



## Country Universities Centre response to: Performance-based funding for the Commonwealth Grant Scheme Discussion paper

The Country Universities Centre (CUC) supports the initiative of the Government to review the allocation of Commonwealth Grant Scheme Funding to include performance based measures. Ensuring the quality of the expanding higher education sector is critical for Australia to remain internationally competitive and prepared for the growing knowledge economy.

### Background to the CUC

The CUC is a not-for-profit network of regional study hubs (RSH), established with the aim of making higher education more accessible for communities in regional and remote areas. In 2019, the CUC will operate eight RSH locations across NSW, in populations ranging from 7 000 (Cooma) to 23 000 (Goulburn).

One of the biggest challenges faced by regional and remote students is the absence of a 'campus' environment and its associated support and benefits. The CUC delivers supported learning to these students, providing them with access to campus level technology, facilities, tutors, supportive administrative and academic staff and a network of fellow students.

The CUC seeks to develop quality learning communities in regional towns through:

- providing access to technology and campus-like facilities, including 100mbps internet connectivity;
- supporting students with academic tutors, administrative assistance and pastoral care;
- providing advice on study pathways and opportunities, including scholarships;
- developing networks of students within the region;
- enabling higher education opportunities for youth to remain in the community and be successful;
- encouraging local academic and professional networks to wrap around the students and assist transition into the workforce;
- supporting local high value jobs for the increasing knowledge economy.

The CUC model supports students in participating communities studying any degree at any university, with the following advantages:

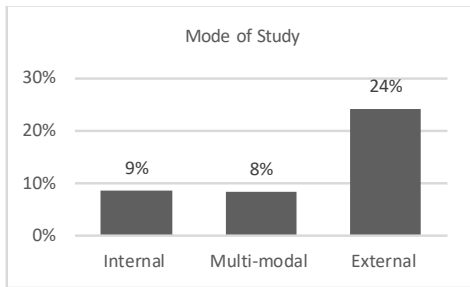
- all students have equitable access to the community driven facilities, and not just a subset of students studying particular courses at particular universities;
- the potential number of students accessing the facility is maximized, increasing the value of the facility to the community and optimizing the student environment and study support opportunities through a greater student base;
- communities are delivered a more diverse array of knowledge and qualifications, enriching the community;
- students have choice and the ability to gravitate towards enrolling in the higher quality course providers, and away from low quality educational provision, incentivizing universities to “beat the competition” by lifting quality of external study courses;
- students can respond to local demand for knowledge/qualifications and gravitate into courses with higher local employment opportunities. In the CUC, freedom of study choice has resulted the most popular disciplines studied being Health, Education and Social Work which are three areas with greater employment growth in regional communities, showing freedom of choice at work.

Policy design assisting communities to maintain models which support all students in the location, rather than a subset studying just a few courses at a single university will potentially provide greater and more equitable returns for the above reasons. The challenge is to formulate potential financial models that sustain this model, which inevitably has a more fragmented enrolment pattern than a model that restricts choice by channeling students into just a few courses at one or two universities thereby resulting in greater cohorts in particular courses. It remains a challenge for the CUC to obtain revenues from those universities with only thin numbers of students studying a wide variety of courses in the CUC, and federal policy development incentivizing these universities to be financial contributors to the sustainability of this support model for their students will be very advantageous.

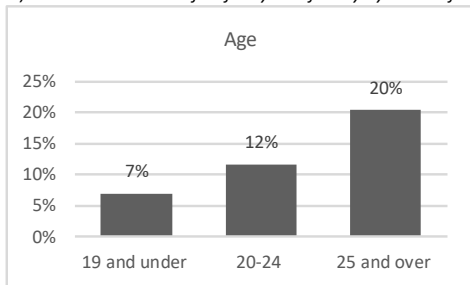
## Performance Measures for Regional Students

Regional and remote students have poorer outcomes than metropolitan students at each benchmark for completion of a Bachelor degree (never came back after the first year; re-enrolled, but dropped out; still enrolled at the end of the 9 year cohort period; completed) (DET 2018). They also have poorer performance in QILT survey results of student engagement.

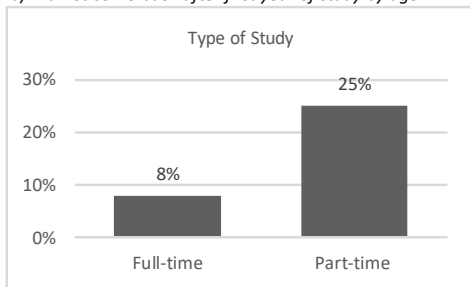
In the most recent data (measured in the four-year completion rates 2014-2017) regional and remote students have a first year attrition rate of 14% and 17% respectively, compared to just 10% for their metropolitan counterparts (DET 2018). Figure 1 compares the characteristics of Australian university students who did not return to study after the first year with the CUC student cohort. On the left of Figure 1 are the percentages of students in each classification or equity group who did not return after the first year of study, as reported in the Department of Education and Training (DET) 2017 Completion Rates for Higher Education Students (2005 – 2017 four year completion rates). On the right of the figure are the demographics of the CUC students for the same characteristics.



