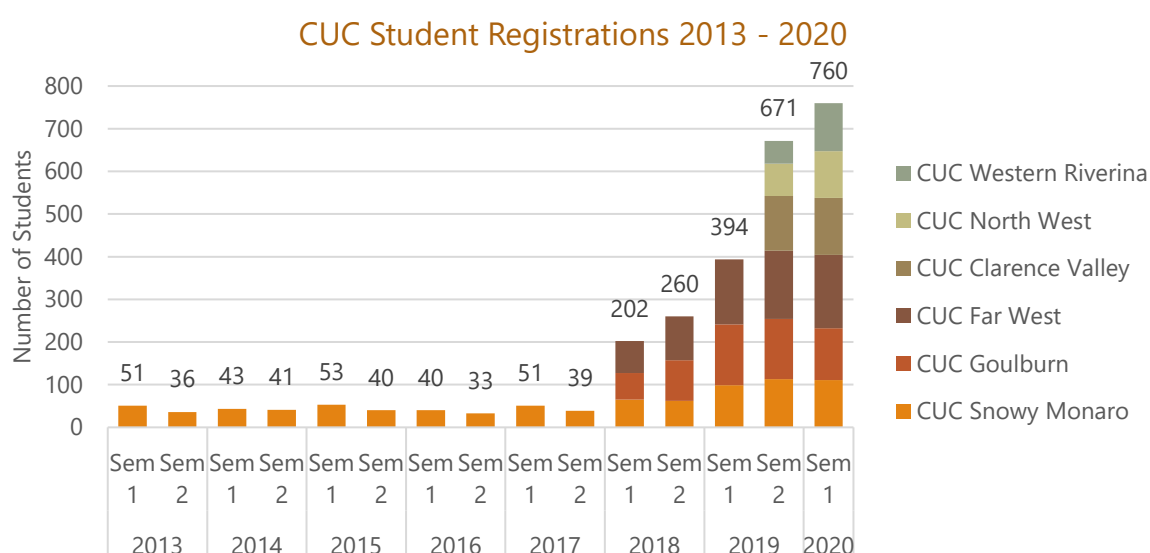


Although the CUC initially targeted NSW towns of population 7,000 to 20,000 for Centre establishment so as to build student numbers, the increasing scale of the CUC group is creating opportunities for smaller communities to sustainably establish facilities as part of the CUC network and gain that benefit of scale. The latest locality to join the CUC network in a federally funded pilot is Dirranbandi (in Queensland) with an approximate population of only 600. If this pilot is successful and sustainable, then many more smaller regional communities in NSW might also benefit from the establishment of a local Centre.

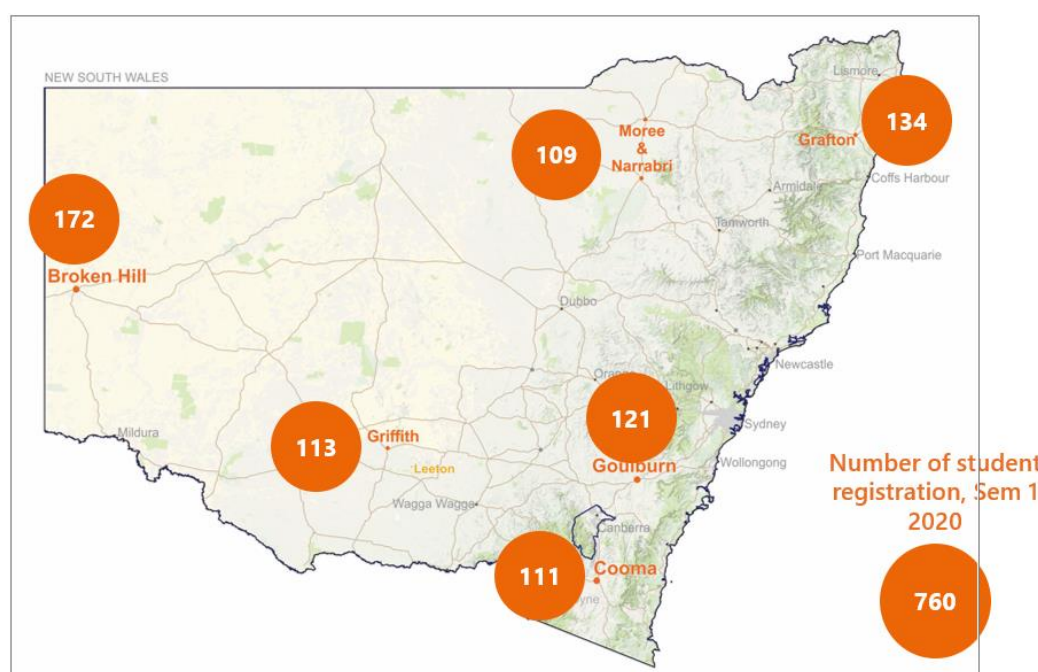


# Student Profile of the CUC

The CUC has rapidly escalated student numbers since the expansion of model in 2018, noting the establishment of CUC Far West and CUC Goulburn occurred in 2018, and the establishment of CUC Clarence Valley, CUC North West and CUC Western Riverina occurred in 2019.



All established Centres now have over one hundred students, contributing to an aggregated student body of 760 students in semester one 2020. Over 1500 students have accessed and been supported by the CUC since first establishment. Numbers are expected to continue to rise as further Centres are established and as better supports are incorporated into the model, made possible by increasing scale of the affiliated CUC network.



Interestingly, prior to expanding the model CUC Snowy Monaro was stable at 33-53 students. However, since expansion CUC Snowy Monaro has steadily grown to 111 students which have been attracted to the Centre by the deepening supports and programs made possible by the increasing scale of the CUC.

This enriching of the model due to the expansion and growth in student numbers suggests that the whole of the CUC is greater than the sum of its parts. If the CUC Centres were to be operating independently and not aggregating their scale through the CUC's affiliate model, then far less would be possible in terms of supports and university relationships,. The steep growth in CUC Snowy Monaro student registrations since the expansion of the CUC provides a strong argument for the CUC's affiliate model in NSW.

