

EQUITY FELLOWSHIP REPORT

“We want to build a culture of learning in our community”

The widening participation functions of the
Regional University Study Hubs Program

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“We want to build a culture of learning in our community”: The widening participation functions of the Regional University Study Hubs Program

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success acknowledges Indigenous peoples across Australia as the Traditional Owners of the lands on which the nation's campuses are situated. With a history spanning more than 60,000 years as the original educators, Indigenous peoples hold a unique place in our nation. We recognise the importance of their knowledge and culture, and reflect the principles of participation, equity, and cultural respect in my work. We pay our respects to Elders past, present, and future, and consider it an honour to learn from our Indigenous colleagues, partners, and friends.

The author also acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which the University of Technology Sydney operates: the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation.

Research was conducted on the lands of the Wilyakali, Yugambeh, Kombumerri, Nukunu, Barngarla, Nunggubuyu, Yolŋu, Peerapper, Toogee, Biripi, Bpangerang, Jaitmatang, Taungurung, Dhudhuroa, Waywurru, Guugu Yimithirr, Menang (Noongar nation), Warndarrang, Minggirringi, and Bigambul peoples. I recognise First Nations never ceded sovereignty. This continent always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

Dedication

I dedicate this report to the late Dr K. Rogers, whose vision and leadership exemplified the transformative potential of education grounded in respect for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal knowledge systems. As the co-founder of the Wuyagiba Bush Uni, located on a small homeland between the remote Aboriginal communities of Ngukurr and Numbulwar in South East Arnhem Land, Dr Rogers was dedicated to creating opportunities for learning that honoured cultural traditions and community values.

My time at the Wuyagiba Bush Uni was one of the most impactful experiences offered by this research. The community's openness in sharing their stories and insights reflected the trust and respect that Dr Rogers cultivated throughout his life's work. Their perspectives have deeply shaped this project and will remain with me always.

Dr Rogers's recent passing is a significant loss to education and the communities he championed; yet his legacy endures in the students he inspired and the meaningful educational opportunities he helped to create. It has been an honour to include the Wuyagiba Bush Uni in this research.

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This report reflects the collective efforts of everyone involved. I hope its findings contribute meaningfully to the ongoing work of improving access to education for all.

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Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AI	Artificial intelligence
ACSES	Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success
CSP	Commonwealth Supported Place
CUC	Country Universities Centre
EARUCP	Eastern Australia Regional University Centre Partnership
GUC	Geraldton Universities Centre
GUAG	Geraldton University Access Group
HEI	Higher education institution
HEPPP	Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program
IRRRE	Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and other diverse sexual orientations and gender identities
RPPPP	Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program
RRR	Regional, rural, and remote
RUC	Regional University Centre
RUSH	Regional University Study Hubs
SUSH	Suburban University Study Hubs
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TYPP	Type of educational institution attending
UC	University of Canberra
UTS	University of Technology Sydney
VET	Vocational Education and Training

1. Executive summary

The Regional University Study Hubs (RUSH; or Regional Hubs) program is an innovative policy tool that enables people living in regional, rural, and remote (RRR) areas to access higher education. This access to higher education is facilitated through bespoke and dedicated study areas that are staffed and have appropriate study infrastructure, including high-speed internet. The program commenced in 2018 with the first round of federal funding (Cohort One) and has since expanded to over 56 Regional Hubs in five cohorts of funding. Despite this expansion of the Regional Hubs, very little research has investigated how and why they work, especially regarding how they enable those living in RRR areas to participate in higher education (“widening participation”).

This research investigated the widening participation abilities of the Regional Hubs using a mixed-methods approach. I conducted interviews with 57 stakeholders at nine Regional Hubs (students, staff, community representatives), surveyed 26 Regional Hubs, and collected ethnographic observations during site visits. Four key findings emerged from this research, all of which enhance our understanding of the relationship between the Regional Hubs and their widening participation effects, as well as their role in RRR communities.

The first finding is that Regional Hubs widen participation. They do this by offering a dedicated study space with appropriate facilities and study infrastructure (such as high-speed internet). Further, users of Regional Hubs identify more as students, which increases their retention and self-belief in their capabilities. Regional Hubs also cultivate a culture of higher education in their communities, which provides additional benefits to the student identity of their users.

The second finding is that staff have an essential role in the widening participation activities of the Regional Hubs. Positive staff–student relationships were widely reported, and staff were referred to as friendly, trustworthy, and welcoming. These positive relationships further enhance the student-identity widening participation functions. In addition, staff were seen as relational navigators, building self-efficacy and self-worth in students, therefore improving their ability to succeed in their studies.

The third finding is that the partnerships in which the Regional Hubs are involved strengthen the widening participation activities. Three key partnerships were identified: with higher education institutions (HEIs); with other education providers, including primary and secondary schools; and with the community at large. All three partnerships have their unique strengths and challenges, but all enhance the ability for Regional Hubs to widen participation. For HEIs, this partnership strengthens support services; for the community, it reinforces a collective identity grounded in educational achievement; and for other education providers, it broadens aspirations by highlighting clear pathways to further education.

The final finding is that Regional Hubs contribute to prosperous regional communities. This contribution is twofold: the first operates by developing the workforce in such a way that it meets the skill needs of their communities. The second is through encouraging young people to stay in community—in effect lessening the brain drain that many RRR communities experience.

An additional contribution I make through this research is my suggestion for a new typology to better understand the form and function of the Regional Hubs. I propose the Operational-Distinction Model as a two-type typology that groups Regional Hubs into either a “Partnered Course” model or a “General-Institution Neutral” model. This typing considers the following operational characteristics: widening participation, regional development, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, enabling programs and tertiary preparation, and vocational training integration. These characteristics are informed by three factors: 1) geography and state-based factors, 2) demographic factors, and 3) community-driven factors. The Operational-Distinction Model allows future researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to better analyse the Regional Hubs program through type-comparisons and insights.

As a result of this research, I propose three recommendations to strengthen the RUSH program: 1) renew funding and reconsider funding mechanisms; 2) develop and implement standards of practice; and 3) strengthen partnerships across the sector. These recommendations, if they are all accepted and implemented, would considerably strengthen the Regional Hubs program and enable more communities to experience an enhanced widening participation effect. In addition to these recommendations, I have developed a practitioner resource *Roadmap to success: A ‘What Works’ guide to Regional University Study Hubs partnerships*, appended to this report and available on the website of the Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success.¹ This resource is a guide to best practice for university–Regional Hubs partnerships and will further enhance the RUSH program.

This research demonstrates the importance of Regional Hubs both to RRR communities and Australia more generally. There are the obvious economic benefits that a more upskilled populace brings, but there are also unquantifiable benefits that higher education can bring to these communities. These include aspiration, innovation, and tenacity, all traits that Australia needs when looking towards the future.

¹ <https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/assets.acses.edu.au/app/uploads/2025/11/Roadmap-to-success-a-what-works-guide-to-partnerships-D-Keenan-2025.pdf>

2. Recommendations

Three recommendations have emerged from this research:

1. Renew Regional Hub funding and reconsider funding mechanisms.
2. Develop and implement standards of practice.
3. Strengthen partnerships across the sector.

I acknowledge that these recommendations are multifaceted, but it is my belief, informed by the evidence collected and presented in this report, that if they are implemented in full there would be immense benefit to the Regional University Study Hubs (RUSH, or Regional Hubs) program through an increased ability to widen participation and grow higher education aspirations in regional, rural, and remote (RRR) communities; and through a more stable and consistent economic and political operating environment.

2.1 Renew funding and reconsider funding mechanisms

I recommend that the Commonwealth Government commit to funding more cohorts of Regional Hubs. This research, and other studies (such as Baker et al., 2025; Stone et al., 2022), overwhelmingly suggest that Regional Hubs widen participation. They allow people from RRR backgrounds to engage in higher education, in turn building a more educated society and prosperous communities. There is enormous benefit to the Regional Hubs, and more funding rounds would allow more communities to experience this benefit. Further, the Regional Hubs are a way to meet the Universities Accord's ambitious target of 80% of the working-age population holding a tertiary qualification by 2050 (Australian Universities Accord Panel, 2023). This target cannot be met without people living in RRR communities obtaining tertiary qualifications.

I recommend that the Commonwealth Government reconsider the partnership funding mechanisms (previously Commonwealth Supported Places; currently partnership program funding) to better support the sustainability and growth of Regional Hubs. Funding designed to facilitate partnerships should not be programmatic. Instead, it should emphasise flexibility, innovation, and sustainability, allowing Regional Hubs to allocate resources according to what is most needed to meet the key performance indicators of their respective grants. These new funding mechanisms may include program-based activities, operational costs, or capital expenditure.

These elements of reconsidered funding were a recurring theme in the research. For example, some Regional Hubs have had to curtail the services they offer because of overwhelming demand, while others quickly outgrew their allocated spaces as student usage exceeded projections. This has meant staff have had to be accommodated in less than appropriate spaces. While some participants said the current funding arrangements were flexible and not onerous for them to report on, I suggest taking what works from the current funding arrangements and strengthening it.

I recommend that state governments commit funding to the RUSH program. Many Regional Hubs have a positive impact on state economies through developing the state workforce; however, the majority do so without receiving state funds. It is entirely appropriate that state governments fund services from which they receive a benefit.

2.2 Develop and implement standards of practice

To ensure the long-term sustainability, consistency, and quality of the RUSH program, I recommend the development and implementation of comprehensive standards of practice. These standards are not intended to regulate Regional Hubs but rather to ensure quality and provide Regional Hubs with the confidence that they are adhering to the multitude of external regulatory frameworks. By ensuring that they are compliant with these frameworks, Regional Hubs can retain the autonomy needed to design and deliver services tailored to the unique needs of the communities they serve. Implementing such standards would guarantee that students receive consistent high-quality service, government funders can be confident that all legal and grant requirements are met, and each Regional Hub can operate without placing stakeholders at risk.

Achieving this requires structured support and targeted capacity-building measures. Regional Hubs must be equipped with tailored capability development initiatives and access to shared resources that strengthen the broader network. As the RUSH program continues to expand, adequate resourcing and strategic investment will be critical to sustaining growth and maintaining quality.

While the RUSH Network has laid important groundwork, additional resourcing is necessary to support long-term success. Collaborative capacity-building efforts will further enhance the program's resilience and effectiveness, enabling Regional Hubs to meet regulatory expectations with confidence while delivering services tailored to the unique needs of their communities. To ensure relevance and secure buy-in, these standards must be co-designed with Regional Hubs as the principal actors. The co-design process should actively involve higher education institutions (HEIs), the Department of Education, Country Universities Centre (CUC), Geraldton Universities Centre, the RUSH Network, and other key stakeholders. This collaborative approach will ensure the standards are practical, relevant, and reflective of the diverse needs of regional communities while preserving the autonomy of each Regional Hub.

The rationale for this recommendation is grounded in an extensive evidence base collected throughout this research, including via interviews with key stakeholders, survey responses, and practitioner ethnographic observations. The findings present a compelling argument for formalising practices across the RUSH Network. As the program continues to grow, it will attract increasing public scrutiny. Establishing robust standards of practice will mitigate potential public criticism by demonstrating accountability, operational excellence, and a commitment to best practices while highlighting the Regional Hubs' capacity to innovate and respond to local needs.

Further professionalisation of the RUSH sector can be achieved through the development of a micro-credential for staff. This credential could incorporate many of the recommended standards of practice, strengthening partnerships between Regional Hubs and HEIs if co-hosted and co-created by HEIs. In the absence of a micro-credential, a centralised

professional development hub offering training on the standards of practice should be developed. This hub would provide ongoing professional development opportunities tailored to the unique needs of Regional Hub staff, fostering continuous improvement across the program and ensuring operational consistency without stifling local adaptability.

The development and implementation of these standards will provide clear operational benchmarks to enhance practice, respect the local autonomy of Regional Hubs while ensuring consistency in core operational areas, and strengthen capabilities through shared learning and resources. These standards will also guarantee that all Regional Hubs meet legal, grant, and educational requirements, thereby enhancing trust in the RUSH program among the higher education sector, government funders, and local communities.

2.3 Strengthen partnerships across the sector

I recommend the strengthening of partnerships across the RUSH sector through the following five actions:

- **Action One:** The Commonwealth Government should adopt learnings from the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP) and incorporate them into their decision making, particularly the learnings from the Eastern Australia Regional University Centre Partnership (EARUCP) project.
- **Action Two:** HEIs must continue to shift from transactional partnerships with Regional Hubs to more altruistic, community-driven engagement.
- **Action Three:** The Commonwealth Department of Education must keep and strengthen the community-owned and responsive elements of the RUSH program.
- **Action Four:** Regional Hubs must continue to seek new partnerships and strengthen existing partnerships.
- **Action Five:** More research is needed into the RUSH program, but this must be done in partnership with all stakeholders, especially the Regional Hubs.

Partnerships are crucial to the widening participation abilities of Regional Hubs; therefore, every effort should be made to strengthen them. The five above actions will do this and are based on the evidence collected through this research. For example, both EARUCP (co-led by CUC Central and the University of Technology Sydney) and RPPPP are illustrations of how multiple universities and Regional Hubs can collaborate effectively. This model demonstrates the power of community-led, widening participation strategies, combining the strengths of both universities and Regional Hubs. This model was mentioned throughout the data as an example of how policy can influence partnerships, to ensure sustainable outcomes and create a more inclusive educational ecosystem across regional and underserved areas. There should be more of these types of partnership.

This research demonstrates how Regional Hubs are successful in embedding higher education within the social, cultural, and economic fabric of their RRR communities. When universities partner with Regional Hubs, they have the opportunity to reimagine their role—not as external providers imposing predetermined frameworks but as collaborators committed to fostering equitable access, inclusion, and long-term capacity-building. The five actions—especially Action Two—of this recommendation will continue to see this type of best-practice partnership develop.

3. Introduction

People in regional, rural, and remote (RRR) areas are significantly less likely to participate in higher education than those who live in metropolitan areas (Barnes et al., 2024). This reflects my own experience: growing up in far western New South Wales (NSW), I aspired to pursue higher education, but the examples of careers and pathways available to me were limited. It was difficult to see what was possible when few role models had taken the path of higher education, and the opportunities to explore different futures felt out of reach. The prospect of leaving my community to study meant not just physical distance but emotional distance from family and support networks. The financial burden of relocating—including the high cost of accommodation and living expenses in metropolitan areas—made the idea of university daunting. Without exposure to university life, I struggled to understand what to expect or how to navigate a system that felt unfamiliar and distant. Later, as the Manager of CUC Far West in Broken Hill, I saw these same struggles reflected in the students with whom I worked—students who, like me, juggled personal commitments, financial pressures, and uncertainty about navigating higher education. I understood their hesitation, the feelings of being an outsider, and the resilience it took to persist.

My experience is echoed in the literature on the barriers to enrolment and successful completion of higher education studies for those in RRR communities, including an “absence of institutional support” (Ghys & Gray, 2012, p. 2099), the cost of transport to attend higher education that is far away from their home community (Gale et al., 2010), and the additional expense of metropolitan living (Baker et al., 2025; Cuervo et al., 2023). This is compounded by the distance of the higher education provider from the home-community, which can make visiting home difficult and take an emotional toll on the student (Cuervo et al., 2023; Gale et al., 2010).

An additional barrier is that in many RRR communities there is a cultural expectation that de-prioritises higher education and instead shifts the focus on young people to gain work-ready skills and enter the workforce upon finishing secondary school (Barnes et al., 2019). Often these barriers are compounded by the equity characteristics of the individual; that is, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander status, gender, socio-economic status, age, and (dis)ability, all impact on the ways that these barriers are experienced (Nelson et al., 2017).

In response to the low participation rate, Regional Hubs were established to make higher education more accessible and equitable in RRR areas. Initially these Regional Hubs were established by communities without government funding. However, as the barriers to higher education were more widely publicised and attracted more political and policy attention—especially through early reports (for example, the Napthine Review (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019) and Halsey Review (Halsey, 2018)—state and then federal funding of the RUSH program began. Since the establishment of the first Regional Hub in Geraldton, the program has gone through five rounds of funding (“cohorts”) and 56 Regional Hubs have been established (or are in the process of being established).

Despite this rapid expansion of Regional Hubs, there remains a small amount of literature on the topic. The literature on Regional Hubs is discussed in the next section of this report, and a careful synthesis shows that there is a considerable gap in our understanding of whether,

how, and why Regional Hubs enable more people in RRR communities to access higher education (“widening participation”). This research therefore seeks to fill this gap via three objectives:

1. To understand the efficacy of the Regional Hubs in widening participation and identify the mechanisms responsible for widening participation.
2. To develop a characterisation of the Regional Hubs. To date, there has been no published, peer-reviewed typological construct of the RUSH program. I see this as a substantial gap for the program, especially as it continues to grow.
3. To identify implications for future policy and practice. Three recommendations emerged from this research, as discussed in the front matter of this report. However, this report, and the associated practitioner resource, has implications for the practice of Regional Hubs. It is my hope that through this report, practitioners will be able to strengthen their own practice.