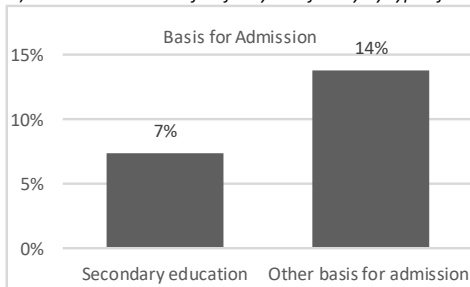
a) Did not come back after first year of study by mode of study



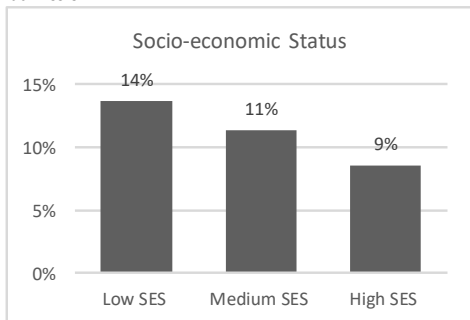
b) Did not come back after first year of study by age



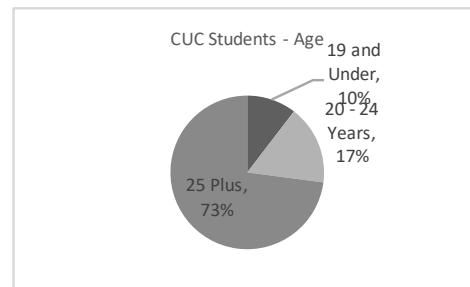
d) Did not come back after first year of study by type of study



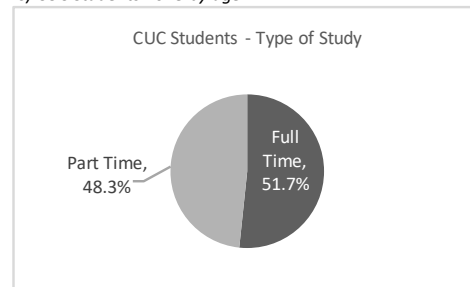
f) Did not come back after first year of study by basis of admission



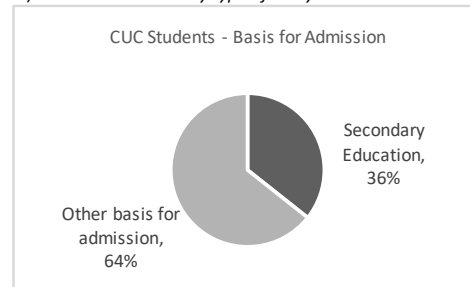
h) Did not come back after first year of study by ses



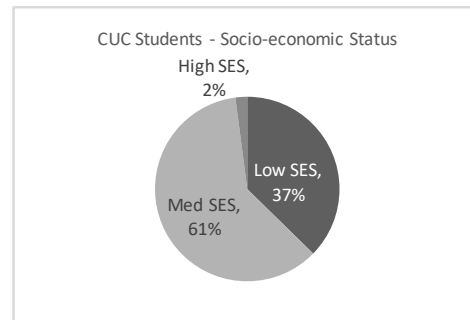
c) CUC Students 2018 by age



e) CUC Students 2018 by type of study



g) CUC Students 2018 by basis of admission



i) CUC Students 2018 by socio-economic status

Figure 1 Student characteristics compared to first year attrition rates. Australian student figures are presented on the left side, with CUC students on the right

In 2018, 67% of the CUC student cohort were studying undergraduate degrees, 11% enabling courses and 22% postgraduate degrees. The CUC cohort consists of predominantly non-traditional students, including:

- 75% of students over 25 years of age
- 52% studying part-time
- 98% regional or remote
- 98% low or medium SES
- 65% entering study through non-ATAR pathways
- over half of the CUC cohort is the first in their family to attend or complete higher education
- nearly all CUC students were studying externally.

For each of the characteristics, the probability of first-year attrition is higher than that of traditional, metropolitan students. Additionally, belonging to multiple equity groups has a compounding effect on higher education completion rates: the more 'at-risk' groups to which a student belongs, the lower the completion rates for a student becomes. For example, completion rates of regional and remote students, who were over 25 years old and studying part-time dropped to 43.9%, compared to full-time metropolitan students, who had a completion rate of 78.7% (Edwards & McMillian 2015). These students in regional areas are in need of additional support in order to be successful in higher education.

### Impact of regional study hubs on performance

Regional study hubs are demonstrated to improve student engagement for regional students, which in turn improves academic performance, retention and success (Davis & Taylor 2019). Sense of belonging, self-efficacy, student well-being and academic emotions were all improved:

- 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.
- Academic emotions: CUC staff assisted students to solve causes of frustration and anxiety through providing assistance with unfamiliar university processes, administrative tasks, and ensuring students are supported to settle into study. The 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 well-being was maintained by creating an opportunity for regional students to remain in their home towns, and retain their family, friendship and community support networks.

These performance aspects were evaluated using the QILT survey results, which were compared to CUC student survey results. Improvements in student engagement for non-traditional students should begin to have an impact up first-year attrition and retention rates, and eventually completion rates.

## Discussion Question 2 - What performance measures should the PBF scheme draw on

The CUC uses all available tools in order to assess the impact of the centre facilities and staff on regional student success. Both short- and long-term measures of performance are required in order to gain an accurate picture of success. The short term tools, such as QILT may only provide indicative information, but it can be acted upon immediately. First-year attrition rates are a meaningful short-term measurement, particularly for our cohort of non-traditional students. Completion rates are probably the most important measure of success, but as most of our students are studying part-time, the Bachelor completion rates will only become relevant after nine-years.

Through increased emphasis on performance, including focusing on supporting non-traditional students, the CUC and regional study hubs may become a valuable resource for universities to achieve their required outcomes. The CUC believes that this may increase the willingness for universities to actively participate in the regional study hub model, particularly in a financial role. Currently the CUC is funded through a combination of Federal, State and Local Government, corporate sponsorship, and university partnerships. The long term vision of the CUC is to **transition away from government funding, towards a sustainable funding model supported by Australian universities**. Government policy can assist through sensible policy design to incentivise universities to engage with Regional Study Hubs. Both short and long-term measures of performance will be required to achieve this, as well as considerations of equity.

## References

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