The CUC encourages students to choose the courses and the university or other provider that most suits that student, rather than confining choice to a defined list of courses from a single university. In semester one 2020, CUC students studied at 34 different Australian universities and 29 non-university higher education providers as well as TAFE NSW.

CUC students typically come from a number of recognised equity groups that are generally associated with poor outcomes in higher education.

## Semester 1 2020 760 students registered with the CUC



49% of students are the first in their family to study



9.3% of students have aboriginal or torres strait islander heritage



49% study part time



64% of student are over 25 years of age



77% of students are female, and 23% are male



9% speak a language other than English at home



54% Low Socio-Economic Status (IEO Index)



98% Regional or remote classification

CUC Semester 1 20

By way of comparison, percentages of equity characteristics in the CUC cohorts of students significantly exceed national higher education and regional university averages as follows:

### Equity Cohorts of the CUC

| Equity Characteristic           | % of CUC Students | % of National Higher Education Students | % of Students at Australian Regional Universities* |
|---------------------------------|-------------------|---|--|
| Regional or Remote              | <b>98%</b>        | 21.2%                                   | 51.2%  |
| Low Socio-Economic Status       | <b>54%</b>        | 17.1%                                   | 27.6%  |
| Indigenous                      | <b>9.3%</b>       | 1.8%                                    | 3.4%   |
| Non-English Speaking Background | <b>9%</b>         | 3.6%                                    | 1.3%   |

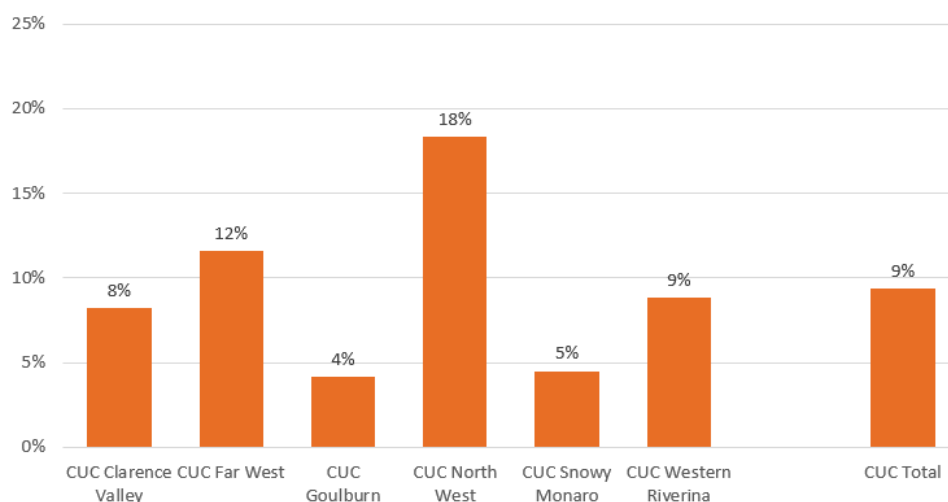
Koshy, P. (2018). Equity Student Participation in Australian Higher Education: 2012 – 2017. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE), Perth: Curtin University, with 2017 figures used for comparison.

\*Figures taken from university members of the Regional Universities Network

\*

The above table indicates the relatively high numbers of particular equity groups accessing CUC Centres, even when compared with regional universities in Australia. Many students come from more than one equity group, compounding probabilities of attrition (see page 26). As such, the CUC has the potential to profoundly impact both individuals and communities. Indigenous participation in the CUC being at over five times national averages is significant, and in individual Centres rises to as high as 18% (CUC North West based in Moree and Narrabri).

## Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Heritage

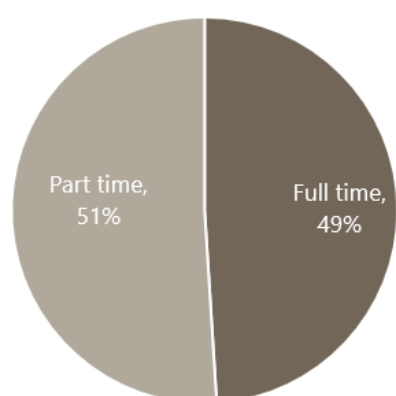


CUC Semester I 2020

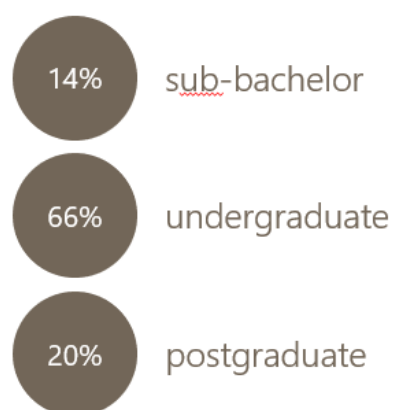
Student numbers are approximately evenly split between full time and part time students. Nationally, approximately 25% of students study part time (ABS Census Data, 2016) but in the CUC it is 51%, highlighting the need for flexibility in CUC Centre operations such as long opening hours as part time students juggle work and family commitments with study.

The CUC supports a wide range of experience in learning, with 20% of students being postgraduate, and 14% in sub bachelor courses including pathways.

## Type and Level of Study



Type of Study



Level of Study

## Evaluation of the CUC Model

Although only a new model with expansion first occurring in 2018, the CUC is encouraging objective scrutiny and analysis of its success, particularly in terms of student success, engagement, retention and employability.

The CUC undertakes semesterly surveys of students as part of its ongoing evaluation with generally high student response rates enhancing confidence in results. It's semester 1 2020 survey has the following responses:

- 98.5% of students find CUC staff to be helpful or very helpful;
- 98.5% of students find the CUC has made it easier to stay, study or work in the local community;
- 87.5% of students agreed or strongly agree that the CUC improves their academic results;
- 91% of students are able to focus better on their studies due to the support and facilities of the CUC;
- 98% of students felt at least some sense of belonging to the CUC, indicating a level of success in developing the collegiate environment of the CUC;
- 98% of students are likely or very likely to recommend the CUC to others.