A mixed-methods approach was adopted to meet the objectives of the study. Interviews were conducted with 57 participants, belonging to three categories: staff of Regional Hubs; students at Regional Hubs; and community members currently or previously involved in the governance and/or creation/operationalisation of the Regional Hubs. A survey was distributed to 26 Regional Hubs, belonging to cohorts One, Two, and Three—that is, those that were operational at the time of the survey. Last, during site visits for interviews I collected ethnographic observations that add a level of richness to the data.

These methods, and the data I collected, also contributed to the practitioner resource I developed as part of the research. *Roadmap to Success: A What Works Guide to Regional University Study Hubs Partnerships* is a guide to best practice for the university–Regional Hubs partnership. In this resource I have collected examples of best practice in developing, strengthening, and maintaining these partnerships. As this research will show, this partnership is important to the widening participation functions of the Regional Hubs.

This report is structured in a conventional manner. In Section 4, I provide background information on Regional Hubs. This includes their history and a demographic user profile to provide the reader with a deeper understanding of who utilises the Regional Hubs. In this section, I also present the five major themes in the literature on Regional Hubs. I conclude this section with an analysis of census data that suggests Regional Hubs do widen participation.

In Section 5, I discuss the methodology of the research. I first discuss the ethics of the research, as well as ethical considerations involved in undertaking the research. I then discuss my positionality in the study, as it affects the study’s reliability and validity. As a practitioner who has worked in the Regional Hubs space for nearly a decade, it is important to me that I am transparent across all aspects of the research to minimise any chance of bias (either conscious or unconscious) appearing in this research. I conclude this section by detailing the specific methodologies underlying the three methods used in the research.

Section 6 presents the results of the research, separated according to method. Presenting the results of the interviews, survey, and observations is one of the ways in which I have embraced transparency in this research.

Section 7 incorporates the results from Section 6 and formulates them into four findings:

- 1) Regional Hubs widen participation.
- 2) Staff have an essential role in the widening participation functions of Regional Hubs.
- 3) Partnerships enable widening participation.
- 4) Regional Hubs contribute to prosperous communities.

These four findings meet the first objective of the study to assess the efficacy of Regional Hubs in widening participation, and feed into Objectives 2 and 3 to characterise the Regional Hubs and provide a basis for future policy recommendations.

Section 8 is where I address the second objective of this study and present a two-type typological assessment of the Regional Hubs, the Operational-Distinction Model. This typology is based on the quantity of evidence collected through this research, as well as my prior knowledge of the RUSH program. This typology, while experimental, will allow future researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to better understand the form and functions of Regional Hubs. It will also allow communities who want their own Regional Hub to better understand the type of Regional Hub that might be best for their communities. I conclude the discussion with some reflections on the research process and limitations of the study and suggest future areas of inquiry.

In Section 9, the discussion, I reflect on how I experienced conducting the research as a practitioner, before presenting the limitations of the research, and conclude by suggesting areas for future research.

There are four documents appended to this report. Appendix A presents the census data analysed in Section 4. Appendix B is the practitioner guide *Roadmap to success: A 'What Works' guide to Regional University Study Hubs partnerships* that I created alongside this research, and Appendix C contains the three interview schedules (student, staff, and community) used in the research. Appendix D presents the survey distributed to Regional Hubs.

3.1 A note on language

I approach this research as a Regional Hubs practitioner who is on sabbatical to undertake this project. As such, strict adherence to archaic academic traditions has not been a priority. This can be demonstrated through my use of both writing in first person and writing in an active style (as opposed to a passive neutral “academic” voice). Throughout this report, I frequently refer to “I” being myself, but I also at times refer to “we”. In this instance, and unless otherwise specified, I am referring to myself and my Research Officer, Dr Joshua James. This distinction is nuanced but important and reflects the fact that some of the work and decisions were led by me, while at times Joshua and I worked simultaneously. This is discussed further in the bias-management plan in the ethics section of this report.

There may be some confusion around terminology used in this report, and I feel it necessary to explain some of the language. The term “cohort” denotes the funding period into which a Regional Hubs falls. Cohort One, for example, was the first round of Regional Hubs federally funded in 2018; Cohort Two was the next round of funding, administered in 2020; Cohort Three was funded in 2022; and so on. Within the cohorts, there is variation in Regional Hub

typology and in commencement of operations. Thus, a Cohort Two hub may have been funded in the 2021 round but not be operational until later.

It should be noted that the term “supported degree” is ill defined and often misused, as it emerged in the unpublished Urbis (2021) report; therefore, the term “partnered courses” is used in this report. Partnered courses are a model where universities and Regional Hubs work in financial partnership to deliver courses that provide additional course-specific academic services. We have changed the language to “partnered courses” to provide clarity and inclusion of enabling programs.

I have opted to shorten “Regional University Study Hubs” to “Regional Hubs”, and RUSH for convenience. The RUSH program has historically been the Regional University Centres (RUC) program, and this term may appear in some older literature and in some interview data.

I acknowledge that the term “regional, rural, and remote” (RRR) is problematic as it homogenises a large area without recognising the spatial inequities that exist in the classification itself (Webb et al., 2024). There is an additional complication with use of the term in that federal and state governments use the terms in the acronym in different orders. “Regional, rural, and remote” is used here to be consistent with the Department of Education’s communications on the Regional Hubs.

Last, I use both “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples” and “First Nations” throughout this report. I recognise the difficulty in grouping together such a diverse group of peoples and communities in such a broad way, and where it is appropriate I name the specific nations and communities to which I am referring.

4. Background

Regional Hubs (formerly Regional University Centres [RUC]) are an innovative policy initiative that has demonstrably widened participation of equity students in RRR areas (Australian Universities Accord Panel, 2023; Blunden et al., 2024). Regional Hubs support student access, participation, retention, and success in higher education by offering institution-neutral academic and pastoral support—that is, agnostic support provided regardless of students' enrolling institution or formal partnership arrangements (Stone et al., 2022). Regional Hubs exist within the equity sphere of higher education policy: research, policy, and practice regarding student equity in higher education typically focuses on the six² designated equity groups, and Regional Hubs focus on students from regional to remote locations.

In 2024, approximately 4,390 students used a Regional Hub, an increase of 29% compared to 2023 (Department of Education, 2024a). Since the program's inception, Regional Hubs have supported 12,836 students. A demographic description of Regional Hub users can be found in Section 1.2.

Regional Hubs are distinct from the traditional university campus model as they are not direct education providers; instead, they offer an extensive range of institution-neutral supports. These supports include dedicated study areas, local support staff, and video conferencing capabilities, coupled with locally led administrative, pastoral, and academic guidance for students. Core to Regional Hubs is the place-based approach that they take. Local ownership enables each Regional Hub to be tailored to the local context in which it operates. The theme that being place-based is key to the success of the RUSH program recurs throughout this research. All these attributes, when combined with the nuanced features of the program, have significant potential to guide future policies and practices, and to leverage federal government investment in expanding the program to drive parity of participation.

Partnerships are central to the RUSH program. Communities who apply to establish a RUSH must show community need and collaboration before funding is granted. Once funded, Regional Hubs are required to maintain partnerships with communities and higher education institutions to improve student outcomes. Many also partner with local industry, often through regional development bodies or councils. Additional partnerships include those between staff and governance teams, as well as inter-Hub collaborations through the RUSH and CUC networks.

While each Regional Hub is unique, a 2021 unpublished independent evaluation commissioned by the Department of Education created a typology grouping Regional Hubs into five discrete models (Urbis, 2021).³ The typology explores the diverse operational modalities of Regional Hubs and how they resonate with, and address, various educational and regional development needs. Existing Regional Hubs of each type have unique staffing

² The six equity groups are students from regional and remote locations, Indigenous students, students with a disability, women in non-traditional areas, students from non-English speaking backgrounds, and students from low socio-economic status locations. See N. Crawford (2022) for a full discussion.

³ This report is cited as Urbis (2021) to be consistent with other publications citing this report (for example, The Country Universities Centre's 2023 submission to the Universities Accord Discussion Paper). It should be noted that this report is not available publicly but has been provided to the author as part of this research.

structures, models of support, and community involvement but this has not been documented, interrogated, explored, or shared with the sector. The five models in the typology are described in Table 1.

Table 1: Typology of Regional University Study Hubs

Model	Rationale
Regional campus	First developed by the Geraldton Universities Centre (GUC), regional campus centres operate with a "mini campus" style, offering student administrative support and pastoral and generalised academic support, but also strongly identify themselves with a specific set of supported courses through the facility itself. We have grouped these centres on the basis that they have a very strong (or exclusive) emphasis on tertiary pathways and industry need, aligned to an underlying focus on regional development. While not excluding students not studying with partner universities, their operating model and marketing is heavily focused on offering specific supported courses.
Country Universities Centre (CUC)	CUCs all operate under a "franchise" model supported by a central unit (CUC Central) that provides core intellectual property, branding, and support. The underlying philosophy is primarily focused on providing an equitable platform for any external tertiary studies, with a small number of supported courses offered in some cases through partner universities. We have grouped these centres on the basis that their centrally supported operating model sets them apart from other models, and they share a strong common focus on tertiary pathways. Their operating model is geared towards a "BYO course" approach with "generalised" academic support (less emphasis on course-specific support).
Indigenous student focus	These multi-site, very remote locations have a focus on creating a bridge between Aboriginal communities and mainstream educational frameworks. Wuyagiba Bush Uni emphasises "two-way" learning of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal knowledge and is focused on tertiary pathways, while the ALPA [Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation] has historically had a broader role as an employer and registered training organisation contributing to community development. We grouped these centres based on their common focus on general educational and tertiary pathways (including enabling and transitional programs), alongside an explicit focus on Indigenous students. Both are operated by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.
Vocational and non-accredited training integration	Each of these locations provides access to Vocational Education and Training (VET) or non-accredited training as part of a generalist focus on educational pathways, of which tertiary opportunities are a key part. These locations draw on substantial complementary funding sources to support work outside the tertiary area. We grouped these centres—based on their common focus on multiple educational pathways—into post-secondary education; integration with VET; and non-accredited offerings.
Tertiary hub	Each of these centres emphasises flexibility in access to a large range of tertiary courses, and although they provide limited course-specific support on site they offer a platform of generalist administrative and academic support. We differentiate these Regional University Centres from the "regional campus" model because they operate a largely "course agnostic" model, and from the CUC approach because they are more oriented towards regional development in their operating philosophy and lack network-based support.

Source: *Urbis*, 2021, pp. 17–19

The success of the RUSH program can be seen in its rapid expansion. Priority Action 1 of the 2023 Universities Accord Interim Report is to expand the Regional Hubs to an additional 20 locations and establish Suburban University Study Hubs (SUSH) (Australian Universities Accord Panel, 2023). These SUSHs are based on the RUSH model as it is a demonstrated cost-effective way of driving parity of participation in regional Australia (Australian Universities Accord Panel, 2023; Blunden et al., 2024). Since the Universities Accord, there have been two additional rounds of funding (cohorts) with five in total, and at the time of writing there were 43 operational Regional Hubs.

Despite this success and planned expansion, very little research has been undertaken to explore why the RUSH program has been effective. For example, there is no peer-reviewed literature available through traditional academic searches since the program was rebranded to RUSH. Under previous names, such as the RUC program and “Regional Study Hubs” there is little academic literature available (>20) that interrogates the role, and efficacy of, the RUSH program. However, there are multiple government (both federal and state) reports around the Regional Hubs that are mainly formal evaluations of the program.

In this literature review the academic peer-reviewed literature is analysed alongside government and other non-peer-reviewed literature. In this section of the report, I provide a brief overview of the history of Regional Hubs before discussing the literature on Regional Hubs, focusing specifically on the evidence for why and how Regional Hubs work. First, I offer a brief history of Regional Hubs, demonstrating their grassroots community origins and subsequent government funding.

4.1 History of Regional Hubs

The history of Regional Hubs can be organised into two timelines: prior to federal funding and when the federal program commenced. In this section, I briefly discuss both timelines to give the reader a greater sense of understanding of the history of Regional Hubs.

4.1.1 Prior to federal funding

Prior to an organised federal approach to Regional Hubs, regional communities were organising themselves to provide support for people who aspired to continuing their education. The earliest example of this is the GUC in Geraldton, a settlement of 38,595 people that lies 424 km north of Perth. The GUC traces its roots back to a 1999 youth forum run by the Mid-West Development Commission, which determined that the most important issue facing young people in Geraldton was the lack of access to university education (GUC, n.d.). Following this, the Geraldton University Access Group (GUAG) was formed in 2000 and in 2001 it successfully lobbied the federal government for an allocation of university places specifically for Geraldton (GUC, n.d.). The GUC was established in that year, and in 2006 opened its purpose-built facility in Geraldton. In 2010, it became a not-for-profit incorporated body to administer the Regional Hub (GUC, n.d.; see also Geraldton to get Dedicated Uni Building, 2003; Geraldton Students Take to Universities Centre, 2004; \$2m Boost for Uni Centre, 2004). Following investments from the Regional Development Council and Royalties for Regions funding between 2006 and 2014, the GUC received \$1.8m from the Australian Government as part of the Cohort One funding of the RUC (now known as

RUSH) program (GUC, n.d.; see also Second Stage of Geraldton Universities Centre Opens, 2014).

CUC Snowy Monaro has a similar story of being community driven. In 2013, the energy company Snowy Hydro Limited, the then-Cooma Monaro Shire Council, and community members funded the Cooma Universities Centre. In 2014, Snowy Hydro gifted the centre to the community and operated for five years without any government funding (CUC Snowy Hydro, n.d.). In 2017, the NSW Government invited the Cooma Universities Centre to develop a proposal to expand its model of higher educational support to further regions in NSW. With Snowy Hydro and other expertise, the CUC structure and vision was formed, whereby centres in other locations would be established and affiliated under a single umbrella, allowing each location to be locally governed and driven by its community, but for all CUCs and students to be represented by an aggregated body that overcomes the inevitable thin numbers in rural education. By the end of 2019, eight CUCs had been established across NSW through state government investment. Since then, the CUC has continued to expand across NSW, Queensland, Tasmania, Victoria, and the Territory of Norfolk Island.

In both the GUC and CUC Snowy Monaro cases, it was the community that came together and established its own Regional Hub, with government funding coming later.

4.1.2 Federal funding

Since 2018, the RUSH program has received over \$100m in government funding, with a focus on improving tertiary education access for RRR students in line with recommendations from key educational reviews, such as the Halsey Review, Napthine Review, and the Australian Universities Accord (the Accord).

The Halsey Review, also known as the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (IRRRRE), a foundational 2018 report, emphasised strengthening the transition from secondary school to tertiary education for RRR students and suggested early identification of educational support needs to boost long-term student success (Halsey, 2018). It made recommendations as follows:

- Recommendation 4: Building a strong learning foundation for RRR children.
- Recommendation 5: Expanding access to work placements, vocational education, and dual VET/university programs.
- Recommendation 6: Supporting RRR students through transitions to university, training, or employment.
- Recommendation 7: Increasing philanthropic involvement to raise achievements for RRR students.

The federal government's response to these recommendations led to the creation of the RUSH program, first funded with \$16.7m in the 2017/18 Budget to establish up to eight community-owned Regional Hubs. Recognising RRR communities' resilience, the government then allocated \$14m in the 2018/19 Budget to provide an additional 500 Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs), specifically for students at Regional Hubs. As part of their federal funding, Regional Hubs are responsible for allocating CSPs to HEI partners. These CSP allocations are often used as leverage in negotiations with universities, offering as an incentive the potential for additional funding. The funding for these CSPs

comes from the Commonwealth Grant Scheme, and universities may also benefit from increased student contribution income if more student places are delivered. In return, Regional Hubs provide dedicated support to university students, which may include delivering course content and coordinating placements. No CSPs were allocated beyond this, and Cohort Three as well as newer cohorts do not have access to this funding.

The Napthine Review later reinforced these priorities, urging the establishment of a national focus on RRR education (Commonwealth of Australia, 2019). In response, the Minister for Education, Dan Tehan announced in 2020 an expansion of the RUSH program, supporting both existing and new Regional Hubs to meet the evolving needs of RRR students (Tehan, 2020). Through these investments, the program seeks to support equitable tertiary education access, foster retention, and create sustainable opportunities in RRR Australia.

