

# SUBMISSION TO THE *IMPLEMENTING SUBURBAN UNIVERSITY STUDY HUBS* CONSULTATION PAPER

29 September 2023

## Executive Summary

Universities Australia (UA) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the *Implementing Suburban University Study Hubs* consultation paper.

UA is the peak body representing Australia's 39 comprehensive universities. Our member universities span the length and breadth of Australia. Together, they educate around one and a half million students each year, undertake significant research and development activities, and engage globally to grow Australia and the world's knowledge base while supporting our nation's economic and social wellbeing.

Suburban university study hubs (suburban study hubs) extend the opportunity for outer-metropolitan and non-traditional students to attain a higher education while continuing to reside in areas that are beyond the geographical limits of universities. When designed according to a principles-based approach and in partnership between local communities and governments, created by and for the people of those communities, suburban study hubs have the potential to improve access to university. This approach also has the potential to support improved outcomes for various traditional and non-traditional students whilst helping to meet the government's equity targets. In meeting this aspiration, it's important the suburban study hubs are designed with clear goals and are not overly expansive in their remit, lest they drift from their primary goal of improving access to higher education.

Rather than developing a one-size-fits-all model where a suburban study hub template is imposed on a community, UA recommends the creation of a principles-based framework and a community-driven process for developing responsive suburban study hubs for the community needs and aspirations of a specific place. This could:

1. be driven through a local community group or local government-identified need and vetting process
2. be facilitated via a state government selection process, and
3. be endorsed by the federal government through a competitive grants process.

This process recognises the fundamental community-centred purpose of suburban study hubs.

Ultimately, to ensure the efficacy and responsiveness of the suburban study hubs program while responding to local and regional needs, a principles-based approach will be essential to guide development. A framework with a set of principles, such as community integration, accessibility and inclusivity, support for online learning, complementing existing initiatives, and developing facilitative partnerships will guide these processes to develop hubs that attract participants, support them to succeed, and address place-based needs. UA

recommends this approach be socialised ahead of any implementation of the suburban study hubs program, with specific benchmarks set to adequately evaluate the success of the suburban study hubs program with the intent to review it after an appropriate and specified amount of time.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

UA makes the following recommendations for developing the new Suburban University Study Hub program:

- Establish a set of principles that enable community-driven development and ensure responsiveness to local needs.
- Develop a ground-up and community-driven process where communities engage with all levels of government alongside other stakeholders to better meet the community's aspirations for higher education participation and to respond to local workforce needs.
- Include funding for infrastructure that allows for participation in the program by less-resourced communities that still have high need and strong community investment for a study hub.
- Define a clear scope and delineation between remit of education providers and new hubs early in the development process of each hub.

## Responses to Discussion Paper

The following response, rather than answering discussion questions separately, offers discussion for the development of a new suburban study hub program holistically. Before specific services, mechanisms or locations can be created or selected, UA suggests setting a framework of principles that guide the co-development of hubs by communities and other stakeholders. This response, starts with discussion of what these principles could be, followed by more specific discussion of the topics from the consultation paper: aims, purpose, and barriers; location; and operators and governance.

### A principles-based approach

A principles-based approach will be essential to guide the development of the suburban hub program, to ensure the efficacy and responsiveness of the program while responding to local and regional needs. UA recommends that this approach be socialised ahead of any implementation of the suburban study hubs program, with specific benchmarks set to adequately evaluate the success of the program with the intent to review it after an appropriate and specified amount of time.

A starting point is to establish a set of principles that will underpin and guide the development process of each specific suburban study hub. UA suggests the following principles to ensure the program responds to the objective of increasing access and supporting equity students in metropolitan and peri-urban areas.

**Community integration:** Suburban study hubs should be deeply integrated within their local communities, reflecting the unique characteristics, needs, and opportunities of the suburban area they serve. Their design and implementation should be community-driven and responsive to local needs. This integration should extend to collaborating with local businesses, community organisations, and other stakeholders to create a cohesive educational ecosystem.

**Accessibility and inclusivity:** Suburban study hubs should prioritise accessibility and inclusivity, making higher education accessible to a diverse range of students in the suburban area, including non-traditional students, mature-age students, Indigenous students, students from low-socioeconomic status backgrounds and students with disabilities. This includes providing physical spaces equipped with modern technology, academic support services, and pastoral care to cater to the needs of all students.

**Support for online learning:** Just like regional university centres, suburban study hubs should facilitate online learning by offering high-speed internet access, video conferencing facilities, and other necessary infrastructure to support students studying online courses from various institutions. This support should aim to bridge the digital divide and ensure seamless access to educational resources.