In 2018, CQUniversity undertook a research study of its CUC Snowy Monaro students in the Education degree in which CQUniversity and the CUC have a partnership, which had been operational for two years: *Australia's community initiated regional study hubs: Equity for and access to initial teacher education – Country Universities Centre Snowy Monaro (Ambrosetti, Harreveld, Power, Blayney, Bush, CQU 2018 (a copy of the report is available on request).*

A key finding of that study was that:

*The support structures that are embedded within the Universities Centre model enables students to succeed more so than if they were studying via the traditional distance mode. (p5)*

And also

*...students studying via the CUC Snowy Monaro...have achieved a grade average that is similar or above the CQU average for each unit. In many instances, such as EDCU11031, EDCU11032 and EDED11454, the...Cooma students have achieved a grade average higher than both face to face students and distance students...(p15)*

The CUC suggests that for its external online students to obtain grade averages higher than CQU's on-campus face to face students is a great indicator of the academic success of its model.



The CUC also has a paper published in a peer reviewed academic journal:

*Davis, M. & Taylor, D. (2019). Regional study hubs: Increasing student engagement to support regional students facing high first-year attrition risk factors. A Practice Report. Student Success, 10(2). 79-90. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v10i2.1312>*

The Conclusion to the article states:

*Regional study hubs have been demonstrated to improve student engagement for regional students facing high first year attrition risk factors. For each of the four mechanisms of engagement presented by Kahu and Nelson (2018), the CUC was able to improve student outcomes. Sense of belonging was facilitated by creating a space to encourage student to student connections, as well as hosting educationally purposeful activities at the CUC centres. CUC staff assisted students to resolve causes of frustration and anxiety through providing assistance with unfamiliar university processes and administrative tasks, and ensuring students are supported to settle into study. High speed internet connections in the regional study hubs removed a further source of frustration for students where poor internet connections interfere with online study. Self efficacy for students was improved through access to academic support and pastoral care. Student wellbeing was maintained by creating an opportunity for regional students to remain in their home towns, and retain their family, friendship and community support networks.*

*The CUC network provides a practical opportunity for regional students to remain in their home towns and still be successful in their studies. The facilities and support structures of the CUC and regional study hubs increase student engagement, which in turn will improve student retention and success. Further work will continue to monitor the impact of regional study hubs, including success in higher education, integrated workforce pathways and local high value jobs, and local academic and professional networks for regional towns.*

The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education is preparing a report 'You going to uni?': Exploring how regional people navigate into and through higher education

<https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/2020-ncsehe-equity-fellow-dr-janine-delahunty-progress-bulletin/>

The Progress report states *A number of participants also were fortunate enough to have access to support and resources such as those provided by Country Universities Centres. Without exception, these students were high in their praise of this kind of support...*

In 2019, the CUC was very pleased to receive an Australian Rural Education Award from the Society of Provision of Education in Rural Australia as peer recognition of its services to regional communities.



Students hard at work studying various courses at different universities in CUC Clarence Valley (Grafton)

These early evaluations of the CUC model appear very positive, but with the first expansion of the CUC only occurring in 2018, the CUC acknowledges that the model is only very young and further evaluations will be beneficial in determining success and providing further guidance for the model. Further planned evaluations include:

- The NSW Department of Education and CUC have agreed to set aside 2% of the NSW Government grant funding of the CUC for the purposes of evaluation of the model;
- The Commonwealth Government is undertaking mid-term and full term evaluations of its funded program of Regional Universities Centres which include all six operational CUC Centres in NSW;
- The Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation is undertaking an evaluation in respect of its funding programs with the CUC, which provide Learning Skills Advisors into each CUC Centre to deliver workshop and one on one academic support for students;
- The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education will finalise its abovementioned report on how regional people navigate into the through university;
- At least two further university studies into the CUC are in planning or research stage; and
- The CUC will continue its internal evaluations including semesterly surveys of students to determine strengths and any weaknesses in execution of the model, and to adapt and evolve its supports within its available resources.

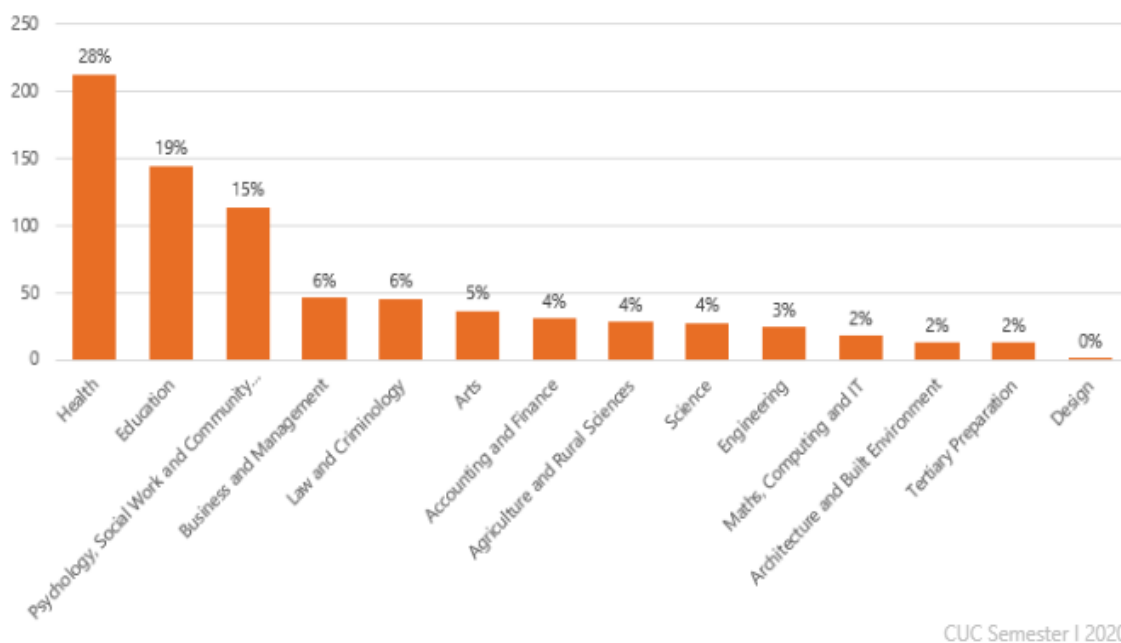
## Terms of Reference (a)

### Tertiary education's economic development role, especially university campuses and Country University Centres (CUCs) in regional NSW.