In 2021, the federal government established the Regional Universities Centres Network (now the Regional University Study Hubs Network), hosted by the then-National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (now the Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success [ACSES]). This network was established to support communities of practice among the Regional Hubs, driving best-practice principles and facilitating collaboration (National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, 2021).

The Accord further developed the RUSH program, with processes implemented from 2022 on the basis of an election pledge by the Australian Labor Party, and a final report produced in February 2024 (Ireland, 2024). The first priority action of the Accord was to “Establish up to 20 additional Regional University Study Hubs (formerly Regional University Centres), building on the thirty-four existing Regional University Study Hubs currently operating across the country” (Clare, 2024; see also Cassidy, 2024). Since the Accord, the total number of Regional Hubs has expanded to 56, of which at the time of writing 43 were operational.

The introduction of the “Partnerships Program” marked a strategic shift in how Regional Hubs engage with HEIs and other stakeholders. Replacing CSPs with direct funding for partnerships, this program allows Regional Hubs to form collaborations based on community needs rather than institutional incentives. For instance, the funding can be used to support initiatives such as work-integrated learning, internships, and targeted academic support. This approach was intended to decouple the Regional Hubs’ financial sustainability from HEI-driven models, which in turn would promote greater flexibility and responsiveness from HEIs. However, as this research will show, this vision was not fully realised. This is because it shifts the burden of leveraging partnerships onto Regional Hubs, which may lack the capacity or resources to maximise this opportunity effectively. Further, it is administratively burdensome and programmatic rather than offering flexibility for Regional Hubs. Additionally, partnership funding is monetarily less than the potential CSP funding amount.

4.1.2.1 Suburban University Study Hubs

The introduction of Suburban University Study Hubs (SUSH, or Suburban Hubs) reflects a key priority recommendation from the Australian Universities Accord Panel (2023), aimed at addressing educational inequities in urban and peri-urban areas. Announced in late 2024, the first 10 hubs are part of a broader government initiative to expand access to higher education by offering localised study spaces, academic support, and digital connectivity. Building on the success of Regional Hubs, the Suburban Hubs aim to address barriers such as socio-economic disadvantage, limited transport options, and the need for flexible study environments in suburban contexts (Department of Education, 2025a).

An important difference between the Suburban Hubs and their regional counterparts is the inclusion of a university ownership model, marking a major shift in the program's operational structure. While this model is currently under trial with the Cohort Five Regional Hubs, it is being implemented directly as part of the Suburban Hubs initiative (Department of Education, 2025a). Regional Hubs have traditionally been community-driven, fostering local ownership and tailoring services to meet specific regional needs. The integration of university ownership, while intended to strengthen institutional partnerships, introduces questions about maintaining the adaptability and responsiveness that have been critical to Regional Hubs' success (J. Ross, 2024). Striking a balance between institutional oversight and community engagement will be vital to ensuring the Suburban Hubs meet the unique needs of suburban communities (Halsey, 2018).

Adapting a regional program for suburban implementation presents both opportunities and challenges. Efforts to apply metropolitan strategies to regional areas have often struggled to address the specific needs of RRR populations, and similar risks exist in applying a regional model to suburban contexts. Suburban areas face distinct barriers such as affordability pressures, commuting challenges, and access disparities that require localised solutions. However, the Suburban Hubs present a significant opportunity to adapt the strengths of the RUSH model—such as place-based support, collaboration, and flexibility—to urban fringe environments. By leveraging lessons learned from Regional Hubs and ensuring community voices remain central to implementation, the Suburban Hubs could play a transformative role in expanding access to higher education for underrepresented student groups.

4.1.3 Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program

An additional development in the RUSH program is the availability of funds through the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP). The RPPPP was developed in response to the 2019 *National Regional, Rural, and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy* and has allocated \$7.2m in funding between 2022 and 2024 to support collaborative outreach projects to nurture aspirations, foster sustainable partnerships, and tackle systemic barriers to higher education (Department of Education, 2024e). Administered under the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* (Cth) as part of the Indigenous, Regional, and Low SES Attainment Fund, RPPPP focuses on place-based initiatives to empower communities and expand access to higher education. One of the key RPPPP initiatives is the Eastern Australia Regional University Partnership (EARUCP), which brings together universities, Regional Hubs, and communities in the eastern region of Australia to further access to higher education.

Phase 1 of EARUCP engaged 21 communities through 32 co-design workshops involving 638 participants (Wrafter et al., 2024). Embedded in the “appreciative inquiry framework”, these workshops identified barriers and pathways to higher education, emphasising the importance of nurturing aspirations, building a culture of learning, and fostering local skills to navigate higher education systems. Phase 1 also highlighted the need for partnerships that embed local knowledge, ensuring that outreach initiatives align with the unique needs of communities. Phase 2, to be completed by mid-2025, builds on these findings by enhancing partnerships and delivering institution-neutral, community-led outreach initiatives. Sustainable collaboration is central to this phase, which established communities of practice to share learnings and embed best practices. It also incorporates a continuous quality improvement framework to ensure the program's adaptability and effectiveness. By

expanding engagement across multiple cohorts and empowering communities to take ownership of their educational futures, Phase 2 aims to establish a robust foundation for long-term regional impact. EARUCP demonstrates the importance of partnerships in the Regional Hubs program.

4.2 Regional Hub user profile

The *Regional University Study Hubs Student Experience Survey* conducted in 2024 gives a comprehensive insight into the users of Regional Hubs and shows the important role the hubs play in increasing educational equity in RRR areas. The survey, the first of its kind to be administered at the national level, was conducted for the Department of Education and administered by the RUSH Network, with a completion rate of 16.8% ($n = 739$ students).⁴ Demographically, 50.9% of survey participants were over 30 years of age, 80.9% were female, 8.2% identified as First Nations students, and 10.5% identified as having a disability. The survey also indicates that 51% of students were studying full-time with 49% of students studying part-time. Additional Department of Education data from April–May 2024 show that 42% of students using Regional Hubs were the first in their family to undertake tertiary studies (Department of Education, 2024c).

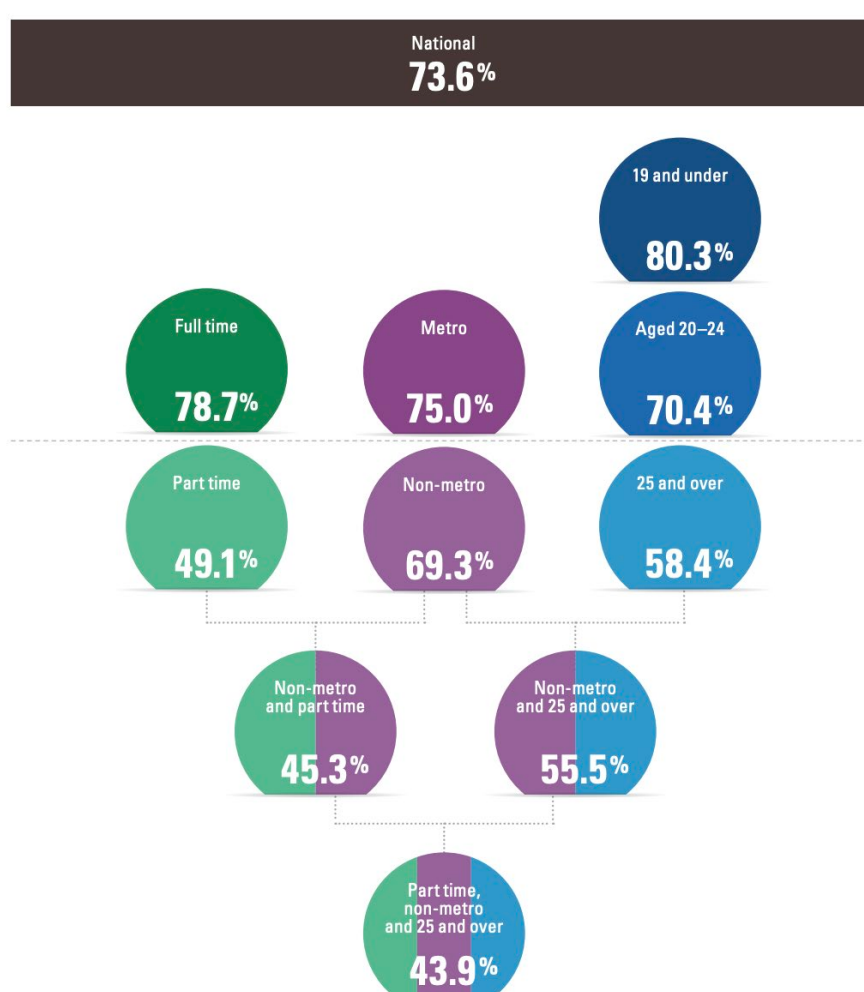
It is difficult to make comparisons between these survey data and national averages, due to fragmented, outdated, or inaccessible government and public data. Nevertheless, some comparisons are possible. For example, across Australia in 2023, 56.3% of students at universities were female, and 2.2% identified as First Nations (Department of Education, 2024b). However in the October–November 2024 reporting of Regional Hub users, 75% were female and 12% identified as First Nations (Department of Education, 2025b). While there are no data for all students with disabilities at the national level, Cadby et al. (2024) analysed undergraduate data and found that 12.7% of all undergraduate students in Australia identified as having a disability—slightly more than the 10.5% of Regional Hubs users. Most students across Australia are young, with only 23.6% of students in 2023 being over the age of 30 years (compared to 50.9% of students who use Regional Hubs; Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2024).

If we consider the compounding and cumulative effects of multiple equity characteristics on successful completion of higher education courses, these demographic data help to explain the role of Regional Hubs as equity tools as well as their role in widening participation (as discussed later in this report). To further illustrate how these compounding and cumulative equity characteristics influence completion of higher education studies, we can look to Edwards and McMillan's (2015) landmark study "Completing university in a growing sector: Is equity an issue?", which shows that when examined together, demographic variables such as low socio-economic status, age, and Indigeneity compound to reduce completion rates more significantly than when viewed in isolation. This phenomenon is particularly relevant to RRR communities, where socio-economic and geographical disadvantages intersect with other factors, amplifying the barriers these students encounter.

⁴ While this survey cannot be seen to be truly representative because of the low completion rate, it is comparable to the CUC data used by Blunden et al. (2024) in their evaluation of CUC in New South Wales. This similarity should increase confidence in the dataset.

This is well demonstrated by Edwards and McMillan's figure 32, reproduced here as Figure 1 (Edwards & McMillan, 2015, p. 28).⁵ This figure demonstrates that completion rates nine years after commencement decline progressively as additional equity characteristics are attributed to an individual. The national average in 2005 for completion nine years after commencement was 73.6%; however, this was lower for those in non-metro areas (69.3% completion), even more so for those in non-metro areas AND aged 25 years or over (55.5%), and more so again for those who were part-time, non-metro, and 25 years or over (43.9%). These last two individual profiles reflect the average Regional Hubs user, except they may have additional characteristics (for example, being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, a woman, or having a disability) that can further influence the likelihood of completion.

Figure 1: A representation of how compounding equity characteristics affect nine-year completion rates



Source: Edwards & McMillan, 2015, p. 28

Examining Regional Hub users through Edwards and McMillan's framework provides a better understanding of both the importance of Regional Hubs for facilitating increased completion rates and the role of compounding and cumulative equity characteristics for

⁵ This figure is reprinted in full, with permission from Edwards and McMillan (2015).

Regional Hub users. Next, we discuss the major themes that emerged from a literature review on the limited scholarship about Regional Hubs.

4.3 Themes in the literature

Much of the literature on the RUSH program examines factors in their success and the positive effects on communities that have a Regional Hub. Through a thorough analysis of the literature, five themes emerged:

- the success of the regional hubs
- the role of location and geography
- community links of Regional Hubs
- the regional economic development effects of a community having a Regional Hub
- a physical place to study.

These themes are broad and to a certain extent, deeply intertwined. This section of the report discusses these five themes. Where possible, I have separated the themes out, but it should be noted that in some circumstances this was not possible because of the degree of interconnectedness.

4.3.1 Success of Regional Hubs

The Blunden et al. (2024) program evaluation of the CUCs found that the program had broadly increased the number of students using Regional Hubs over time and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are enrolled with CUC-affiliated Regional Hubs at a level that is representative of their communities or greater. This same program evaluation found that students who use Regional Hubs have a greater sense of belonging, and students who use a CUC are more likely to stay in their local area.

In the report *Regional, rural, remote marginalisation from higher education: Isolation, mobility and the role of the Country Universities Centres* (Bunn & Lumb, 2024), the authors demonstrate the impact that CUCs have on RRR students and communities.⁶ For example, the study found that when a student has a dedicated space (such as a Regional Hub or CUC) to engage in online learning it helps to build a “stable sense of identity and recognition” in the student (Bunn & Lumb, 2024, pp. 4, 27, 42). Bunn and Lumb argue that through increased recognition and a more stable sense of identity, students are more likely to succeed in their studies. Further to this identity recognition, Bunn and Lumb found that through having access to a CUC, online learners experience a reduced sense of isolation and create communities of learners. This in turn increases the likelihood of educational achievement and attainment. This community-building has a positive impact on educational outcomes through the ability of students to recognise and support each other—a vital component of student success (Bunn & Lumb, 2024).

An increased sense of belonging in students who use Regional Hubs is a recurring theme in the literature, as a contributing factor to their success. For example, in Delahunty’s (2020)

⁶ In the interests of transparency, it should be noted that I contributed to this research in my previous role as a manager of CUC Far West. However, beyond my participation in the research, I had no role in collating, analysing, or presenting the research.

study, students from RRR backgrounds reported a sense of community and belonging when studying, at least partly facilitated through Regional Hubs. In their study of CUC students, M. Davis and Taylor (2019) found that the CUC students who were surveyed had an exceptionally high rate of self-indicated belonging: “When surveyed about sense of belonging, the CUC students returned 81% positive results, compared to a QILT [Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching] national average of 51%, and a QILT average for external, regional students of just 36%” (M. Davis & Taylor, 2019, p. 85). This increased belonging is a contributing factor in both student retention and student success; it appears that if they feel they belong in a community of scholars, they are more likely to persevere in their studies.

In Nicole Crawford’s (2021) ACSES Equity Fellowship *“On the Radar”: Supporting the Mental Wellbeing of Mature-Aged Students in Regional and Remote Australia* she discusses the impacts that Regional Hubs have on the mental health of mature-aged students. Crawford considers how having access to a Regional Hub, the physical space, and high-speed internet contributed positively to the mental wellbeing of the participants in her study. Notably, Regional Hubs played a role in providing education infrastructure and the sense of belonging that came with visiting a space dedicated to pursuing education.

4.3.2 Location-based factors and geographic spatiality

The locationality of Regional Hubs is a recurring theme in the literature, with many studies pointing to the barriers that geography poses in the success of regional learners and the importance of location as an enabler for them to succeed. Many people in rural populations—especially young people—experience a “mobility imperative” to move from their rural area to a metropolitan area for increased opportunities for employment and education (Bunn & Lumb, 2024). In their study of CUCs, Bunn and Lumb (2024) discuss how many students who use the CUCs experience feeling a need to move from their rural area. For example, they cite one participant (Bunn & Lumb, 2024, p. 16):

In my experience, university wasn’t accessible unless you were going to leave the community, leave family and that sort of thing. And I could have done that, but soon after leaving school decided not to. Well, I did leave, but for other purposes. But yeah, there’s just not the access to the range of courses unless you are able to commit to either leaving the community, leaving town, leaving family, jobs, etc.

This participant was not alone in expressing how this mobility imperative impacts on them. Indeed, many participants in Bunn and Lumb’s study articulated how they had a strong desire to stay in their own community to study and work but felt the need to move away to pursue these activities. Bunn and Lumb conclude that CUCs create a new pathway for people—a middle ground between moving away to pursue education or staying in their community and not studying. The CUCs therefore act “as a third option: one that provides space for people to continue their education while remaining in place” (Bunn & Lumb, 2024, p. 40). This mobility imperative is intimately linked to the next two sections discussing community and economic/regional development, as this imperative often coerces people into moving away from their families, friends, and communities, and the effects of this “brain drain” on local economies, with young workers moving away and therefore reducing their impact on local Gross Domestic Product, employment, and so on.