**Complementary to existing initiatives:** Suburban study hubs should complement, rather than duplicate or replace, existing educational investments and activities in the suburban area. This principle encourages collaboration with local universities, colleges, and educational institutions to create a seamless educational pathway for students, without duplicating resources.

**Facilitative partnerships:** Suburban study hubs should act as a conduit between education providers and the communities that hubs are based in, to increase access to higher

education and improve support services that enable student retention and aspiration. Establishing strong links between suburban study hubs and higher education providers, vocational education and training providers, local organisations, support services, and local industry is crucial. These partnerships can provide students with practical experiences, internships, and career opportunities, enriching their educational journey and increasing the hub's relevance within the community. However, these partnerships should be facilitative and not transactional, centring the needs of the local community at the forefront of the design and implementation of the suburban study hubs.

## **Aims, purpose, and barriers of Suburban University Study Hubs**

UA recommends a suburban study hub model that is initiated by a local community then developed through stakeholder engagement. This will better meet the community's aspirations for higher education participation and respond to local workforce needs, which a one-size-fits-all approach cannot achieve.

### **Aims**

When considering the design and development of new suburban study hubs, the most important element to consider is how to enable a community-driven approach. UA suggests a development process that enables community ownership and active participation in the creation, implementation, and direction of suburban study hubs. The aim of the program should primarily be to support the aspirations of local communities. Suburban study hubs are much more likely to be successful with buy-in and investment from the local community where local and state governments are responding to local needs. Without this ownership or desire from the local community as a starting point, external stakeholders (including universities) can do little to support or ensure the ongoing success of the efforts of suburban study hubs, especially considering that the types of support from universities would vary from site to site, responding to specific, place-based needs.

An additional aim of suburban study hub development should be to embed the hubs within existing support ecosystems. A community-driven approach will likely incorporate community partnership during ideation and this relationship building should continue, as appropriate for context, throughout the suburban study hub's lifecycle. This is not only desirable but necessary to build visibility and trust within the community and to encourage uptake and retention in higher education. While suburban study hubs may have location-specific partnerships with locally responsive arrangements, it would be anticipated that suburban study hubs would involve a range of more common local partnerships which could include:

- local industry partnerships, such as through business mentoring programs or local employment opportunities through work-integrated learning programs
- community services such as local libraries, non-government organisations or not-for profit organisations
- local schools
- community councils or organisations, and
- co-location or share-use spaces.

These partnerships will not only ensure suburban study hubs address existing gaps in services but also avoid duplication of services within communities.

## Purpose

While specific needs will vary from site to site, the general purpose of suburban study hubs should be to provide student wellbeing and general academic support, as opposed to learning and teaching support for specific courses of study, which is the remit of higher education providers. This support could include infrastructure such as high-speed internet access so that students may study online, study spaces and learning-conducive environments, as well as learning supports such as learning advisors and centre managers.

Beyond academic supports, wraparound services will be vital to encourage uptake and retention of students at suburban study hubs. These may include but are not limited to:

- Wellbeing support
- Medical services
- Carer services
- Mentorships
- Cultural advisors
- Career guidance and support
- Transition and pathway guidance, and
- Relevant financial assistance and scholarships to make it possible to prioritise learning. This may also include employment opportunities within the hub or connection to other earn while you learn opportunities.

It is likely not possible or practical for suburban study hubs to provide all, or even any, of these supports in-house. However, hubs should be a place where students can gain information and advice about accessing or connecting to such services.

In addition to the services provided to students registered at the hub, suburban study hubs could also consider facilitating programs that encourage learning engagement in community-based industry areas, such as workshops or seminars for specific skill building, academic support to prepare for university study such as enabling programs or outreach to local schools, and shorter form learning programs such as microcredentials. These could be delivered in partnership with a university and industry/business.

One such important partnership should be with local schools. To meet the government's desire for increased higher education participation by 2035, extending the remit of suburban study hubs to include activities related to school engagement will be a necessary measure. In collaboration with other services, such as local government or university-initiated outreach programs, suburban study hubs could provide insight into activities that are effective in supporting students through school and deciding on the next step in their educative journey. This could include careers services in schools or in suburban study hubs that encourage matriculation into tertiary education, pathway information, advice, or hosting professional development for teachers. These activities could also be extended to other mechanisms for providers to engage with the hub to increase engagement and participation from other key members of the community or hub staff.

## Barriers

When considering barriers students may face that suburban study hubs could address (aside from the support services noted under 'Purpose') an essential service all suburban study hubs will need to provide is reliable access to IT resources. These services require staff with

proficient knowledge of the various utilised online learning management systems (LMS) and an understanding of the various provider policies and procedures for student engagement (as is the case in the Country University Centre model). This will require professional learning for hub staff in areas such as using LMS, accessing library databases or awareness of new forms and policies. Suburban study hubs can also provide a variety of general academic support including asynchronous resources and face-to-face or virtual support. Suburban study hubs could also make available and promote opportunities for students to engage with each other, such as through study groups or peer support networks. Not only will this aid students academically but will help foster greater networks of peer-support and community engagement.