As the CUC has only been established for seven years in Cooma and under three years in other locations, and students studying part time commonly take six to eight years to complete a degree, it is early to assess the economic role of CUC's in terms of graduate contributions to local economies. However, it is interesting that while the CUC promotes choice of studying any course at any university, CUC students are studying degrees with the greatest local employment opportunities.

This pattern is demonstrated by the courses studied by CUC students in semester one 2020 which are as follows:

#### Courses Studied in the CUC Semester One 2020



The three most popular areas of study are Health, Education, and Psychology, Social Work and Community Services which align with the largest sectors of jobs growth in Regional NSW according to the Australian Government's Labour Market Information Portal. The portal

predicts the three greatest areas of jobs growth in Regional NSW between 2019 and 2024 will be:

- Health Care and Social Assistance with 37,700 new jobs by 2024;
- Education and Training with 10,200 new jobs by 2024; and
- Professional, Scientific and Technical Services with 6,400 new jobs by 2024.

All these sectors employ a large proportion of university graduates as part of their workforces. CUC students therefore generally appear to be choosing disciplines with good employment prospects in regional NSW, and it is expected that following graduation these students will fill a portion of the expected jobs growth in these sectors to the benefit of local economies.

Further, ABS census data from 2011 indicates a national emigration of youth from regional areas resulting in a diminished young adult population:

### Population Pyramids of National Urban and Rural Areas



Workforces in regional areas are impacted by the low numbers of young adults within the 20-35 y.o. age bracket in the community, affecting not only the age demographic of the working population but also matters such as uptake of technology and new ideas. The CUC suggests that the youth migration and brain drain of young adults from regional to metropolitan areas is a critical social and regional development issue, as workforces are skewed towards 40 to 70 year old age brackets. If regional communities through facilities like the CUC can retain more people in the 20-40 year old age bracket then benefits to local workforce and community social and sporting life may result.

## Case Study

### CUC Snowy Monaro – the longest operational CUC Centre

Lack of local higher educational infrastructure and support is often cited as a cause of intellectual emigration from a regional area, leading to a loss of youth with impacts on local workforce development.

Census data indicates that in the period from 2011 to 2016 (**noting that CUC Snowy Monaro was established in Cooma in 2013**), there has been an increase in the proportion of 20-35 year old age brackets in the total population in Cooma:

#### Changes in Cooma Young Adult Population 2011 - 2016

| Area  | Data table           | Data label | Data Type | 2016 | 2016% | 2011 | 2011% |
|-------|----------------------|------------|-----------|------|-------|------|-------|
| Cooma | Five year age groups | 20 to 24   | UR        | 386  | 5.22  | 343  | 4.76  |
| Cooma | Five year age groups | 25 to 29   | UR        | 389  | 5.28  | 355  | 4.93  |
| Cooma | Five year age groups | 30 to 34   | UR        | 411  | 5.58  | 394  | 5.48  |

Source: Profile ID at [profileid.com.au](http://profileid.com.au): Snowy Monaro Regional Shire

As indicated in the above chart, in Cooma from 2011 to 2016:

- 20-25 y.o. have increased from 4.76% to 5.22% of the town population
- 25-30 y.o. have increased from 4.93 to 5.28% of the town population
- 30-35 y.o. have increased from 5.48% to 5.58% of the town population

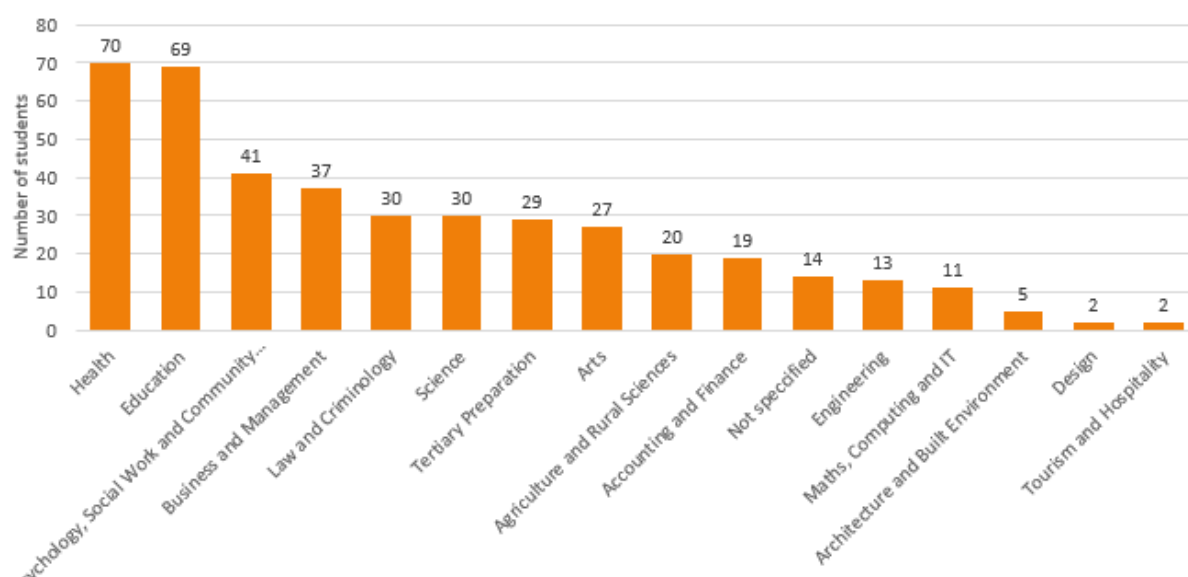
Between 2011 and 2016, in a total population of 7388 in Cooma there was an increase of 104 young adults (20-35 y.o.)

The majority of students (being 63%) studying at the CUC are in the 20-35 y.o. age bracket.