In Delahunty's (2020) ACSES Equity Fellowship, she examined how people from RRR navigate into and through higher education. One of the key findings of Delahunty's report is that people in RRR areas who decided to stay in their communities to pursue higher education were, at least in part, motivated to do so because of access to a Regional Hub or regional university campus. This is echoed in the literature, such as Worsley's (2024) article on the CUC Snowy Monaro, which discusses the impact of the CUC on the decision to enter or re-enter higher education. One example that Worsley provides is of Sarah, a person who dropped out of high school to pursue a career in hairdressing, because university felt "too hard for many reasons, and I wanted to be with my family. Uni just meant leaving home, even if it did bring me other opportunities" (2024, p. 48). Worsley continues (2024, p. 48):

After over a decade in this profession, it was in fact her family that supported her to complete a Bachelor of Psychology while juggling her role as a mum, wife, and business partner in her family's new surveying business ... Sarah acknowledges that without this local resource, university study would never have been available to her. **The pressures of place would have denied, rather than driven, her aspiration.**

The emphasis in the last sentence is my own but demonstrates this relationship between place and the decision to enter or return to higher education. Regional Hubs are usually located within a community to facilitate easy access for students; however, in some instances there has been a purposeful decision to remove a Regional Hub from the community to allow students to study, undistracted by society. For example, in their reflexive assessment of the Wuyagiba Bush Uni, Jaggi et al. (2024, p. 128)—who were instrumental in creation of this Regional Hub—note that:

When deciding on a location for the program, Wuyagiba outstation was best fit. About two hours' drive from Ngukurr, the remote location limits "humbug" and distractions, allowing students and staff to focus on their study and employment. "Humbug" is a term commonly used by Aboriginal communities, referring to consistent demands relating to sharing and cultural obligations between kin. In the modern context, humbug can be a considerable stressor for Aboriginal people who are trying to become financially independent by engaging in employment and removing themselves from welfare (Nagel & Thompson, 2010). As co-author Dr H Rogers stated: "[we] want to move away from community because of humbug and distractions from families. Too much fighting and drug and alcohol abuse in community. Otherwise, they won't be able to concentrate" (Personal communication, 11 September 2022).

This quote from Jaggi and colleagues demonstrates how instrumental the location of a Regional Hub is in contributing to its success. For the Wuyagiba Bush Uni, having the physical study place away from the nearest settlement leads to better higher learning outcomes. The quote also demonstrates a relationship between social capital and location. The success of a Regional Hub could be attributed to its removal from the humbug and distractions of life, but this can only be known through experts from within the local community making decisions about the Regional Hub. The community links of Regional Hubs are an important theme throughout the literature, as explored in the following section. Further, the provision of a space that is culturally safe where being Aboriginal and having

connections to Country, language, and identity are prioritised can be linked to the positive educational outcomes at Wuyagiba Bush Uni (Jaggi et al., 2024).

4.3.3 Community and university partnerships

The 2024 review of the CUC program in NSW conducted by the University of New South Wales Social Policy Research Centre (Blunden et al., 2024) on behalf of the state government found that they have a variety of community and university partnerships, with partnerships often facilitated through the connections of those who sit on their governance boards (see also Baker et al., 2025). At the Wuyagiba Bush Uni, two-way education practices are adopted, and the, “Strengthened cultural knowledge and pride in students (and staff!) led to increased student confidence and understanding of their cultural relationships and responsibilities according to local Aboriginal worldviews and kinship systems” (Jaggi et al., 2024, p. 133).

In the article, *Meeting Schools Where They're At: Reciprocal Partnerships for Place-Based Aspirations*, Worsley (2024, p. 47) writes that “Genuine partnerships between universities and organisations like the CUCs and other Regional University Study Hubs can ensure a positive impact in communities”. Worsley discusses how some partnerships between communities and universities are a contributing factor to “brain drain” as young people move out of their communities to pursue higher education. Worsley—who at the time of writing worked for the CUC Snowy Monaro—points to a different type of partnership embodied by their Regional Hub. Through working in partnership with the University of Canberra (UC), CUC Snowy Monaro embarked on a partnership project in which they sought to develop young people’s career aspirations, regardless of whether that involved higher education. This project involved the CUC and UC visiting young children in schools and asking them to imagine through art what their future would be. Their art projects were then collected and have been published as a book. UC’s involvement in this project demonstrates the positive relationships Regional Hubs can have with universities, even when the project might not benefit the university—in this instance because the program was not trying to persuade people into higher education but grow the aspiration of the entire region.

4.3.4 Regional development links

An investigation into the supply and demand of service workers in NSW conducted by the Regional Australia Institute (2022) suggests that CUCs play an important role in the workforce development of regional Australia. The Regional Australia Institute (2022, p. 46) conclude that:

The CUC student pipeline will not be enough on its own to fill projected skilled workforce needs in key public services like health and education in regional NSW. But it is a very important contribution, given that there is a much higher likelihood of the CUC-supported students practising their new profession in the region in which they are living and learning.

The role of Regional Hubs in facilitating regional economic development can also be seen in the Northern Territory through the impact of the Wuyagiba Bush Uni. The Wuyagiba Bush Uni Aboriginal Corporation, the organisation that owns and operates the Wuyagiba Bush Uni,

reports significant economic gains because of its operation. They point to the 50 Aboriginal people to whom they have provided workplace training and employed (Jaggi et al., 2024, p. 135).

4.3.5 Physical space to study

In Bunn and Lumb's (2024) study of CUCs, they found that one of the determining factors in the success of students who use a CUC is the availability of a dedicated study space—a space free of distraction that enables them to study more easily. One participant they interviewed (Patricia, p. 41) mentioned that having a study space lessened the distractions that everyday life offered and gave her a sense of solidarity when other people were studying. Further, because the CUCs in this study had extended opening times (access via swipe card after business hours and on weekends), students could access this dedicated study space at a time that suited them. This is especially important considering that in many RRR communities, community spaces are only open during traditional work hours; the CUCs' accessibility makes it even easier for students to use the space. It should be noted that the extended hours are a condition of affiliation to the CUC, but many non-affiliated Regional Hubs also recognise the importance of extended access and have implemented their own extended opening hours.

Stone et al.'s (2022) study of secondary school students in RRR areas found that some were not interested in studying through online means, and the education experience they received during the COVID-19 pandemic ruined online learning for them. However, when these high schoolers were told about the RUSH program, their minds were changed, and they were more open to the idea of studying online if they had a Regional Hub they could attend. This highlights the importance of the place-based approach: both physical space and the location within the community.

4.4 Relationship between Regional Hubs and widening participation

Widening participation often refers to an increase in the number of students starting and completing higher education who come from backgrounds that do not usually engage in the higher education space (Tham et al., 2023). There is a number of ways in which widening participation can be measured (Martin, 2018; Simpson & Hope, 2024; Walton & Carrillo-Higueras, 2018), but for this report I rely on Grant-Smith et al.'s (2020) explanation of the “widening participation agenda”, which they say is “to increase the participation of students from these underrepresented social groups to levels which reflect their representation in the broader Australian population” (Grant-Smith et al., 2020, p. 9).⁷ In the context of the current study, the underrepresented social groups are those from RRR backgrounds.

One of the ways we can analyse widening participation is to examine the difference in number of people in parts of regional Australia that have a Regional Hub who are either

⁷ Widening participation should refer to the entire lifecycle of the student: enrolment, retention, and completion. However, because the life cycles of students using Regional Hubs fall into the nine-year completion group and the maturity of the RUSH program is less than nine years, these data are unavailable. Therefore, the assessment of widening participation is limited to enrolments under the assumption that widening participation in enrolment will flow through into widening participation in retention and completion.

studying at higher education or vocational education institutions. While a blunt tool, examining the number of people engaged in higher/vocational education in these areas can enable inferences to be made about the role of Regional Hubs in facilitating more people in these areas to engage in higher education. In this section, we discuss an analysis of postcode data, which supports the assertion that Regional Hubs widen participation, drawing on other literature and evidence to make this conclusion.

We analysed data from 180 postcodes across regional Australia. To determine which postcodes to include in the analysis, we conducted geographic drive-time modelling to identify those within a 30-minute drive of a Regional Hub site across the four cohorts. The 30-minute drive limit was set because of data from the Regional University Study Hub Student Experience Survey, which indicates that 84.4% of students drive 30 minutes or less to access a Regional Hub (Buckley, 2024). Postcodes were excluded if at least half of their area was not covered by the 30-minute drive criterion: this resulted in the Regional Hubs in the Northern Territory being excluded from the analysis, as the postcodes in the Northern Territory are significantly large. A further nine postcodes were excluded as they had zero people attending any HEIs.

Of the 171 postcodes that were analysed, 54 related to Cohort One Regional Hubs, 37 to Cohort Two, 34 to Cohort Three, and 46 to Cohort Four.⁸ As Cohort One Regional Hubs were established in 2018 and had up to three years of operation before the census, we hypothesised that they would be the strongest in terms of widening participation. Cohort Two and Cohort Three Regional Hubs would not have been operational for long before the census, so it was hypothesised that they might have little to no impact on widening participation. As Cohort Four Regional Hubs were not operational during the 2021 census, we did not expect this cohort to widen participation and therefore could be considered a control group.

These 171 postcodes were analysed according to the “type of educational institution attending” (TYPP) data from the 2011, 2016, and 2021 censuses (cited as “ABS, 2011”, “ABS, 2016”, and “ABS, 2021”). The TYPP question on the census asks if an individual is in education and what type of educational institution they attend. These data were compiled and collated using TableBuilder, a product provided by the ABS. Further analysis was conducted through IBM SPSS Statistics. The full dataset is available as Appendix A. It is important to note that there is a level of perturbation in this data, as the ABS has an obligation to retain confidentiality: to counteract this perturbation, only descriptive modelling of the data was completed. These data should be understood to represent general trends only.

Postcodes for the Cohort One Regional Hubs experienced the largest increases between the 2011 and 2021 censuses in number of people attending higher or further education. Over the 10-year period between censuses, Cohort One experienced a 15% increase in the number of people attending higher education (both university and vocational). While this is less than the national average of 21% over the same period, it is a higher increase than the other cohorts. This is detailed in Table 2.

⁸ Note that the addresses from Cohort Four are necessarily fixed as some of the Regional Hubs in that cohort are not yet established. In this case, the centre of the town or settlement in which the Regional Hub will be located was taken as the centre point for the 30-minute-driving radius.

Table 2: Changes Over Time in the Number of People Enrolled in Higher Education, by Postcode

	2011 to 2016 (pre-RUSH establishment)	2016 to 2021 (post-RUSH establishment)	10-year increase
Cohort One	-7%	24%	15%
Cohort Two	-9%	24%	12%
Cohort Three	-4%	17%	13%
Cohort Four	-3%	8%	5%
Australia wide	9%	9%	21%

Interestingly, Cohort Two had a similar size increase between 2016 and 2021 as Cohort One, but given the 9% decrease between 2011 and 2016 this cohort had a smaller 10-year increase. It could be that the Regional Hubs of Cohort Two had a positive impact on widening participation early in their operation. Alternatively, the increase may be attributed to other population movements and study enrolment trends, detailed later in this section.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine whether there were significant differences in the increase in higher education attendance across the four cohorts over the period 2016–21. The results of the ANOVA indicated a statistically significant difference between the cohorts ($F(3, 166) = 3.372, p = 0.020$). A Tukey honestly significant difference (HSD) test was also run. This post-hoc analysis is used to compare the means of different groups to determine if any significant differences exist between them. The results indicated that while the differences between cohort means were not statistically significant at the 0.05 level, Cohort One had the highest mean value. This suggests a favourable trend for Cohort One, which approached the threshold for statistical significance with a p -value of 0.059, highlighting its potential as a leading performer among the groups.

To understand this postcode analysis, it is important to consider the complex external factors representing drivers for people to study at university or vocational education providers. For example, there is a strong relationship between economic conditions and enrolment numbers. When there is low unemployment and strong economic growth, fewer people typically study, as the economic incentive to work is greater than a desire to study. Conversely, in times of recession or economic downturn, more people participate in higher education (Nobanee & Dilshad, 2021). This has implications for the analysis here. In 2011, Australia was recovering from the effects of the Global Financial Crisis (McDonald & Morling, 2011a, 2011b) and the 2021 census was conducted during the COVID-19-related economic slowdown (Leonora, 2023; McKibben & Fernando, 2023), meaning that economic downturn is likely to have affected the results in both census periods. These external factors should be taken into consideration when viewing these data. Nevertheless, the postcode analysis provides a positive sign that the increase in enrolments was greater in areas that have a Regional Hub than in areas that do not. Analysis of the 2025 census will reveal the long-term effects of Regional Hubs on the number of people attending vocational or higher education.

Blunden et al., (2024) found that the CUCs widen participation: of note is the authors' finding that CUCs provide facilities that are "proximal, familiar, and communal" (Blunden et al., 2024, p. 79), which helps students overcome barriers to maintain enrolment in their selected courses. Further, the review found that CUCs not only counteract the disadvantages

associated with studying in RRR Australia, but also that Regional Hubs act to reduce the impact of gender, Indigeneity, and income on enrolment and study status. That is, CUCs are encouraging women, First Nations, and low-income students to engage in higher education in ways that they would otherwise not be able to. These findings echo those of other equity evaluations, including that of Wojtek et al. (2023). These external reviews support the current study's hypothesis and the postcode analysis to suggest that Regional Hubs do widen participation.

In this section, I have established the background of the RUSH program, including its history and who uses Regional Hubs. Further, I suggest that the compounding and cumulative equity characteristics of RRR students give credence to the fact that Regional Hubs are sites of widening participation. Further, I have presented the five themes that emerged from a literature review, as well as evidence from a postcode analysis suggesting that areas with a Regional Hub do experience widened participation. In the next section, I discuss the methodology for the research in this report.

5. Methods

Provision of a clear overview of methodological approaches and justification of choices made in a research design is often overlooked in creation and dissemination of research (Cai et al., 2019; Khadilkar, 2018). Therefore, it is appropriate and necessary for research conducted with equity groups to clearly define and justify methodological choices and approach to ensure both high-quality scholarship and ethical decision-making. Cai et al. (2019, p. 347) summarises the importance of this stage:

Choosing appropriate and effective methods and justifying that choice is a critical part of conducting and communicating high-quality research in education. By carefully and explicitly connecting the research questions and the hypotheses that form the theoretical framework to the selection of methods, it is possible to avoid many common methodological problems. Indeed, methods that are well justified and closely connected to the other components of the study form the basis for generating trustworthy and insightful findings and for producing a coherent report of the study.

To increase the trustworthiness of this research, I thus provide a thorough discussion on the methodological approach and justify why I made key choices relating to the methodology. I begin this section with a discussion of the ethics approval and ethical considerations regarding the conduct of research with RRR communities. Then, the mixed-methods approach employed here is detailed, including the semi-structured interviews conducted, the survey administered, and the practitioner observations completed on site visits.

5.1 Ethics and ethical considerations

Ethics approval was granted for the research by the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Human Research Ethics Committee and classified as *No ETH24- 9301 Road map to success: Decoding the Regional University Study Hubs*.

This research was guided by the principle that research should not only do no harm, but should be mutually beneficial for both the researcher and study participants. This principle is realised in this research through the employment of rigorous safety measures to ensure participant safety and comfort throughout the research process, and sharing of the results with participants so that they can benefit from the research process. This approach is consistent with the UTS Research Policy, which incorporates other national ethical research statements including the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies *Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research*.

This reciprocal relationship is further evidenced by the production of the “what works” guide for HEIs developed through this research. The staff and students of Regional Hubs, HEIs, and the wider community benefit from this knowledge sharing and the potential of deepened partnerships between Regional Hubs and HEI. This partnership guide is presented in Appendix B.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the research. For those who participated in an interview, written informed consent was obtained via a form signed by the participant. If the signature was provided on paper, the document was scanned and then shredded, and the electronic file stored on Stash, the UTS research management system. If the signature was provided electronically, the file was archived into Stash alongside the digitalised paper signatures. For survey participants, informed consent was gathered through the survey itself via a series of questions that had to be agreed to. Informed consent for the observations was obtained from the Regional Hubs operational executives.

Participants were given blanket anonymity: no identifying characteristics of participants or Regional Hubs have been made available, and every effort has been made to ensure the ongoing anonymity of participants. While in some research there is the option for participants to waive their anonymity, or for a pseudonym to be used, in this research no such accommodations are made. Participants of the research are identified in the text as “participant” and if additional context is needed then the type of participant (that is, staff, student, or community member) is used. This decision was made both to protect the participants and to ensure the research can be rigorous because anonymity can often elicit more truthful answers (Ong & Weiss, 2000). This anonymity is especially important as I have included a list of Regional Hubs that I visited to ensure integrity and transparency of the research and thus did not want to risk potentially identifying participants if a pseudonym was used in such a way that could be identifiable (for example, the pseudonym may unknowingly associated with the individual).