Additionally, accessibility should be at the forefront of designing the physical spaces of the suburban study hubs. Facilities and services should be responsive to the needs of students, many of whom are likely to have commitments beyond studying that require flexibility and responsiveness to their diverse needs. For example, providing flexible operating hours to cater for students studying part-time or parents with children will be essential to opening access to a wider range of non-traditional and equity students.

One potential barrier to the success of the hub program is how to accurately identify and effectively support the needs of potential users of the suburban study hubs, particularly in metropolitan or peri-urban areas where multiple communities may exist within a singular geographic area. The community-driven approach previously discussed would enable a stronger community voice in the development of suburban study hubs, but this community participation and ownership should be carried through the delivery and evaluation of suburban study hubs as well. This could include, staffing suburban study hubs with members of the community (this could also include employment opportunities for local students), mechanisms that allow for use of facilities by the community where appropriate, and promoting ownership and connection with the hub through branding and design that reflects the local community. Additionally, engaging local channels for communication about the hub's services could help further inform community engagement and break down barriers to participation in higher education within communities.

Another potential barrier is duplication of services between stakeholders, particularly the hub and education providers, leading to, or resulting from, weak relationships between them. To prevent this miscommunication, the suburban study hub and provider(s) should, in the development of a hub, create a clear delineation between the remit of the hub and that of education providers. Suburban study hubs should not be designed to develop and deliver discipline specific learning and teaching services as this is the responsibility of universities. Suburban study hubs can provide more targeted wellbeing services as well as general learning and teaching support services. This distinction is essential to avoid confusion and duplication. Beyond this, the scope of various stakeholders may vary considerably from site to site. Accordingly, a thorough needs-based analysis should be conducted for each hub and protocols established to maintain a regular interface between the hub and universities to ensure that services work in partnership rather than competing with existing offerings in the community.

Clear communication of the purpose of each suburban study hub is necessary for provider-agnosticism and a community-focussed approach. Ensuring that the community's purposeful engagement lies at the heart of responding to education and skills needs will help tailor

provider engagement programs, as well as promote improved collaboration between the provider, hub, and community.

## Location

When considering the location of new suburban study hubs, community needs and desires should drive the selection process. Only through this grassroots desire and need within a local community will a suburban study hub be successful in its aims and purpose. Following this identified local need, and with the support of local and state governments, higher education providers and federal government, a business case can be established that identifies the local areas that are in most need of a hub and where the hub will be most effective in meeting the government's equity targets.

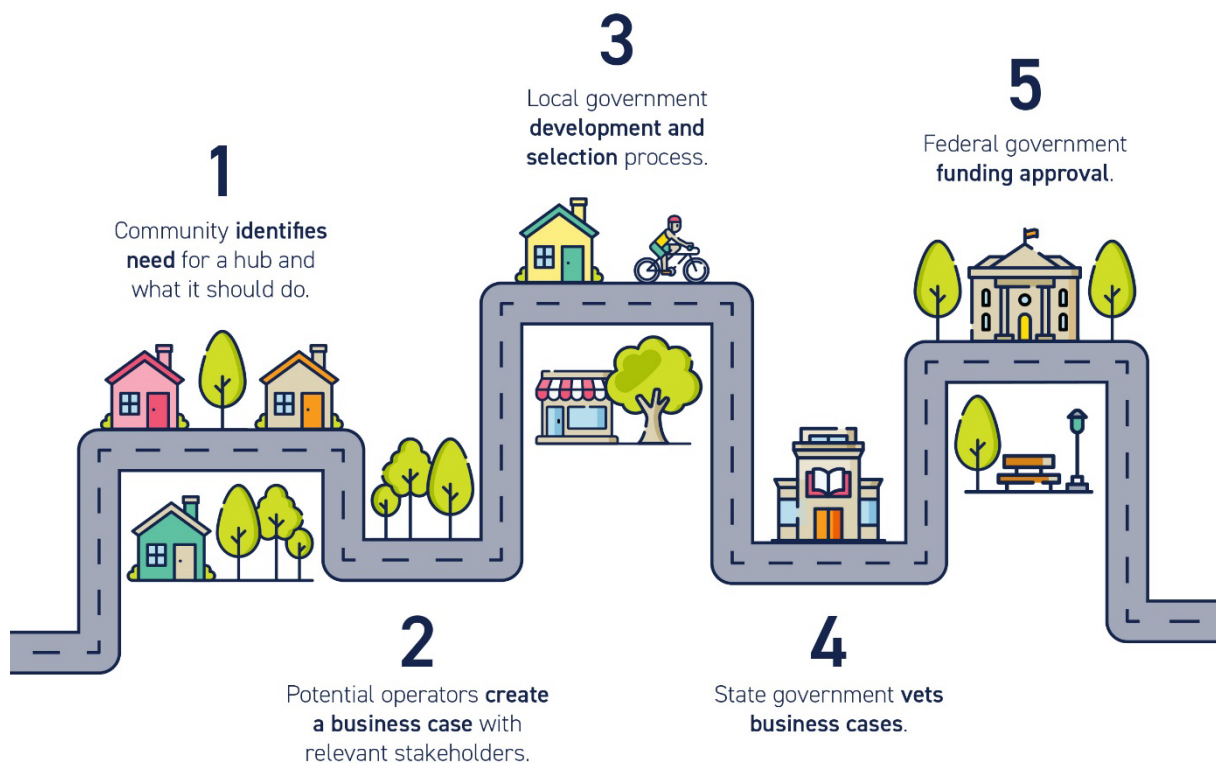
When assessing location, several other supplementary factors may be considered, such as tertiary education enrolment and attainment rates, unemployment rates, population growth, distance to tertiary education providers, and demographic makeup. Ensuring all parameters of local identification, including the consideration of program overlap (for example, not duplicating existing university outreach programs) is important to ensuring the efficacy and necessary collaborative nature of the suburban study hub.