Whilst evidence is early and there is no information on causality, it is demonstrably the case that the young adult population in Cooma has grown as a proportion of the total population during the period in which CUC Snowy Monaro was established and operated for three years, as measured by census data. **It appears from census data that very early indications suggest with the presence of a CUC there may be a slowing of the emigration of youth from the town (as is so common in regional communities), and building numbers of young adults which may have a positive effect on the age demographics and nature of the local workforce and social life in the community.**

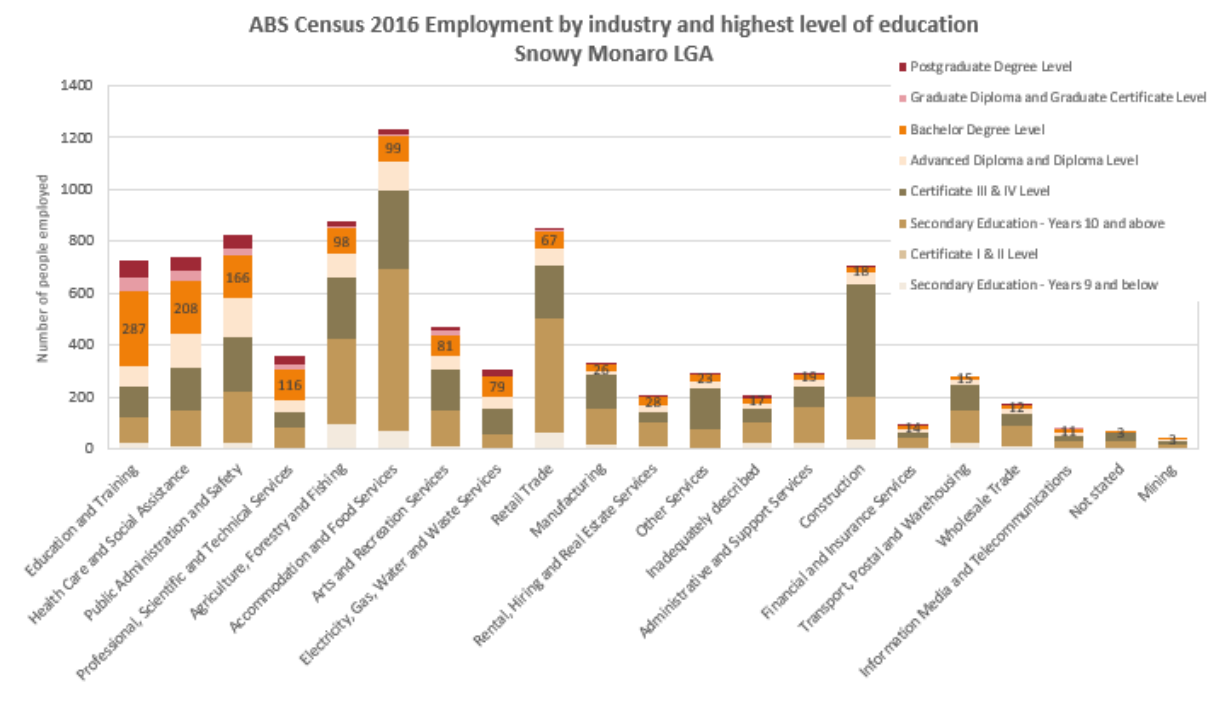


CUC Snowy Monaro students have since 2013 studied the following courses:



Census data in the Snowy Monaro Regional shire indicates that the largest fields of employment are in accommodation and food services, followed by agriculture. However, these two sectors primarily seek employees with vocational or school qualifications (ABS Census 2016). When sectors of employment are ranked in order of their employment of university graduates, education ranks highest employing 287 university graduates in the Shire, followed by Health Care and Social Assistance which employs 208 graduates. Public Administration and Safety follows with 166 graduates and Professional, Scientific and Technical Services with 116 graduates (see chart on following page).

A pattern has emerged where although CUC students are encouraged to study in areas of their choice with universities of their choice, **CUC students are choosing to locally study in the disciplines with the greatest graduate employment prospects in the Snowy Monaro region. The most popular courses studied at the CUC of Health, Education and Social/Community Services aligns with the areas of greatest local graduate employment.**



The CUC can and does play a role in gathering regional information on job prospects for the future, so that students can be advised of likely local employment prospects when selecting fields of study. The evidence suggests students are selecting courses generally aligning with local job opportunities even when presented with the choice of being supported to study any course at any university. This student driven model is to be compared with many small university owned regional campuses that only offer a small number of courses such that students' choice is limited, and which do not always necessarily align with local employment prospects.

## Upskilling

Small regional, rural and remote locations can be perceived as "backwaters" for professional advancement and opportunities, partly because of the lack of professional development opportunities. CUC Centres can address such issues for existing professionals and other graduates by providing supported local opportunities for postgraduate study, short courses and microcredentialling

A number of CUC Centres have been established or planned in Special Activation Precincts (SAP's) of the NSW Government (CUC Parkes, CUC North West with its facility at Moree, and CUC Snowy Monaro with its proximity to Jindabyne) and is involved in active discussions about preparing future workforces. For example, CUC Parkes is a member of the Parkes SAP Working Group, working with Council and Industry to meet the training and professional

development needs of the Parkes SAP including meeting the postgraduate and higher education needs of workers looking to reskill or upskill into areas of higher specialisation.

### Postgraduate Study

Approximately 20% of CUC students are postgraduate, studying Masters, PhD's, Graduate Certificates and Graduate Diplomas. These students are experienced learners that enhance the academic communities in the CUC Centres to the benefit of less experienced students. Participating CUC communities can provide the facilities and support to encourage postgraduate uptake furthering academic aspects of local professional careers.

### Short Courses and Microcredentials

The CUC has arrangements with course providers of short courses and microcredentialling which alleviates the need for professionals to travel, incur expense and lose work time attending professional development in metropolitan locations. Examples include a partnership between the CUC and the University of Sydney Centre for Continuing Education (CCE) potentially offering short courses delivered through the CUC in topics such as Project Management (2 days), Advanced Leadership and Management (2 days), Budgeting and Forecasting (1 Day) and Social Media marketing.

A partnership with Amazon AWS and 2Pi Computing has developed and can offer short courses in web development, cloud computing and other specialised computing skills. These bespoke courses can in future be delivered from one CUC centre, and broadcast across the network.

The CUC has delivered an exclusive seminar series by the Health Education and Training Institute (the professional development arm of NSW Health) for health professionals in regionally focussed topics including diabetic care, substance abuse and mental health. The CUC has also live linked into conferences such as the Rural Health Alliance and in Early Childhood. These sessions are aimed at professionals and students in relevant practice areas.