To ensure that individuals freely participated in the research, no reimbursement or monetary gift was provided. There is considerable debate about the ethics of researchers paying compensation, or in-kind payments, to individuals for their participation in research (Largent & Lynch, 2017; Różyńska, 2022). The *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*, published by the National Health and Medical Research Council (2023), provides guidance on when it is appropriate to reimburse research participants, largely suggesting that reimbursements should include reasonable costs such as travel, accommodation, and parking. As the interviews for this project took place largely in the Regional Hubs where the participants were, it was decided there would be no reimbursement for participants.

5.2 Positionality, reliability, and validity

A key ethical consideration in this project is managing potential or perceived conflicts of interest and bias. These issues arise from my professional position within the sector and therefore relate to the reliability and validity of this study. In this section, I outline my positionality and the bias-management strategies applied throughout the research.

Positionality refers to how a researcher’s identity and context influence their perspective and relationship to the research. Maher and Tetreault (1993, p. 118) describe positionality as the recognition that “Knowledge is valid when it includes an acknowledgment of the knower’s specific position in any context, because changing contextual and relational factors are crucial for defining identities and our knowledge in any given situation.” Others (for example, Holmes, 2020; Bourke, 2014; England, 1994) define it more broadly as encompassing

worldview, relational stance, and socio-political context. In this study, my positionality directly shapes both the production of knowledge and my interactions with participants.

I approach this research as a higher education practitioner rather than an academic. Over fifteen years, I have held several roles in higher education in RRR areas, including Centre Manager at CUC Far West in Broken Hill (2018–2022) and Director of Student Services at CUC Central, the role to which I will return after this Fellowship. Before my time at CUC, I was an Education Programs Coordinator at the University of Sydney working at the University Departments of Rural Health in Broken Hill. I have also chaired the Regional University Study Hubs Advisory Committee. These experiences give me deep professional connections across both CUC-affiliated and independent Regional Hubs; connections that confer insider status and facilitate trust and access but also require active management of potential bias.

Insider status provided practical benefits such as easier recruitment, more open dialogue with participants, and a “more authentic understanding” of the subject being researched (Merriam et al., 2001, p.411), but it also risked overfamiliarity or blind spots. To mitigate this, I developed a bias-management plan based on established best practice (Dunwoodie et al., 2022; Hoffman & Winter, 2022; Noble & Smith, 2015; Podsakoff et al., 2012). The plan included:

1. ongoing disclosure of potential conflicts of interest in all materials and outputs
2. interview accommodations, offering participants an alternate interviewer (Dr Joshua James) to reduce perceived power imbalance
3. a second author who provided critical peer scrutiny from outside the Regional Hub context
4. transparent discussion of limitations, including my positionality and contextual constraints (Ross & Zaidi, 2019)
5. consultation with an expert reference group of academics, practitioners, and policymakers to provide external oversight.

This approach aligns with a social constructivist epistemology, which views knowledge as co-created through social interaction (Jha & Devi, 2014). By acknowledging my positionality and embedding reflexivity throughout the process, I sought to minimise bias and enhance the credibility and validity of the research.

With the ethics of this research now established, and having presented a significant discussion on the validity and reliability of the research, I now turn to the methodology of the research.

5.3 Methodological approach

A mixed-methods approach was taken in this Fellowship, involving interviews, a survey to Regional Hubs staff, and Regional Hub site observations. Mixed-methods research employs both quantitative and qualitative methods to gain a more complete understanding of the research problem (Hansen et al., 2016). The literature suggests this style of research is particularly suitable for educational research as it can help to understand more fully the complexity of the education sphere (Ponce & Pagán-Maldonado, 2015; see also Sammons & Davis, 2017). In the context of this research, use of a digital survey allowed us to capture

the largest number of participants by minimising the effects of geography, while interviews allowed us to gain a deeper perspective on the topic. As the Regional Hubs cover an expansive area, it is not feasible to interview every Regional Hub manager, community, or staff. A survey allows participants to provide their input without being constrained by budget and distance. Further, implementing a survey facilitates a comparative approach to the topic, and removes some of the objectivity involved with qualitative analysis.

This research is grounded in Kilpatrick et al.'s (2003) conceptualisation of social capital theory at the community level. This version of social capital suggests that within a community there are networks, and different agents hold differing amounts of power that can be utilised to develop the community as a whole. This view of social capital grounds this research in two ways. The first is through utilising the social capital of the Chief Investigator in my role as a former manager of a Regional Hub. Through my social capital and relationships with other Regional Hubs managers, who themselves have social capital, the research was able to access a wide range of participants. The second is that by embracing the communitarian elements of social capital, this research is mutually beneficial as it will strengthen the networks between participants and improve Regional Hubs through a clarified typology and associated policy recommendations. Given the two-way nature of this research—inasmuch that participants will receive a copy of both this report and future reports produced from this endeavour—participants will continually be building social capital by gaining new knowledge about the Regional Hubs. This is particularly true for Regional Hubs staff and community members who can use this new social capital to develop their communities and use the research, along with the gaps in community development that it highlights, to strengthen their networks.

The research is guided by the Equity Initiatives Framework developed by Bennett et al. (2015). This equity-based conceptual framework can be used in the design, implementation, and evaluation of equity programs, initiatives, and interventions in the higher education setting. The framework has since been adapted into the Equity Initiatives Map, which maps the equity initiatives of higher education providers in Australia (Zacharias, 2017) and was recently updated (Bennett et al., 2024). While this is not a formal evaluation of the Regional Hubs, some of the best-practice principals of evaluation (Bennett et al., 2024, pp. 3–4) are nevertheless incorporated into our general research approach:

- A mixed-methods approach should be used that incorporates quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection that reflect national institutional approaches to data collection. This research achieves this by incorporating a survey, interviews, and synthesis of federal, state, and Regional Hub data, using methods comparable to other studies into Regional Hubs (such as Baker et al., 2025).
- The evaluation should be grounded in a systematic review of the literature. This has been conducted as part of the context-setting of this report, and is reflected on and woven into the findings as appropriate.
- Consideration should be made of the diversity across geographical areas and community demographics. We collected data from the six states of Australia and one territory (the Northern Territory; the Australian Capital Territory is excluded as it does not have a Regional Hub). The Regional Hubs analysed represent a variety of community demographics and levels of remoteness.

The experiences of students and the needs of the communities are at the forefront of the evaluation. As the reader will note throughout this report, the voices of students, community members, and stakeholders are paramount. We have collected their stories and present them here to the audience, and weave them throughout the wider themes.

In both the interviews and the survey, efforts were made to enhance the value of participation by clearly explaining the purpose of the research, and to reduce participant burden by minimising time commitments and ensuring flexibility in how and when participants could engage. Decreasing the burden of participation was particularly important through this research design as there was no reimbursement for participation, and students who use Regional Hubs are often time poor, as they balance work, study, and life commitments. In communications with participants, I tried to be clear and unambiguous; use appropriate content and appropriately formatted information; be flexible with scheduling; and be sensitive to participants' schedules and time pressures. This is consistent with West's (2017) guidance on accessing research participants. While his article focuses on school-based education research, the principles are applicable to this study. The following section outlines the methodology for the semi-structured interviews.

5.3.1 Semi-structured interviews

There were 57 interviews conducted with participants from nine Regional Hubs. These interviews were conducted both in person as well as over Microsoft Teams. Interviews were conducted with three categories of participant: Regional Hub staff members, identified community members (such as members of the governance boards of the Regional Hubs), and current students using Regional Hubs.

Participants were recruited from nine of the 32 Regional Hubs.⁹ These nine represent variation in both Regional Hub typology—as established in the literature review—and funding cohort (Cohort One, Two, and Three). Further, all of Australia's states and the Northern Territory participated in this research. The selection of the nine Regional Hubs represents a balance between what is possible within the study fieldwork timeframe while offering a broad sample of the practices at each Regional Hub. The sample of nine Regional Hubs across different maturity levels and states ensures diversity in the target population sample and a good sample of practice for this ethnographic study to gain a deep and contextually grounded understanding. The list of Regional Hubs that participated is presented in Table 3, including the number of participants from each category.

Participants were recruited for interviews through a modified snowball sampling technique. Whereas traditional snowball sampling techniques encourage participants to recruit further participants (Naderifar et al., 2017; Negrin et al., 2022), this research instead utilised the Regional Hub staff to identify potential participants, as well as being participants themselves. This approach allowed us to utilise the extensive networks that Regional Hub staff have in their local communities, again emphasising the importance of the embeddedness of Regional Hubs in their communities. A potential downside to this approach is the potential biases of Regional Hubs staff in their selection procedures, which runs the risk of diminishing voices that would appear to sit outside the narrative that the Regional Hub or Regional Hub manager is seeking to project. However, the results of this research demonstrate that this is

⁹ While the RUSH program has since expanded, there were only 32 in operation when this Fellowship commenced.

not the case: there is a breadth of diversity in the answers that suggests this concern is unfounded. This approach to selecting participants was particularly culturally appropriate in this research when selecting Aboriginal participants. Through the course of this research, it became apparent that in some circumstances for Aboriginal participants, having the approval of the Traditional Manager/Boss for Country was a prerequisite for their participation.

Table 3: Number of people interviewed by role

Regional Hub Name	State or territory	Cohort	Number of participants	Staff	Student	Community
Uni Hub Spencer Gulf, Port Pirie	South Australia	One	8	2	3	3
Uni Hub Spencer Gulf, Port Lincoln	South Australia	Three				
Study Hub West Coast	Tasmania	One	12	5	4	3
Regional University Centre Goondiwindi	Queensland	One	6	3	1	2
Country Universities Centre Cape York	Queensland	Three	5	2	2	2
Taree Universities Campus	New South Wales	Two	8	4	2	2
Wuyagiba Bush Uni	Northern Territory	Two	4	2	2	
Great Southern Universities Centre	Western Australia	Two	4	2	2	
Country Universities Centre Ovens Murray	Victoria	Two	8	3	2	4
			Total by participant type	23	18	16
		Total interviewees	57			

5.3.1.1 Interview protocol

Interviews were semi-structured, conducted in an extended conversation style, and the audio was recorded on a password protected device. This approach involved the interviewer having a list of pre-determined questions to which they could refer but otherwise moving the conversation forward in an organic way, exploring topics and themes as they arose. While structured interviews allow for a more “scientific” method that is seen to be more consistent

and attempts to minimise any biases of the research team, the semi-structured method takes the scientific approach and grounds it in the human reality of complex social environments. Semi-structured interviews recognise that interviews are not a “neutral instrument” and instead are “infused with cultural and social norms” (Marvasti & Freie, 2017, p. 626). Having a set group of core questions and allowing follow-up questions in response to an interviewee’s comments has resulted in deeper, more insightful data.

A separate interview schedule was developed for each participant category type (see Appendix C), and all three interview schedules were developed in accordance with best-practice literature, such as Bearman (2019), Galletta (2012, pp. 9–44), and Rabionet (2011). Underpinning the interview schedule was the “responsible” approach to interviewing that we took. A responsible approach, as defined by Rubin and Rubin (2005, pp. 108–128) involves being empathic with the participant, being conversational, adhering to semi-structured principles, and linking the questions together. Interviews ranged in length from 20 minutes to one hour, which is consistent with published guidelines around conducting interviews that are not too onerous on the participant (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Jamshed, 2014).

5.3.1.2 *Interview analysis*

Following an interview, the audio recording was de-identified by giving the file an alphanumeric code. On a password-protected database, the alphanumeric code was stored next to the original file name, therefore creating an identifiable link that only the second author and I can access. Once the files were de-identified, an authorised third party transcribed them (under a confidentiality agreement) and returned the transcripts. These transcripts were then imported to NVivo and thematically analysed.

We identified nine themes prior to analysis that I thought would be helpful in answering the overarching research questions. However, the thematic coding of these interviews was an organic process, and more themes emerged as iterative analysis was conducted (Galletta, 2012, pp. 119–145). This is consistent with established research procedures (such as Blair, 2015; Wilkinson-Stokes, et al., 2024). Braun and Clarke (2006) note that thematic coding can often require material to be considered and then re-considered through the analysis process as new ideas emerge and thinking can develop. This is especially important as analysis began before all the interviews had been completed due to time constraints. Thus, interviews were analysed as they were transcribed and then analysed again as an entire corpus of evidence. Because of this, the original 9 themes evolved into 17 themes, listed alphabetically below:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| 1. accessibility | 10. place-based comments |
| 2. community partnerships | 11. policy or Regional Hub suggestions |
| 3. funding model | 12. regional development |
| 4. future of Regional Hubs | 13. social capital |
| 5. governance-related topics | 14. student belonging |
| 6. partnerships with HEIs | 15. student difficulties |
| 7. impact of staff | 16. student safety |
| 8. importance of education | 17. widening participation. |
| 9. operational and financial matters | |

5.3.2 Survey

The second component of this research was a survey sent to Regional Hubs that are part of the Cohort One, Two, and Three funding rounds. The purpose of this survey was to gain additional insight from leaders of Regional Hubs themselves, particularly around their views on university and community partnerships, operational and financial matters, and their needs and aspirations for Regional Hubs. In this section, we discuss the survey design, distribution, and analysis.

Drawing on Kelley et al.'s (2003) checklist of good survey design, the following steps were taken in the survey design, distribution, and collection to ensure rigorous survey data: 1) an appropriate research question, 2) a survey that is designed and tested to answer the research question, and 3) results that are clearly analysed and reported on. My application of these three steps is discussed below.

The central research question for the survey is the overarching question of this research: how do Regional University Study Hubs widen participation? However, as the audience for this survey was staff from the Regional Hubs themselves, we wanted to explore questions relating to Regional Hub operations, as opposed to student or community questions. Therefore, we asked questions designed to gather data on operational matters (staffing levels, sources of funds), the Regional Hub's view on partnerships with communities and universities (both financial and non-financial), and the Regional Hub's aspirations and needs for the future. These questions enable us to gain a better understanding of how Regional Hubs are widening participation and what they need to fulfil this.

The survey was designed and distributed through Qualtrics. It consisted of 24 questions, which were tested by the research team and colleagues to ensure accessibility, readability, and clarity. The survey in its entirety is presented in Appendix D.

A Participant Information Statement was built into the Qualtrics survey itself, which collected the participants' informed consent at each stage of the process (for example, that the participant understood the scope of the project, that they were freely giving consent, and that they had rights as participants in the research). The decision to incorporate the informed consent into the survey itself, as opposed to as an attachment that the participant needed to download to read, ensured that participants had control over their participation and consent in a more deep, meaningful manner (Holtz et al., 2024).

The survey was distributed via Qualtrics through a direct email to Regional Hubs that were operational at the time of distribution. As a result, most of Cohort Four and all of Cohort Five were excluded from participation, as they were not yet operating. The timing of the survey coincided with the federal government's announcement that universities would be eligible to apply for funding to establish and operate their own Regional Hubs (J. Ross, 2024), which may have influenced the nature and content of responses. While the literature suggests that external events can influence survey completion and responses (Muñoz et al., 2019; Silver & Moynihan, 2019), as the survey was distributed after the announcement, all participants were operating in the same context. Therefore, we expect there to be little variance in responses due to this announcement, but there may be an increased anti-university sentiment in the responses.

Analysis was largely conducted using Qualtrics tools. For quantitative analysis, a basic descriptive analysis was conducted while for the open-ended textual questions, a thematic analysis was conducted. In some circumstances, the quantitative analysis was cross-tabulated against the open-ended question analysis to gain a deeper understanding of the data.

5.3.3 Practitioner ethnographic observations

To supplement this research, I also conducted practitioner ethnographic observations during site visits. These observations were based on my own experience in the Regional Hubs sector, and their purpose was to better understand the relationship between the physical space/place and a Regional Hub's role in widening participation. Practitioner ethnographic observations are a way of gaining a more "holistic understanding of the phenomenon being studied" (Daniel & Harland, 2018, p. 63) as they supplement data generated through interviews and allow for a deeper theoretical construction and application (Fitzgerald & Mills, 2022, pp. 2–4). In this section, I briefly discuss the design of the observations and how they were analysed.

Ethnographic observations can employ a diverse range of methods and analyses (Fitzgerald & Mills, 2022, p. 3). The practitioner ethnographic observation I used was developed to systematically capture the place-based and environmental aspects that shape experiences in Regional Hubs. The tool was loosely designed on the basis of established literature on observational tools, such as Angrosino (2007) and Fitzgerald and Mills (2022). However, underpinning the design of the tool was my institutional knowledge of Regional Hubs. While in this study, we visited nine Regional Hubs. Through my own practitioner work I have visited more than 60% of the active Regional Hubs. This deep insight into Regional Hubs allowed me to create an observational tool that is sufficiently flexible to be applied to many sites but rigorous enough to be replicable across Regional Hubs. These observations were analysed using a simple thematic analysis.