As written in the consultation paper, suburban study hubs must use existing infrastructure. UA urges reconsideration of this requirement on the basis of meeting equity goals. If funding only goes to areas that are well-resourced and can afford to donate infrastructure, poorer communities are likely to be excluded.

Regardless of whether new infrastructure is created or existing infrastructure is used, it is essential to ensure that suburban study hubs are accessible to potential students. Considerations for a suburban study hub's location, to ensure appropriate access to hubs, could be nearness of public transport and parking spaces, housing or accommodation, and/or other community services or support facilities such as childcare. Suburban study hubs must also ensure that spaces are physically accessible to people requiring accessibility features. However, these considerations are contingent on locally identified needs and be complimentary to, rather than duplicative of, existing services, including services provided by universities and other providers.

## Operators and governance

Although the suburban study hubs should be driven by community need, they will need a management structure to operate them. This could be done by an existing organisation or an entity set up by the community for this purpose. Either way, to run a suburban study hub an operator should be able to demonstrate a strong business case for its creation as well as the requisite business, education and support service skills that will be required to operate effectively. This could first be driven through a local government-identified need and vetting process, secondly via a state government selection process and thirdly via endorsement of a grant by the federal government (Figure 1). This process recognises the fundamental community-centred purpose of the suburban study hub.



**Figure 1:** A community-driven process for development

At a base level, an operator should be able to demonstrate community awareness of the need for a hub and representativeness of the community's demographics. It should always be able to reflect the educative and wellbeing qualities necessary to support students engaging with university programs. Ideally, these operators should have prior experience within the higher education sector, as well as skills relating to adult learning initiatives, and evidence-based student support strategies. Having people with the skills and abilities necessary to support staff, community engagement and support services will also be beneficial.

With community representativeness at the heart of the operation, ensuring this principle is reflected in the hubs' governance structures will be critical. Due to the nature of the suburban study hub, each governance structure should be responsive to the community, though follow a general template to ensure accountability and transparency. Various models exist; however, a model that has proven successful in the regions, and which could be used as a template, is the CUC model. In this model, each CUC operates off a similar management structure with adaptations to meet the specific needs of the community it serves. This model provides a clear framework which incorporates local identities and embeds place-based practices at each location under the general support of a central representative body.

To support effective provider engagement, UA suggests that a framework that clearly defines roles between the hub and provider(s) be established early in the development process to ensure clarity of expectations and provision of services, as well as limits on these activities. These roles should be reviewed regularly and a mechanism for regular meetings between the hub and provider(s) be created to ensure services are not being duplicated and students



are receiving appropriate levels of support. This should also include regular review processes to ensure the hub continues to meet the community's needs.

## Conclusion

To 'get the design of the new Suburban University Study Hubs right' (Consultation paper, p. 2) a model with a community-driven approach is essential. This requires a principles- and place-based approach. Universities will continue to remain responsible for learning and teaching activities, but new suburban study hubs can be uniquely positioned to respond to the needs of peri-urban areas outside of geographic areas for universities to practically reach. Suburban study hubs could be the facilitator for strong collaborations between education providers and local communities to support retention and completion of higher education programs, encourage greater participation, and build local aspiration and capacity.

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