

Inquiry into the delivery of vocational education and training in regional, rural, and remote Queensland

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Country Universities Centre

Inquiry into Vocational Education
and Training in Regional, Rural
and Remote Queensland



Executive Summary

The Country Universities Centre welcomes the inquiry into vocational education and training (VET) in regional, rural and remote (RRR) Queensland, and in particular wishes to respond to the examination of:

3. Existing programs that might assist in reducing barriers or supporting priority cohorts in accessing localised and place-based VET; and
5. Opportunities for the Department of Employment, Small Business and Training to facilitate improvements in these areas.

The Country Universities Centre (CUC) with locally governed facilities, staffing and adult learning communities in regional, rural and remote Queensland is an opportunity for supporting VET Provision in RRR Queensland where no TAFE campus exists.

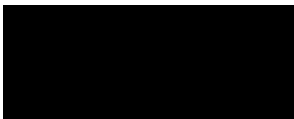
The CUC recommends the following to the Inquiry:

Recommendation 1. That the CUC work with DESBT to determine how CUC Centres can best support VET students with facilities, technology, staffing and learning communities, particularly in RRR towns where there are CUC Centres but no TAFE campus (such as St George, Dirranbandi and Cooktown).

Recommendation 2. That the Queensland Government support the expansion of further CUC Centres into RRR towns in Queensland where there is no TAFE campus.

Recommendation 3. That the Queensland Government supports the CUC to recruit Vocational Support Staff and Foundation Skills Coaches in locations where there is a CUC Centre but no TAFE campus, and where appropriate provides travel and accommodation support for these staff to provide outreach in surrounding communities without TAFE Facilities (such as staff based in Cooktown providing outreach throughout Cape York Peninsular).

Please contact me on the provided details if I can be of any further assistance to the Inquiry.



Duncan Taylor

Founder

Country Universities Centre

The Country Universities Centre (CUC) under the Commonwealth's Regional University Program is expanding a network in Queensland in addition to its Centres in NSW and Victoria, with Centres operating in Roma, St George and Dirranbandi, and Centres funded and being established in Cooktown and Mt Isa (www.cuc.edu.au). In particular, the locations of St George, Dirranbandi and Cooktown have no TAFE campus, and **there is an opportunity for the CUC to work with the Queensland Government to utilise the existing facilities, technology, connectivity and staffing to support VET provision in these regions.**

The Commonwealth Government's Australian Universities Accord is building a long term plan for the Australian higher education system to meet the current and future needs of the nation. The Terms of Reference for the Accord include investigating the connection between the vocational education and training and higher education systems:

- *“Explore possible opportunities to support greater engagement and alignment between the vocational education and training (VET) and higher education systems. In particular, the panel will have regard to the experience of students in navigating these systems and ensuring a cohesive and connected tertiary education system.” University Accord Terms of Reference No. 5*

CUC Centres in locations without TAFE campuses provide a powerful opportunity to have all levels of AQF tertiary education facilitated and supported from one facility in the community, with potential benefits to cohesiveness and connectedness across vocational and higher education, and articulated pathways between these two systems. **CUC Centres which are inclusive of vocational students will be able to play an important role in advancing the direction of future tertiary education policy as foreshadowed through the Commonwealth University Accord's Terms of Reference.**

The communities in locations such as St George, Dirranbandi and Cooktown are more than two hours drive to the nearest TAFE campus, and as a result have not benefited from the vocational spending of the Queensland or Commonwealth Government that is directed towards those who can access TAFE campuses. As a matter of equity, these communities should have the opportunity to participate in fee free courses and other vocational spending which previously has been largely inaccessible to them. Further, local staff operating out of a CUC Centre could signal and co-ordinate local apprenticeship opportunities, facilitate digital training opportunities, support digital literacy, provide foundational language literacy and numeracy support, and guide students on financial supports available for travel and accommodation requirements where visits to distant TAFE campuses are unavoidable.

The CUC Centres are community owned and driven not for profit organisations that currently provide infrastructure, staffing and a student learning community in location to assist students to break down barriers to success. The focus of the CUC is in higher education under the Commonwealth's Regional University Centre Program, but in communities lacking TAFE facilities there has been some extension (and considerable opportunity to further extend) into facilitating delivery of VET. **The local ownership of CUC Centres together with local industry representation of Boards of Governance of CUC Centres is an ideal platform to drive Place Based approaches to VET in these smaller Queensland communities.**

In smaller communities where it is not feasible to have dedicated TAFE campuses and infrastructure, there is considerable opportunity to utilise the facilities, technology, connectivity and staffing already embedded in CUC Centres for the facilitation of VET delivery.

Further, the network of CUC Centres provide a base for outreach of vocational and foundation skills supports to surrounding communities. For example, staff in CUC Cape York based in Cooktown could access a multitude of the communities across Cape York Peninsular far more readily than, say, staff based in TAFE campuses in Cairns.

Country University Centres have been demonstrated to improve access, participation, and success for regional people in addition to training locals for the jobs and skills required in their communities. However, only select regional communities have a CUC and in smaller communities a CUC focussed only on higher education is not always a viable option. The CUC is developing a pilot low-population model that can work as a cluster across multiple towns and incorporates facilitation of VET. This community-led model can play a pivotal role in supporting both university and VET students in smaller communities and facilitate seamless transition across both study pathways for local students. Creating a low-population CUC model incorporating VET across Queensland will have a demonstrable impact on access, retention, and workforce development in smaller rural communities.