6. Results

In this section, I discuss the results of the research and present them according to method. This section gives a high-level overview of the results, summarises key themes, and highlights key results from the interviews, survey, and observations. In Section 6.1, I discuss the 17 themes that emerged during the thematic analysis of the interviews. Next, I discuss the results of the survey, focusing on the three key themes that arose: university partnerships, widening participation, and the future of Regional Hubs. I conclude the section with a summary of my ethnographic observations.

It should be noted that this section does not consider the results in the wider context (or in relation to one other). This comparison is reserved for the following two sections: *Findings* and *Discussion*. This was a deliberate decision taken because of the large volume of data gathered through the research. I feel it is necessary to speak to the results from each method before discussing them in the wider context of this study, which I do later in this report. Further, the results speak to the hours of voluntary time of participants and to honour their participation I feel it is best to include summaries of the full dataset. Underscoring the decision to include summaries for each method was the desire to minimise any perceptions of publication bias I may hold. Central to the bias-management plan I have adopted is a commitment to transparency at every stage of the research. This breakdown of the results by method seeks to meet that commitment.

6.1 Interview results

In this section, I summarise the responses during the 57 interviews conducted. This is done in two parts. First, I discuss the occurrence of themes and then I provide a summary of the sentiments of each of the 17 themes. The number of occurrences (n) is the number of times the theme came up in interview. In some interviews a theme came up multiple times and thus the total in some categories is greater than the total number of interviews conducted. The most common theme that emerged from the thematic analysis was widening participation ($n = 163$), followed by the role of staff in the Regional Hub ($n = 99$), and then partnerships between Regional Hubs and HEIs ($n = 64$). The full occurrence of themes is provided in Figure 2.

When themes are separated by participant type (community member, staff, student), variation in themes among participant types is evident. Apart from widening participation, each participant group discussed a different area more commonly in their interviews. Figure 3 highlights differences in the distribution of the occurrence of themes by participant type. In interpreting these data, it should be noted that the occurrences for both students and community will be lower than those for staff because the number of interviews in those two categories is smaller than the number of interviews conducted with staff.

Figure 2: Occurrences of themes in interviews

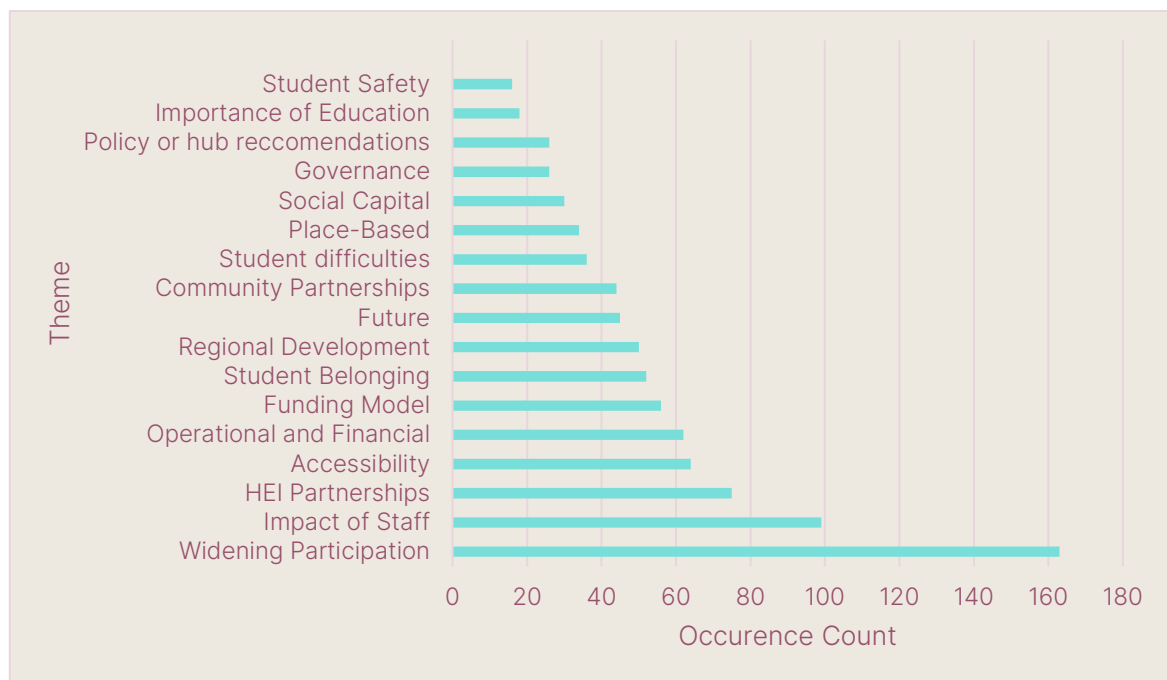
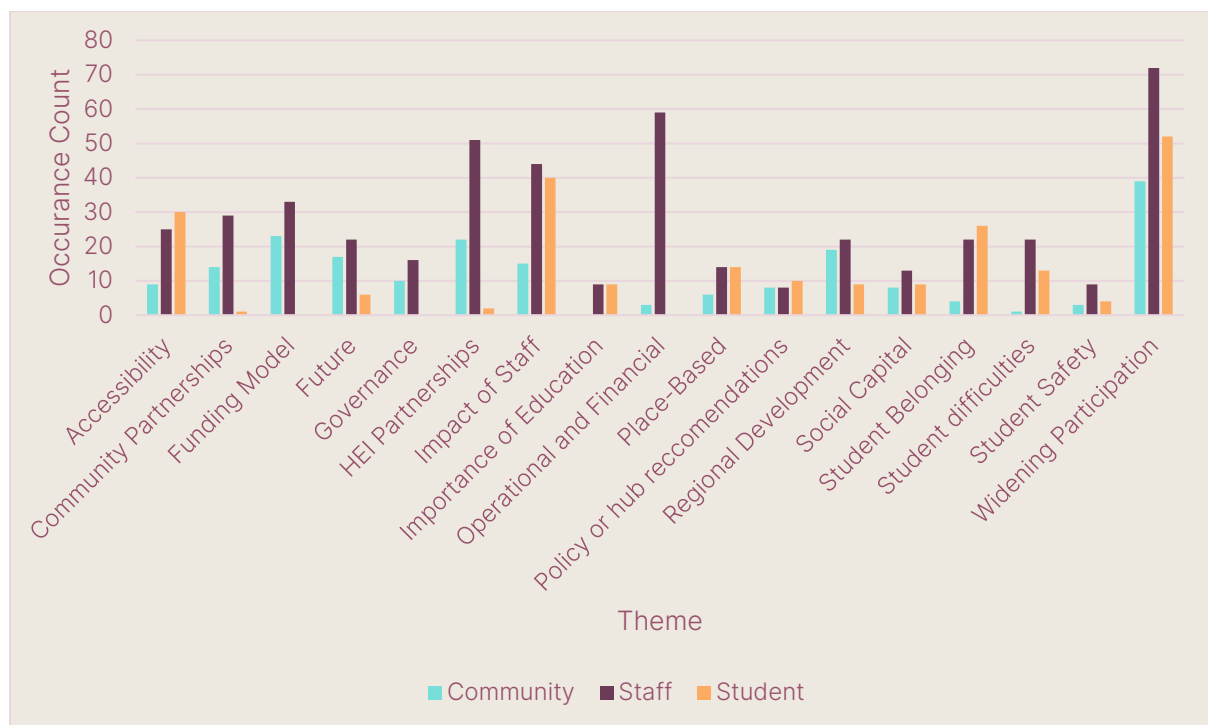


Figure 3: Occurrences of themes in interviews by participant type



For staff, the three most occurring themes were widening participation ($n = 72$), operational and financial matters ($n = 51$), and HEI partnerships ($n = 51$). For students, the three most occurring themes were widening participation ($n = 52$), impact of staff ($n = 40$), and accessibility ($n = 30$). For community members, they were widening participation ($n = 39$), funding model ($n = 23$) and HEI partnerships ($n = 22$). Below, we provide a summary of each of the 17 themes.

6.1.1 Summary of themes

To create these interview summaries, the thematically coded text from NVivo was input into Microsoft Copilot (<https://copilot.microsoft.com/>) a generative artificial intelligence (AI) tool.¹⁰ Co-pilot was prompted to analyse eighteen PDFs, one for each theme, and provide a one or two paragraph summary of each of them. Once Copilot had provided summaries of the text, each summary was copied into this report and then checked for accuracy against the comments themselves. All the Copilot summaries were edited for clarity and accuracy.

6.1.1.1 *Widening participation*

The interviews highlight the significant impact that Regional Hubs have in facilitating higher education study for those who have previously experienced barriers to such study (“widening participation”). Participants noted the essential support that Regional Hubs provide for students who might otherwise struggle with the challenges of distance education, such as limited internet access and lack of quiet study spaces. The services that Regional Hubs offer, such as free printing, dual-screen computers, and academic mentoring, were key factors identified to help students stay focused and achieve higher grades. The presence of Regional Hubs also fosters a sense of community and belonging, encouraging students to pursue higher education without having to leave their hometowns. This is particularly beneficial for mature-age students and those with family commitments, as it allows them to balance their studies with their personal responsibilities.

6.1.1.2 *Impact of staff*

Recurring comments regarding the impact of staff in the success of the Regional Hubs include their pivotal role in providing personalised support and fostering a welcoming environment. Staff members were praised—by members of all participant categories—for their dedication, approachability, and ability to build strong relationships with students, which significantly enhanced student retention and success. Staff were identified as being able to assist with the many needs of students, from navigating university systems and applications to offering emotional and motivational support. The presence of local staff who understand the community's needs and dynamics was highlighted as crucial, as they can offer tailored assistance and connect students with relevant resources. Additionally, staff members' efforts in outreach and engagement activities, such as organising events and maintaining communication, were seen as essential in promoting Regional Hubs and encouraging

¹⁰ UTS and Copilot have an enterprise agreement that ensures that data input into Copilot remain secure and are not used to further train large language models. Using Copilot like this is compliant with UTS privacy requirements and ensures that the data provided by participants remain secure (UTS, 2024). Further, the text was de-identified before being input into NVivo, and because the themes were exported from NVivo thematically, they are further removed from the original (de-identified) file in which they were uploaded. I acknowledge that the use of AI and large language model technologies can be controversial (Frank et al., 2024). However, the protocol implemented here shows that Copilot can be a tool that can be used carefully to conduct strenuous and labour-intensive manual activities to save valuable researcher time.

participation. To summarise, the commitment of staff and their proactive approach were viewed as fundamental to the positive outcomes and growth of Regional Hubs.

6.1.1.3 Partnerships with higher education institutions

The interviews revealed several strengths and challenges associated with partnerships between Regional Hubs and HEIs such as universities. Strengths include working with universities to enhance the ability of Regional Hubs to provide tailored support and resources to students, which in turn enhances their educational experience and success. Participants identified partnerships with several universities that had been particularly effective, offering workshops, placements, and academic support that benefited both students and the institutions. However, challenges persist, including a feeling that some universities can be lacking in their responsiveness and unwilling (or unable) to provide support, which can hinder student progress. Additionally, participants felt there was often a disconnect between university policies and the unique needs of RRR students, leading to frustration and barriers to access. The need for better communication and more proactive engagement from universities was highlighted as essential for improving these partnerships and ensuring they met the needs of all students.

6.1.1.4 Accessibility

Accessibility was a recurring theme for participants as a reason for student success. Their comments include the convenience of having a physical space to study, which helps students focus and avoid distractions at home. Many appreciated the extended hours, particularly the ability to study early in the morning and late at night, which is crucial for those balancing work and family commitments. The fact that some Regional Hubs are open from as early as 5am and as late as midnight allows students to fit their studies around their busy schedules. The availability of resources such as computers, printers, and kitchen facilities was also highlighted as essential. Additionally, the Regional Hubs provide a safe and supportive environment, with some students noting the importance of having a place where they felt comfortable and could bring their children if needed. The accessibility of staff for support and the ability to connect with other students were also mentioned as significant benefits.

6.1.1.5 Operational and financial

The interviews identified several operational and financial aspects of Regional Hubs, emphasising the importance of funding from the Commonwealth and local councils that supports core operations, staffing, and facilities. This highlights the challenges of managing multiple funding sources and the need for strategic planning to consolidate resources effectively. Staffing structures vary, with some Regional Hubs relying heavily on part-time and volunteer staff, while others have more robust full-time teams. Participants also discussed the importance of partnerships with local organisations and educational institutions to enhance service delivery and financial sustainability. Additionally, it addresses the logistical complexities of operating in remote areas, including the need for travel bursaries and accommodation arrangements for students.

6.1.1.6 Funding model

Interviewees expressed a range of feedback about the funding model. Many highlighted the reliance on Commonwealth funding and lack of state government support, despite the benefits that state-level institutions accrue from Regional Hubs. The shift from CSPs to partnership project funding has been a significant change, with some finding CSPs more

flexible and beneficial for leveraging university partnerships. Although many participants in the study operated under the CSP funding model, the new partnership funding model was seen as less flexible and more administratively burdensome.

There was also concern about inequities among funding cohorts, with the perception that earlier cohorts have a more advantageous funding arrangement. The need for more stable, long-term funding was emphasised, as the current three- and four-year funding cycles create uncertainty and hinder long-term planning. Additionally, the importance of funding for widening participation and community engagement activities was noted, with many Regional Hubs struggling to support these critical functions under the current funding model. The general sentiment of the interviews, which is supported by the survey responses discussed next, suggests a need for a more flexible, equitable, and sustainable funding approach to support the diverse needs of Regional Hubs.

6.1.1.7 Student belonging

The interviews show that by using Regional Hubs, individuals develop a sense of student identity. Many participants highlighted the social connections they formed, which helped alleviate the isolation often felt in online and postgraduate studies. Regional Hubs provide a communal space where students can interact, share experiences, and support each other, creating a sense of community and belonging. This social aspect is particularly important for those in niche or postgraduate programs who might not have peers in their immediate environment. Regional Hubs also offer a supportive environment where students can engage with staff and other students, enhancing their educational experience and sense of purpose. Additionally, Regional Hubs help integrate students into the local community, providing a network of support that extends beyond academic needs.

6.1.1.8 Regional development

Participants discussed the way that Regional Hubs interact with the local and regional economy. They emphasised that Regional Hubs play a crucial role in addressing local skills shortages by providing education and training tailored to the needs of the community, particularly in roles in the health, education, and social services industries. This includes upskilling the existing workforce and offering pathways for young people to gain qualifications without leaving their hometowns. Regional Hubs help retain local talent, reducing brain drain to larger cities, and supporting local businesses by creating a more skilled workforce.

Additionally, Regional Hubs contribute to economic development by attracting new residents who seek educational opportunities and by fostering innovation through partnerships with local industries. The integration of Regional Hubs with local councils and regional development organisations, particularly through their governance models and community partnerships, further enhances their impact, ensuring that the training provided aligns with regional economic needs and opportunities.

6.1.1.9 Future

All participants had a broadly similar vision for the future of Regional Hubs: they wanted to see expanded services, increased roles, and deepened community and education partnerships. Many expressed a desire for Regional Hubs to become central to their communities, offering more diverse educational opportunities and becoming integral parts of local strategic planning. There was a strong emphasis on the need for financial stability and expansion of physical spaces to accommodate growing numbers of students. Participants

also highlighted the importance of integrating Regional Hubs more closely with local schools, businesses, and healthcare providers to address skill shortages and support local economic development.

Additionally, some Regional Hubs articulated a vision where they would offer more classroom-based education, virtual classrooms, and specialised support for students with diverse needs. However, other Regional Hubs described a future whereby they decidedly did not offer classroom-based education, instead continuing to support students as they do in their current capacity. Overall, the future of Regional Hubs—as suggested by the Regional Hubs themselves—should have a focus on growth, financial sustainability, and deeper community engagement.

6.1.1.10 Community partnerships

The importance of community partnerships was a recurring theme for participants. They emphasised that these partnerships are crucial for the success and sustainability of Regional Hubs. Many Regional Hubs are supported by local councils that provide financial backing, facilities, and strategic support. Partnerships with local industries and businesses are also vital, as they help align educational programs with regional workforce needs, ensuring that students gain relevant skills and employment opportunities. Additionally, collaborations with schools and community organisations enhance outreach and engagement, making education more accessible and tailored to local needs. Participants highlighted the role of Regional Hubs in fostering a sense of community, breaking intergenerational unemployment cycles, and supporting local economic development. These partnerships enable Regional Hubs to be responsive to community needs, create meaningful educational pathways, and contribute to the social and economic fabric of their regions.