The CUC is currently in very early stages of discussing opportunities to provide innovation, soft skill and entrepreneurial courses and training with the Sydney School of Entrepreneurship. The CUC is motivated to develop courses in soft skills in response to studies such as the 2019 Workforce Development Study by RDA Far West indicating the importance of soft skills in surveys of local employers in Far West NSW (RDA Far West, 2019). That study noted (at page 69)

*The Country Universities Centre Far West provides outstanding facilities and caters for local students undertaking tertiary education qualifications. The Centre is building partnerships with tertiary providers and has begun face to face delivery of some qualifications locally. The*

*establishment of CUC Far West provides opportunities for local students to participate in supported Higher Education and achieve their educational aspirations from their home town. Local students now have access to a high tech supervised facility, tutorial and mentoring support and access to a network of like-minded students in a campus like environment*

Unfortunately, COVID-19 has made face to face short course delivery more difficult since March 2020, but the CUC is looking forward to resuming activities as soon as feasible.

## **The CUC in COVID-19**

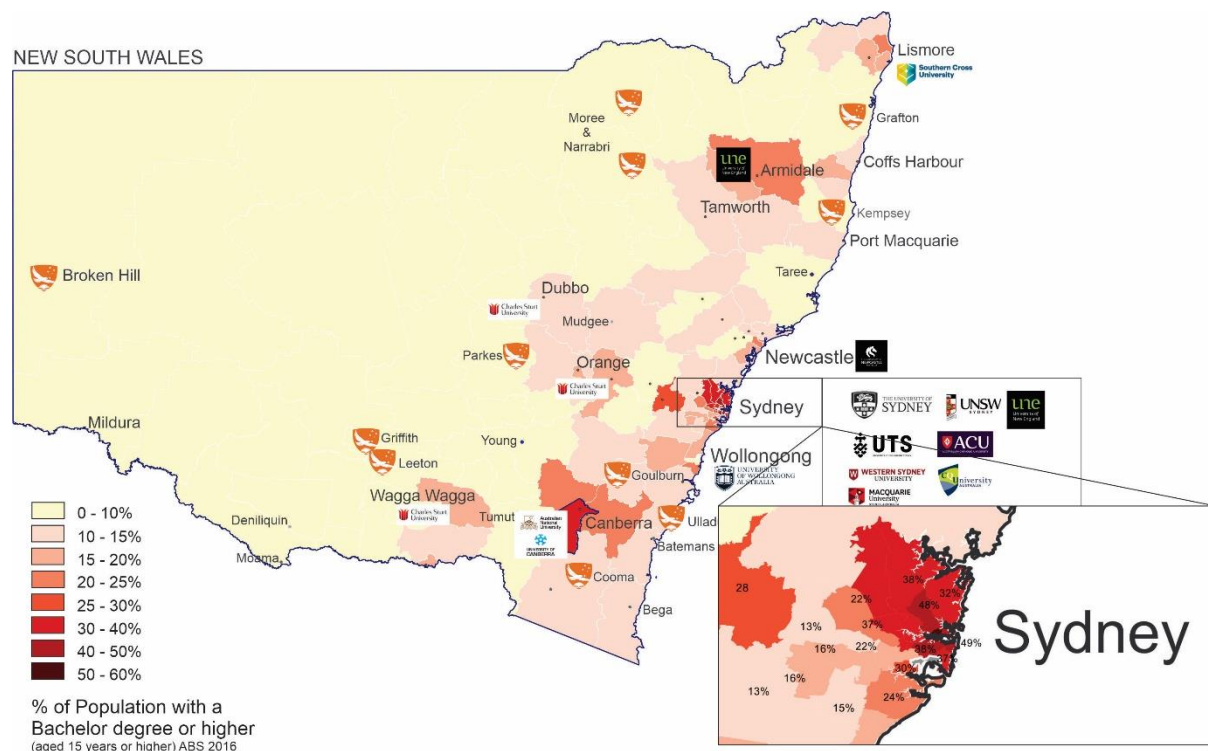
The role of CUC's became even more vital during COVID-19 restrictions, as many regional students returned from university campuses to their families, and needed fast connectivity to maintain their studies including interactive Zoom tutorials. Although the Centres suspended students access for a very short period in the height of the restrictions, for the most part the Centres were able to maintain student access with social distancing measures. Support was maintained face to face where possible and safe, with Centre Managers and Learning Skills Advisors calling students to provide support where face to face meetings were not feasible.

## Terms of Reference (b)

### The mission of NSW universities with a particular focus on the role of universities to serve specific geographic communities

The CUC is directed towards communities with a population too small to attract or retain direct university investment in the form of a regional campus.

### Bachelor Attainment, and Location of University Campuses and CUC's



The above map indicates the location of university campuses and CUC Centres (established and planned) in NSW. University campuses are clustered in metropolitan and inner regional areas where populations typically have 20% or more having a Bachelor degree or higher. CUC's have been located in areas with less than 15% Bachelor degree attainment, and most commonly under 10%. As a result, CUC's are servicing areas of need where direct university investment appears unsustainable, and CUC's serve populations where many accessing



higher education are first in their family to do so (49% of CUC students), low SES (54% of CUC students) and where large cohorts identify as indigenous (9.3% of CUC students).

In order to encourage universities to work with the CUC to together serve these geographic communities, the CUC has to de-risk activities for universities. It does so by seeking a diversity of funding sources in addition to university revenues (including all levels of government, corporate, community and foundation philanthropic support). The fee sharing model with universities is based around student numbers or Commonwealth Supported Places, such that the community takes on the risk and the role of ensuring sufficient student numbers and diversity of revenues to provide sustainability. Cornerstone universities are asked to provide a share of student fees or the value in Commonwealth Supported Places allocated to that university by the CUC.