CUC Centre Model

Governance

CUC Centres are owned and driven by a local community Board of a not for profit company limited by guarantee registered as a charity with the Australian Charities and Not for Profits Commission. The Board positions are voluntary typically are constituted with local industry, government and educational members such that Centres are networked into the local workforce and well informed regarding skillsets, knowledge and qualifications in local demand.

Facilities

Each CUC is fitted with modern technology and fast connectivity to remove these as barriers to student success. The Centres have study rooms with terminals for general use, break out spaces, examination and assessment spaces, social areas, staff offices and service areas. Figure One below indicates a floorplan design of a facility in Cooktown being established to open to students in Semester One 2023.



Figure 1 - Concept design of the CUC Cape York Centre being established in Cooktown, showing facility spaces

Staffing

Each CUC Centre has a Centre Manager with facility and student oversight, and a Learning Skills Advisor to provide students with the general academic advice and tools to be successful. CUC Balonne (St George and Dirranbandi) and CUC Cape York also have been funded to recruit First Nations Engagement Officers.

Staffing is at this point directed towards higher education skills and success. However, the CUC suggests that support from the Queensland Government to recruit foundation skills and digital literacy coaches will considerably assist the CUC to support VET students. Those coaches can then leverage off the existing facilities, technology and learning community to enhance VET delivery at low cost in the local region.

Learning Community

CUC Centres become a physical hub for lifelong learning in each community and are a place of belonging for students. Whilst the focus of the Commonwealth’s Regional University Centre Program is higher education, there is scope to expand support into VET, professional development, short courses, outreach, and all forms of online learning. This also aligns with the Commonwealth’s Universities Accord Panel which is currently exploring ways of better connecting university and vocational training systems.

Case Study – CUC Balonne in St George and Dirranbandi

CUC Balonne is a local not for profit charitable community organisation which has established facilities in St George (pop 3130) and Dirranbandi (pop 610) under the Commonwealth's Regional University Centre Program. In St George, the Centre occupies part of the library but has proven so popular it now spills over into co-sharing Council Training Rooms as well. In Dirranbandi, the Centre occupies some space in the Rural Transaction Centre. In both locations, the facilities and technology are available to students for online learning seven days a week from 7am to midnight.



New Centre located in The Hub

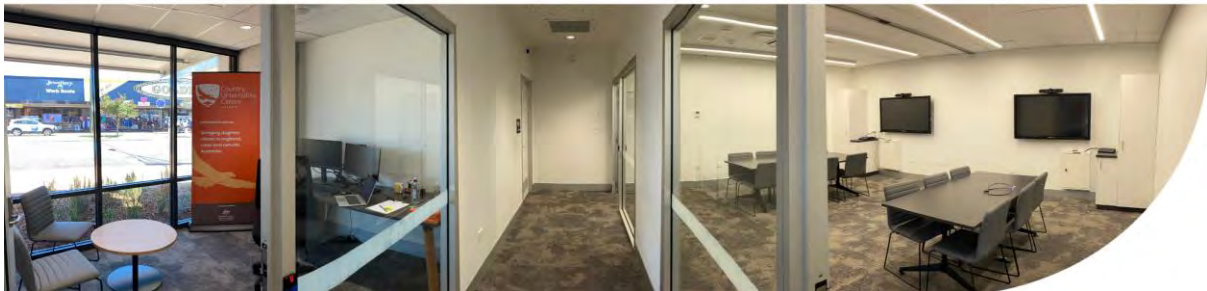


Figure 2 In St George, CUC Balonne forms part of the award winning Hub in the Library



Figure 3 - CUC Balonne has proven so popular so that it has taken over some of the Council Training Rooms as well as co-sharing the Library

A Centre Manager and Learning Skills Advisor are based in St George and travel to Dirranbandi. General staff at the Rural Transaction Centre in Dirranbandi are trained to deal with basic student enquiries, and triage more specific student enquiries back to the Centre Manager and Learning Skills Advisor.

CUC Balonne was modelled and funded to support a community of 38 students by year four of operations, but has outperformed and exceeded 80 students in only its second year of operation.



Figure 4 - The CUC has developed a low populations model in Dirranbandi co-located in the Rural Transaction Centre

CUC Facilities, staffing and learning communities are a significant opportunity not just in the delivery of higher education, but also in facilitating the delivery of VET in regions without TAFE campuses where CUC Centres are located.

Many other regional and remote Queensland communities without a TAFE campus have also expressed interest in establishing a Country Universities Centre to support VET as well as higher education students. If further CUC Centres can be strategically located in RRR Queensland and be utilised to support VET provision in their surrounding region, then new communities and people will have access to engage in supported VET beyond what has previously been possible. The CUC seeks the Queensland Government's endorsement and support to establish CUC Centres in these and other locations under the Commonwealth's Regional University Program such that broadened activity using into VET support in these new communities using CUC Centre infrastructure, technology and staffing becomes possible.

Support for additional staffing leveraging the existing CUC facilities, management and infrastructure will allow communities in regions without TAFE campuses to share more equitably in government expenditure and supports previously accessible in other regional areas. This staffing could utilise the existing assets and connectivity, and be focussed on foundational skills, language numeracy and literacy, digital literacy and vocational training support, broadening the focus of CUCs from higher

education into VET and lifelong learning to the benefit of the community and the future local workforce.

Recommendation 1. That the CUC work with DESBT to determine how CUC Centres can best support VET students with facilities, technology, staffing and learning communities, particularly in RRR towns where there are CUC Centres but no TAFE campus (such as St George, Dirranbandi and Cooktown).

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