6.1.1.11 Student difficulties

Students, staff, and community members all expressed the vast range of difficulties that students face. These challenges include balancing study with work and family commitments, financial pressures, lack of local childcare, and the high cost of travel and accommodation for placements. Many students struggle with digital literacy, especially those who have been out of formal education for a long time or have never used computers extensively. Mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, also significantly impact students' ability to focus and succeed. Additionally, students with learning difficulties or neurodiversity face unique challenges in accessing and completing their studies. Regional Hubs help students overcome these obstacles by providing a supportive environment, access to technology and internet, tutoring and academic support, and a community space where students can study without distractions. Regional Hubs also offer practical assistance, such as helping students navigate financial aid and providing transport solutions. By addressing these diverse needs, Regional Hubs play a crucial role in enabling students to pursue and succeed in their education.

6.1.1.12 Place-based

The physical place of a Regional Hub was a recurring theme in the interviews. Participants highlighted the importance of having a dedicated space for studying, which provides a distraction-free environment with reliable internet and access to necessary resources such as printers and computers. Many appreciated the availability of private rooms for focused study and exams, as well as communal areas that foster a sense of community and support. Regional Hubs offer amenities such as kitchenettes, heating, and air conditioning, making

them comfortable places to spend long hours. The location of Regional Hubs is also significant; being centrally located in town makes them accessible and visible, encouraging more people to use the facilities. For some, a Regional Hub's presence in the main street is crucial for community engagement and visibility. Additionally, Regional Hubs provide a safe and quiet space away from home distractions, which is particularly valuable for those living in crowded or noisy households. In sum, the physical space of Regional Hubs plays a vital role in supporting students' educational journeys by providing a conducive environment for learning and community interaction.

6.1.1.13 Social capital

Social capital refers to the networks, relationships, and norms that facilitate collective action and cooperation within a community. The interview results highlight how the social capital of staff and community members involved with Regional Hubs directly contributes to their success. Staff members leverage their local connections and relationships to promote Regional Hubs, engage with students, and foster partnerships with local organisations. For example, staff members who are well known in the community can effectively spread the word about a Regional Hub's services, leading to increased enrolment and participation. Word-of-mouth recommendations from trusted community members play a crucial role in attracting new students and building trust in a Regional Hub's offerings. Additionally, the familiarity and trust that local staff have with the community enable them to provide tailored support and connect students with relevant local resources and services.

In RRR Australia the importance of social capital is enhanced because of the smaller population base. In these areas, personal relationships and local knowledge are vital for effective communication and community engagement. The smaller population means that social networks are often more tightly knit, and information spreads quickly through informal channels. This close-knit nature of regional communities allows Regional Hubs to build strong, supportive networks that are essential for their success. The interview results underscore the significance of employing local staff who understand the community's needs and can leverage their social capital to create a welcoming and effective learning environment.

6.1.1.14 Governance

Participants highlighted a range of experiences with the governance arrangements of their own Regional Hubs and identified areas where governance structures could be strengthened. Some Regional Hubs operate under a single legal entity that covers multiple regions, which helps streamline operations but can also create challenges in ensuring local representation and understanding of community needs. For example, the board of one Regional Hub requires board members to live in the catchment area and possess specific skillsets, such as financial management and strategic planning, to ensure they are well equipped to govern effectively. Other Regional Hubs are governed by local organisations or local government associations, which can provide stability but may also lack specific expertise in education. Several participants noted the importance of having diverse and skilled board members who understand the unique challenges of not-for-profit governance and the specific needs of regional communities.

The involvement of local Aboriginal people and cultural leaders in governance was highlighted as a positive example, providing culturally appropriate leadership and ensuring that programs are tailored to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Some Regional Hubs have successfully recruited board members with a mix of professional backgrounds, including business, law, and education, which has helped them navigate complex governance issues and drive strategic planning. However, there were also concerns about the effectiveness of some boards, particularly when members lack relevant experience or when governance structures are not well defined. Generally, participants emphasised the need for strong, locally representative governance structures that can adapt to the evolving needs of their communities and support the long-term success of Regional Hubs.

6.1.1.15 Regional Hubs and policy recommendations

Participants proposed a range of operational recommendations. For example, they emphasised the need for more proactive engagement and networking opportunities for students, suggesting the creation of student associations and more community participation events.

Participants also made policy recommendations. Some recommended increasing the visibility and awareness of the RUSH program through better communication strategies. There were calls for integrating vocational and non-accredited training more effectively and ensuring that Regional Hubs are responsive to the needs of their communities. Participants also highlighted the importance of having regional higher education facilitators in schools to support career development, and the need for centralised databases to streamline data collection and management. Additionally, they stressed the importance of incorporating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and ensuring that funding supports these initiatives. These recommendations have been incorporated into the recommendations of the report to enhance the effectiveness and reach of Regional Hubs.

6.1.1.16 Importance of education

The importance of higher education and the role that Regional Hubs play in fostering cultures of education, was another recurring theme from participants. Many emphasised that education is fundamental for student empowerment and breaking cycles of disadvantage. They shared how Regional Hubs provide crucial support and resources, making higher education visible and accessible to those in remote areas. Participants noted that Regional Hubs help build a culture of learning within communities by offering a welcoming space for study, organising educational events, and integrating cultural knowledge. Regional Hubs also play a significant role in motivating individuals to pursue further education and career development, thereby enhancing their personal and professional lives. Overall, Regional Hubs were seen as vital in promoting the value of education and creating opportunities for lifelong learning in regional areas.

6.1.1.17 Student safety

Student safety was a recurring theme from participants—including how students feel both safe or unsafe—and from staff on how they can and do ensure student safety. Many students expressed feeling safe at Regional Hubs, particularly appreciating the security systems, lockable study areas, and the presence of staff. For example, some students mentioned feeling comfortable studying late at night because of the security measures in place. However, there were also areas identified for improvement, such as ensuring consistent access to security systems and addressing concerns about physical and emotional safety. Staff highlighted the importance of creating a welcoming and secure environment, with some Regional Hubs implementing measures like CCTV, restricted access for under-18s, and clear communication during emergencies. Notably, participants

said that student safety is crucial, and many discussed ongoing efforts to enhance security and address all aspects of student safety.

To conclude the summaries of the interviews, the 57 participants expressed a wide range of opinions in over 40 hours of audio recordings. Therefore, these summaries represent a high-level overview of the sentiments expressed. Many of these sentiments are like the survey responses and my ethnographic observations, as discussed in the next section.

6.2 Summary of survey responses

Three major themes appeared in the survey responses: university partnerships, widening participation, and the future. These three themes are discussed in this section, but I begin with a demographic breakdown of the participants to provide further context on the RUSH program.

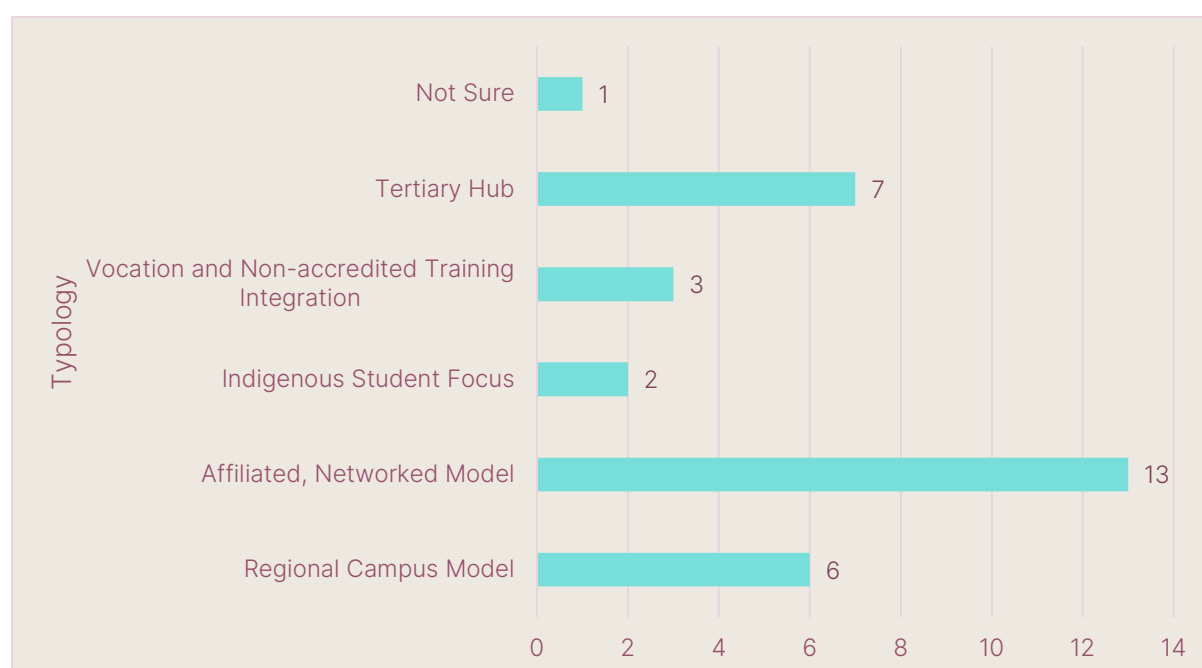
There were 26 participants to the survey, of which most ($n = 14$) belonged to Cohort One. A full breakdown is presented in Table 4. Note that the total number of responses to this question is greater than the total number of participants because some Regional Hubs belong to multiple funding rounds for different sites. For example, four Cohort One Regional Hubs indicated that they also belonged to other funding cohorts.

Table 4: Count of survey participants by Cohort

Cohort Number	Count
Cohort 1 (2019)	14
Cohort 2 (2021)	7
Cohort 3 (2023)	5
Cohort 4 (2024)	5

Participants were asked to identify which typology (or typologies) best described their Regional Hub, based on the classification outlined in Table 1. All but one participant was familiar with the relevant typology or typologies. The affiliated, networked model ($n = 13$) had the most responses, followed by the tertiary hub ($n = 7$), and regional campus models ($n = 6$). The full responses are summarised in Figure 4. Note that participants could select multiple responses.

Figure 4: Typology of survey participants



When asked what services their Regional Hubs offered, the most common response from participants was course navigation or enrolment assistance. The second most mentioned service was academic advising (see Table 5). When asked what other services they provided, two Regional Hubs said they offered pastoral support and services, and another two said they offered some of these services on an ad hoc basis, or that they were working to implement some of them. One participant noted that their Regional Hub directly offered some of these services, while their parent organisation offered some of the others.

Table 5: Count of services offered by the participating Regional Hubs

Service	Count
Academic advising (general or broad support such as writing feedback)	23
Career counselling (by an accredited career counsellor)	3
Course navigation or enrolment assistance	25
Facilitation of placements or work-integrated learning	11
Local employment and workforce development networking or mentoring	18
Specific First Nations or Indigenous support	9
Tutoring or mentorship (field- or subject-specific advice)	11
Widening participation activities (for example, outreach, first year transitions, pre-access programs)	21

6.2.1 University partnerships

Participants were asked a range of questions about the nature of their partnerships with universities, and the perceived benefit they derived from these partnerships. Responses to these questions suggest that participants frequently collaborated with university practitioners, and saw their non-financial university partnerships as more important for widening participation than their financial partnerships, although they found value in both. Further, both financial and non-financial partnerships contributed to the success of their respective Regional Hubs.

When asked how frequently their Regional Hub collaborated with university practitioners, over half of the respondents indicated a frequent collaboration. A majority ($n = 15$) of the participants indicated that they often collaborated, and a small number ($n = 2$) indicated that they always collaborated with university practitioners. Seven Regional Hubs said they sometimes collaborated, and two said that they rarely did. Zero respondents indicated that they never collaborated. This indicates a high level of partnership between most of the participating Regional Hubs and room to grow partnerships with those that did not collaborate frequently.

Participants were asked to indicate the importance of their financial and non-financial partnerships with universities on a sliding scale, where 1 represents not important and 5 represents very important. The results are presented in Table 6. The analysis shows that non-financial university partnerships were rated as slightly more important (mean = 3.23) than financial university partnerships (mean = 2.81) in the success of Regional Hubs. However, responses regarding financial partnerships exhibited greater variability (SD = 1.71) than those regarding non-financial partnerships (SD = 1.55), indicating slightly more diverse opinions on their importance.

Table 6: Importance of financial and non-financial partnerships between Regional Hubs and universities

Survey question	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Variance
How important are financial university partnerships in the success of your Hub?	0.00	5.00	2.81	1.71	2.92
How important are non-financial university partnerships in the success of your Hub?	0.00	5.00	3.23	1.55	2.41

Participants indicated a range of financial partnerships between their Regional Hubs and universities, with the most common being CSP funding ($n = 18$), followed by RPPPP ($n = 12$), and Cohort Three Regional Hubs Partnership Funding ($n = 2$). A further two Regional Hubs indicated other sources of funding through financial service level agreements and two were unsure of their financial arrangements. Four Regional Hubs had “other” funding arrangements and two of these were still working on establishing their financial partnerships: one with a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institution; and the other that had allocated CSPs but was not seeing the financial benefit of this allocation.

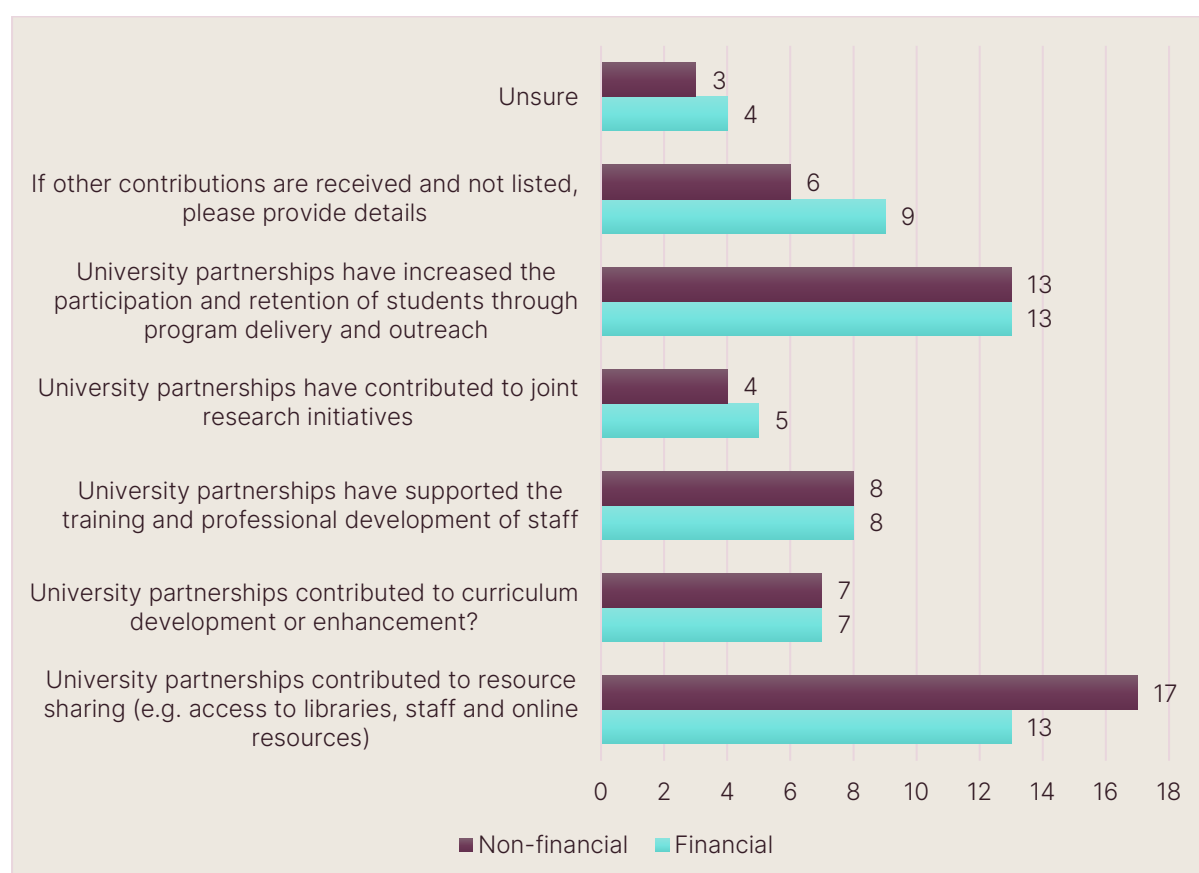
Participants were asked what role financial and non-financial partnerships played in the success of Regional Hubs, and the two most selected responses across both financial and non-financial partnerships were resource sharing between the Regional Hub and the

university (for example, access to libraries, staff, and online resources); and that these financial partnerships had increased participation and retention of students through universities delivering programs and conducting outreach programs. Interestingly, participants indicated a greater perceived value in the non-financial sharing of resources between universities and Regional Hubs ($n = 17$) than financial sharing ($n = 13$). The full results related to this question are presented in Figure 5.