With the mission of providing supported higher educational opportunities in locations too small for direct university investment, the CUC has developed a tool analysing locations for assessing suitability for a new CUC Centre by weighting the following thirteen statistical, geographic and community factors:

- Population Factors
  - Population of location
  - Density of hinterland.
- University Access and Participation
  - Distance to Nearest University Campus
  - Number of Students Enrolled in Universities in location
  - Number of Students Enrolled in Universities in hinterland
- Equity Factors
  - Percentage Bachelor Attainment in Population
  - SES Status of Community
  - Indigenous Population
- Community Co-operation
  - Eagerness of Community
  - Co-investment
  - Local Government Participation
- Facility Options
  - Quality of Facility
  - Connectivity to High Speed Internet

The CUC model is community driven rather than university driven. With local community ownership and governance of CUC Centres, participating geographic communities ultimately determine the manner in which universities will engage in these locations. As a result, activities and supports at the Centres will be driven towards community goals and aspirations rather than those of universities. This is a fundamental difference with a more traditional model of university ownership of higher education infrastructure in a community, that will ultimately be used to serve university interests rather than community goals.

## Terms of Reference (i)

### The recent experience with online learning and lessons for the further development of alternative models of tertiary education service delivery.

The CUC suggests there are three key challenges for students studying online, especially in regional areas: Opportunity, Access and Support. The recent COVID-19 situation has exacerbated these barriers, with issues encountered by regional students who regularly study online being magnified across the whole university cohort. The Chart below summarises some of these challenges, and how the Country Universities Centre has been working to support regional students to overcome barriers to online education in regional areas.

| Barriers to online study in regional areas  | Solutions provided by the Country Universities Centres   |
|---|--|
| <b>Opportunity</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Aspiration to go to university met with barriers to study, such as concern about costs and relocating</li><li>• Limited understanding or sources of information about options for study</li><li>• Finding the right course for regional employment opportunities</li><li>• Finding the right higher education provider for student needs (eg support, flexibility)</li></ul> | <b>Opportunity</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Information and assistance in finding the right course options to meet student needs</li><li>• Assistance in identifying and applying for scholarships or financial support</li><li>• Constant visible presence and source of information in regional communities around the possibilities of study</li><li>• School outreach to promote tertiary education options</li></ul> |
| <b>Access</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Poor internet connectivity</li><li>• Distractions at home making it difficult to focus on study</li><li>• Work/life/study balance requiring flexible study arrangements, especially for mature aged students</li><li>• Digital literacy</li><li>• Interrupted online exams and assessments due to poor internet connectivity</li></ul>  | <b>Access</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• High speed internet connections 100 mbps</li><li>• Quiet space to study</li><li>• Extended operating hours (7am – midnight 7 days per week)</li><li>• Face-to-face support with digital literacy</li><li>• Exam and online assessment facilities</li></ul>   |
| <b>Support</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Steep learning curve for academic skills</li><li>• New university vocabulary to navigate</li><li>• Social isolation</li><li>• First in their family to study</li><li>• Poor Student Engagement</li><li>• Confidence, motivation and persistence</li></ul>  | <b>Support</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Learning Skills Advisors for face-to-face academic support workshops and one-on-one sessions</li><li>• Face to face support from Centre Managers</li><li>• Learning community, surrounded by fellow students</li><li>• Increased student engagement through improved sense of belonging, self efficacy and well-being</li></ul>   |

The CUC recommends that further development of online learning needs to consider opportunity, access and support, especially in regional areas. The CUC experience with online study is that it optimally is scaffolded with blended face-to-face support in a community of learning for students to be able to engage in, persist with, and be successful in their studies.

## Opportunity

Whilst many young people in regional areas aspire to go to university, 40% of regional students with an ATAR of 75 or more do not transition directly from school to university (Quinn et al 2017). These students have been identified as having high aspiration for their futures, with traditional barriers to higher education such as low aspiration or lack of parental support not being major contributing factors to this challenge. The three main barriers identified by the researchers were:

- Cost (identified as an issue for 60% of students in the study);
- Indecision about the future and what/where these school leavers want to study, (43% of students identified this as a barrier); and
- Anxiety over leaving family and friends to relocate for university (41% of students identify this issue).

The CUC offers significant cost savings for many regional and remote students when compared to relocating and accessing a distant campus, which is often estimated at costing \$25,000 to \$30,000 for the student, of which only a portion will be covered by government student income support (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019 at page 24). Access to information around course choices and advice on financial supports are also very important resources provided by the CUC in overcoming these barriers. The CUC offers support to students in identifying and applying for appropriate scholarships for future and current students. Online study also offers opportunities for regional students to be able to study without the need to relocate away from family and friends to attend university.

Mature aged regional students who would like to strengthen or redirect their career paths also face challenges in accessing information around the best higher education provider to meet their needs, or in selecting a course that is relevant to regional employment opportunities. This ideally includes CUC's assisting potential students in critically evaluating the most important factors in a study provider and course, and assistance in connecting with universities or finding useful online tools.

## Access

### Internet

Poor internet connectivity in regional areas create a barrier to online study. In a recent article by Stone and Davis (2020), regional students reported issues that were prohibitive to study, including accessing or downloading materials, being unable to watch lectures and having assessment tasks interrupted. Understandably, many students expressed anger, stress and frustration, with some being unable to access the internet from home at all. Some quotes from these students are included below:

*"It takes an eternity to download lectures and streaming them requires extensive buffering. Uploading any files for group work or assignments is extremely slow and frustrating when deadlines are looming. The fluctuating connection which completely drops at times makes live tutorials or meetings pointless." (Internet download speed: 6.4 mbps Broken Hill)*

Students with slightly higher home internet speeds reported interruptions to study, disrupted focus, reduced productivity, and being unable to study at certain times.

*"If it is really slow you easily lose focus and you get easily frustrated. This can turn you right off studying in these conditions." (Internet download speed 9.5 mbps Goulburn)*

Only students with a download speed above 16 mbps agreed that their internet was sufficient to complete their online university study. Even among this cohort, difficulty with video calls and slow internet at certain times of the day or evening were reported. Across the whole cohort, cost of internet was a recurring theme.

The CUC offers students a reliable, high speed internet connection, with 100mpbs upload and download speeds. This reliable connection is vital for students undertaking online assessments, and valued by students who need to video call into tutorials, download lecture materials, or interact in multimedia activities as a part of their course.

### Flexibility

Regional students who study online are more likely to be mature aged students who are studying part-time, and consequently balancing difficult work/life/family/study loads. These students benefit from being able to study under flexible conditions, such as before or after work or during weekends. The CUC offers extended hours to students, with Centres open from 7am – midnight seven days per week. CUC Learning Skills Advisors are also available outside of business hours to accommodate student needs.

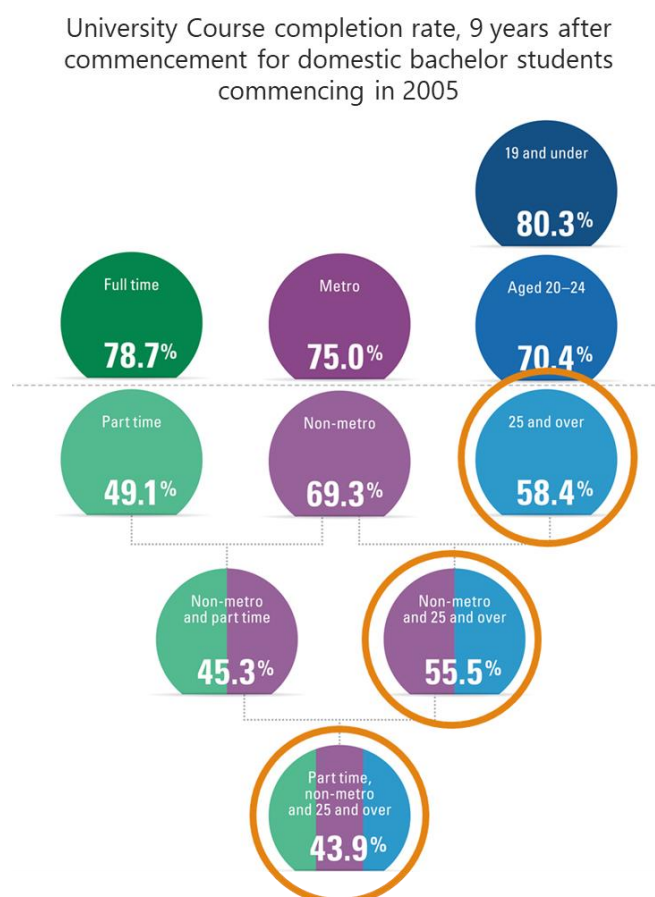
## Digital Literacy

In order to access online education, a basic level of digital literacy is required. Face to face assistance to set-up with digital platforms and technology removes a barrier that many people face in regional areas in participating successfully in higher education.

## Support

Students studying online are two and half times more likely than those on-campus to withdraw from university without a qualification (DET 2018).

Students who study in a regional area are more likely to be over 25 and studying part-time (ABS 2016). University students who study part-time online in regional areas are nearly half as likely to complete their degree as a full-time on-campus student (Edwards and McMillian 2015). The diagram below from Edwards and McMillians shows the compounding effect on university completion rates for students who belong to multiple equity groups.



The compounding effect of belonging to multiple equity groups on course completions (Edwards and McMillian 2015)

As identified in the student profile earlier in this submission, CUC students typically belong to several groups associated with low completion rates, being highly regional, low SES, part



time at university, mature age, first in family and indigenous. Students belonging to several of these groups have compounding effects such that the types of supports provided by the CUC become exponentially valuable to the student.

The Country Universities Centres offers face to face support for all students. The wrap-around support model offers students academic, administrative, technology, and well-being support, as well as a community of students to provide peer support.



**Administrative support** includes assisting students with enrolment, understanding HECS census dates, and navigating university terminology and platforms.

**The academic support** provided by the CUC provides students with face-to-face support for general academic skills, such as referencing, assignment writing and essay writing. Being able to offer these skills in a workshop format with other local students (regardless of which institution they are studying through) encourages further connections between students to share anxieties or uncertainties around study.

### CUC Wrap around support model

This support is in part provided by Learning Skills Advisors attached to each of the current operational Centres under a program funded in part by the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation. These advisors provide workshops and individualised advice to students on generic academic skills. The CUC is seeking additional funding to provide similar services in newly establishing Centres.

**Further support with technology** ensures that students have the tools required to be able to access online education, including high speed internet, computers, printers, scanners and video conferencing software, as well as skills in digital literacy.

**Well-being support** may include ensuring students have a dedicated person to discuss concerns around their study with proactive workshops such as time management, and assistance with finding resources and contacts for mental health, financial concerns, or advocating for students who may have had their studies impacted by natural disasters such as bushfires in 2019/20, and ensuring they have practical options to continue with their studies.

Social isolation has been identified as one of the most important barriers for students who are studying online (Muilenburg & Burg 2005). Nationally, only 21% of regional online student report having access to opportunities to interact with local students (QILT 2016). The

CUC provides a learning environment for students to collaborate and work alongside a diverse cohort of students. In 2020, 62% of CUC students reported that having the opportunity to work in proximity to other students made it easier to feel motivated or supported in their studies

In the most recent CUC Student Experience Survey, 87% of students stated that they were more likely to continue with my studies as a result of the help they have had from the CUC.

## Conclusion

The CUC is only a young model, but is already demonstrating success in lowering barriers to success for regional, rural and remote students in locations too small for university campuses to develop. The model promotes student driven choice in areas of study, but students are making study choices that align with growing local job opportunities suggesting that CUC students will be important in driving the future economic development of their regions. Very early signals also indicate that CUC Centres may be associated with growth in the young adult population in regional communities.

The CUC has welcomed both NSW and federal Government support in the expansion of the model to eight locations in NSW, which will further grow to eleven locations in NSW in 2021, and 13 NSW locations by 2022. The locations locally own and manage their CUC Centre for the benefit of their community, but obtain the benefits of a larger affiliate network to maximise opportunities for university support.

The CUC considers that it is an alternative model for facilitating successful higher education delivery that is quickly amassing a positive track record, and which could become an important part of the future fabric of the economic and social development of regional NSW. Continuing support of the NSW Government will be instrumental in the further expansion of the CUC, and in deepening its services to its existing students and communities. The CUC is delighted to be part of the NSW Inquiry, welcomes any further questions in relation to this submission and is looking forward to hosting members of the Committee on a virtual tour of one of its Centres.

## References

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