When given the option to mention aspects of financial partnerships not listed in the survey, participants provided a range of responses, including “money”, “staffing events and programs”, and “CSP funding allows for diversification of our services according to local need”. When asked about non-financial partnerships, responses included universities sharing professional development with the Regional Hubs, widening participation activities, and networks.

I asked participants if they currently offered supported degrees, and if they did, what percentage of their students were enrolled in such a program. Supported degrees are a model where universities and Regional Hubs work in partnership to deliver courses. The definition of supported degrees is generally contested and may not have been fully understood by participants, as indicated by one who said, “I’m not 100% sure what supported degrees mean”. Therefore, not all responses relating to supported degrees may be accurate.

Figure 5: The role of financial and non-financial university partnerships in the success of Regional Hubs



Most Regional Hubs surveyed said that they did not offer supported degrees ($n = 14$, 53%), while seven said they currently offered them, four said they planned to in the future, and one Regional Hub said they had offered them in the past. Those Regional Hubs that indicated they currently had supported degrees varied in the number of such students using their hubs:

- Two Regional Hubs had 1–25% of their students enrolled in supported degrees.
- Two Regional Hubs had 26–50% of their students enrolled in supported degrees.
- One Regional Hub had 51–75% of their students enrolled in supported degrees.
- Two Regional Hubs had 76–100% of their students enrolled in supported degrees.

Regional Hubs who offer supported degrees say they do so to address specific community needs and skills shortages, such as nursing and early childhood education. These Regional Hubs had established partnerships with universities to provide local access to higher education, offering courses like the Registered Nurse degree and micro-credential units. Some supported degrees were enabling pathways where the micro-credentials offered were for professional development. One Regional Hub explicitly mentioned aligning its tertiary study opportunities with regional workforce requirements, offering supported courses online with extensive support services.

Regional Hubs that did not offer supported degrees identified various barriers. These included the dispersed population of the regions in which they were located, making it difficult to achieve scale, and the lack of university partnerships. Other Regional Hubs faced significant barriers to entry, such as language, literacy, and numeracy issues, and focused instead on building education pathways. Some Regional Hubs maintained an ethos of institutional agnosticism, which did not align with offering supported degrees. Additionally, small population bases and the centralised nature of universities in some areas made it difficult to support degrees.

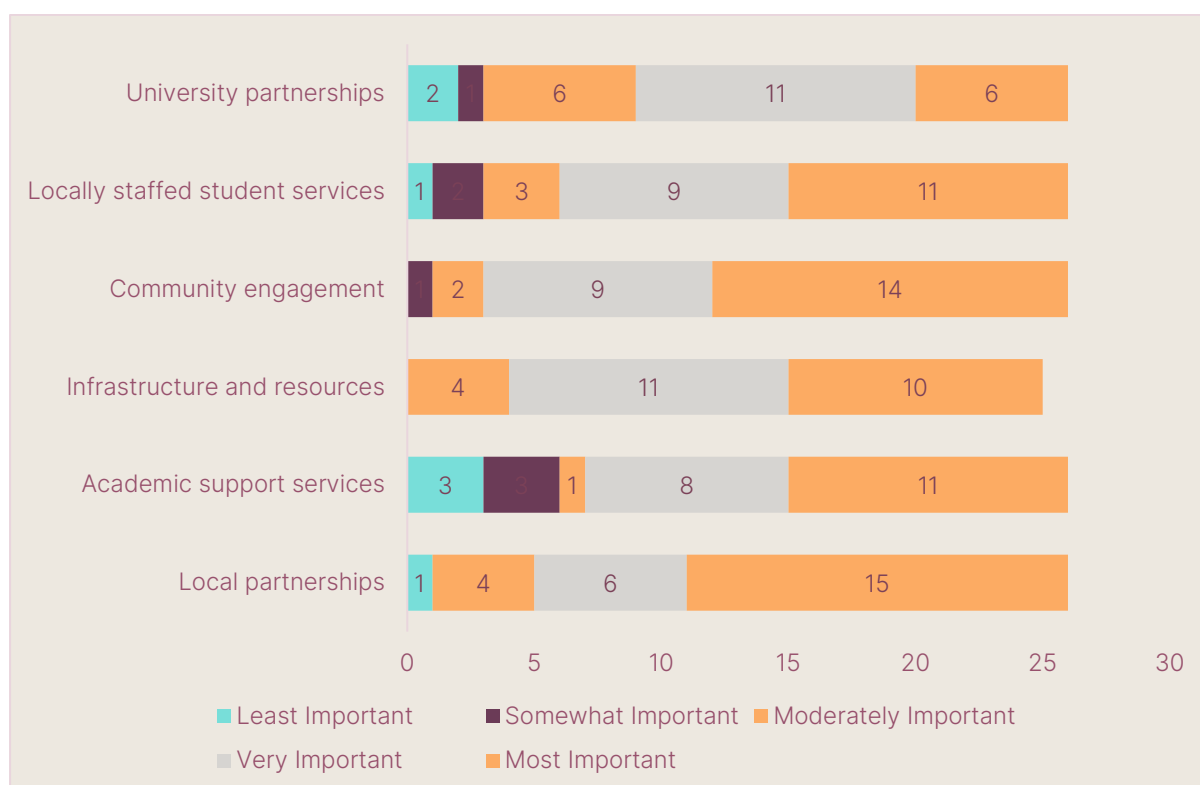
6.2.2 Widening participation

Participants were asked to rate the following six elements in terms of their importance for the success of their Regional Hub in widening participation:

- | | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Local partnerships | 4. Community engagement |
| 2. Academic support services | 5. Locally staffed student services |
| 3. Infrastructure and resources | 6. University partnerships. |

On a scale where 1 equalled not important, and 5 equalled the most important, participants overwhelmingly ranked local partnerships and community engagements as the most important factors in their success of widening participation. Local partnerships had 15 “most important” responses, and 6 “very important” responses, while community engagement had 14 and 9 in their respective categories. Infrastructure and resources were the most agreed-upon element of widening participation, with all participants indicating that it was at least moderately important. University partnerships had the fewest “most important” responses ($n = 6$), and the highest number of middle-ground responses ($n = 6$). Academic support services ranked lowest in terms of “least important” and “somewhat important” responses, with a combined six responses. A full breakdown of these results is provided in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Participants' views of the importance of factors in widening participation



When responses to this question are cross-tabulated against whether Regional Hubs offer supported degrees, there is a significant difference in attitudes to the importance of university partnerships as an element of widening participation. For example, the average response to university partnerships was 3.7 for all respondents, but for Regional Hubs that offered supported degrees the average was 4.4. This emphasises the importance of the relationship between Regional Hubs offering supported degrees and universities, and how those Regional Hubs that did not offer supported degrees did not view universities as widening participation.

When asked to what extent participants agreed with the statement “Our Hub significantly contributes to the academic success and retention of regional students”, 73% of respondents ($n = 19$) strongly agreed with the statement. A further six indicated that they agreed with the statement, and one strongly disagreed.

Survey participants were also asked what policy change they thought would enable them to enhance the effectiveness of their Regional Hub’s ability to widen participation. The answers to this open-ended question were coded thematically, which showed that of the 21 valid responses to this question, over half ($n = 13$) related to funding policy. A further five related to expanding the mandate and services of the Regional Hub program, and three related to partnerships with HEIs.

Funding-related comments largely related to RUSH program funding mechanisms, and the comments present an array of suggestions to change or keep various aspects of different funding mechanisms. Some would like to remove CSPs entirely and move towards partnership and RPPPP funding, while others would like to remove partnership and RPPPP funding and move back to CSP funding. Others mentioned entirely new funding arrangements, including the use of historical student data to which to benchmark their

funding and other direct funding arrangements. This array of funding-related policy suggestions is evidence of the diverse needs of Regional Hubs and could be a side effect of the evolving funding environment through different cohorts.

Within the expanding mandate and services of the RUSH program theme, there was again a diverse array of perspectives offered. Some participants wanted there to be a widening of scope of the RUSH program to allow for more vocational and non-accredited students, while many wanted an increase in widening participation programs that could be tailored and delivered in community, as well as greater access to accredited career guidance counsellors. Policy suggestions related to HEI partnerships include more genuine partnerships from universities as well as funding arrangements that bypass universities completely. The overarching theme of the responses to this question can best be summarised by the following participant quote:

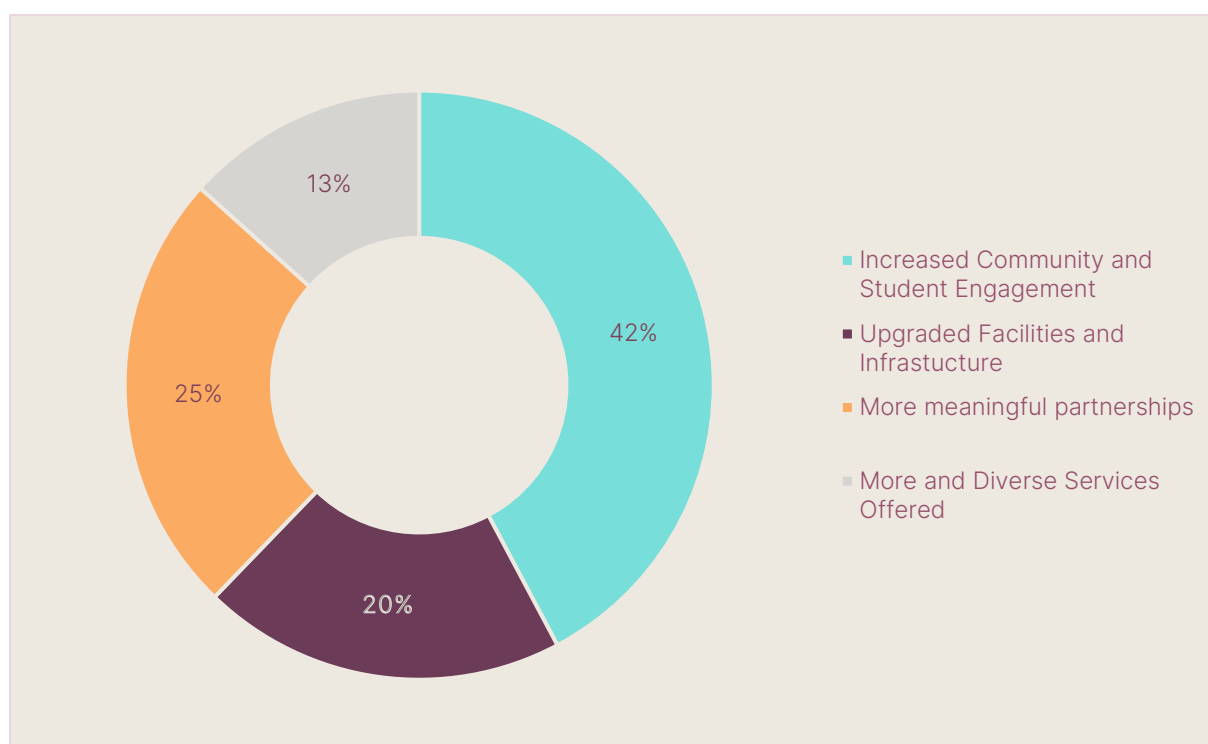
Widening participation is integral to creating equity for remote/regional Australia and needs to be adequately resourced.

6.2.3 The future

Participants were asked two questions about the future of Regional Hubs. We first asked about their dreams and aspirations for their Regional Hub, and where they saw it in five years. The second question asked what the Regional Hubs required to actualise their dreams. Through a thematic analysis of these comments, the following four key themes emerged, with their frequencies shown in Figure 7:

1. increased community and student engagement, including a growing number of students using Regional Hubs
2. new or upgraded facilities and infrastructure, including new Regional Hubs under their established organisation
3. more meaningful partnerships with HEI and community organisations
4. an increase in services offered, including new services or an expansion of existing services.

Figure 7: Aspirations of participants as indicated through the survey



Regarding increased community and student engagement—the most frequent theme—one participant said that they would like to engage more with Aboriginal communities and Torres Strait Islanders in their region, and to change the culture of higher education in their region through increasing the number and diversity of people who use their Regional Hub. Increasing engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students was a recurring sentiment in this theme; for example, two participants said that they wanted to grow the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students using their Regional Hubs to develop their language, literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy skills. Many participants indicated that they wanted to grow the number of students who use Regional Hubs; for example, one said that they wanted to “Have over 500 students with more than 90% graduate and 30% work in the local community”. Another participant echoed this sentiment, saying that they wanted to increase the number of students using the Regional Hub to “over 200 students. To have a strong alumni of graduates working in the region”.

In the theme of “more meaningful partnerships”, most participants indicated that they aspired to have more meaningful partnerships with a range of stakeholders including HEIs, community organisations, and regional development organisations. For example, one participant said they wanted to “have partnerships embedded with higher education institutions, local business/industry/organisations/community groups that provide pathways for locals to cater for the needs of the individual student and also the workforce needs of the community”.

The third theme, expanding and diversifying services, contained a range of aspirations. Many participants wanted to have dedicated accredited career development advisors, while others wanted to run specific widening participation programs in local primary and secondary schools. Some participants discussed a desire to have courses delivered at their Regional Hubs; for example, one participant stated that “We would like to see more content being

taught out of our hubs, and with that an increased cohort of local students". The last theme was new or upgraded facilities and infrastructure. This is a broad category but largely related to increased physical space in Regional Hubs, better facilities, and more staff. One participant summarised this theme well:

Staffing to include: a full-time administrator/manager, a full-time career development practitioner/academic advisor, a full-time Indigenous Education Officer or an Equity Officer, a part-time student engagement/widening participation officer; bigger premises with more IT facilities.

Other participants indicated how they wished to expand their Regional Hubs to new sites, or set up satellite hubs so they could further their reach and social impact. It is difficult to see these four themes related to the future in isolation of one another, as they are all deeply intertwined. For example, increased and diversified services being offered alongside new or upgraded facilities and infrastructure could increase student engagement. Similarly, more meaningful partnerships would be formed through increased community engagement.

Participants were asked what they needed to actualise these aspirations, and a large variety of responses was recorded. Much of what is required for Regional Hubs to actualise these aspirations relate to funding: for increased staff to deliver widening participation or career advice; for professional development; for capital works; for new resources; for better marketing material; and generally increased levels of funding. Alongside funding, participants indicated having access to a central bank of resources and policies, a strengthened RUSH Network, and better university, community, and government partnerships.

To conclude this summary of the survey results, I leave the reader with a quote from the survey that speaks to the role of staff in Regional Hubs, and the impact that both staff and Regional Hubs have on people. The emphasis is my own, but this quote encapsulates the sentiment of many of the participants as demonstrated through the survey. To give the reader context, participants were asked to share a brief success story or significant outcome, and this is what one participant wrote. Some details have been omitted for anonymisation:

While waiting to attend a meeting [...] I encountered a student who appeared to be in distress, crying and trying to hide her face. Quietly, I introduced myself and asked if she wanted to talk. When she told me her name, I recognised that she was one of the first students enrolled at that site, even before it had formally opened! A committed mature-aged student nearing completion of [her] degree, she was surprised I remembered who she was and then told me about her long-term relationship breakdown and how she couldn't imagine her next steps.

The meeting was postponed an hour as the [volunteers], and I listened to her life experiences and shared our own. When we finished our conversation, she was signed up to participate as a student subcommittee representative, and she had made plans to meet with our Learning Skills Advisor [...] and she knew that she would overcome this obstacle and finish her degree. We all went home a few hours late that day, but our conversation on the drive back [...] was full of satisfaction and possibilities. **We hadn't been sidetracked from our Study Hub work that day: our students ARE our work.** Those reminders come when we need them most.

6.3 Summary of ethnographic observations

The ethnographic observations conducted across the Regional Hubs during the fieldwork were a critical component of this research, offering contextual insights that complemented interview and survey data. These observations provided a deeper understanding of how place-based strategies are implemented, highlighting the ways in which Regional Hubs contribute to educational access, community connection, and widening participation. However, maintaining participant anonymity posed challenges, as the diversity of Regional Hub environments made it difficult to summarise findings without potentially identifying specific locations. Additionally, the timing of visits influenced the observations, with some taking place during periods of low student engagement, complicating efforts to assess participation levels comprehensively.

Observations were structured around key areas: physical environment and infrastructure; staff and operations; student engagement and activities; community involvement and partnerships; and cultural and social atmosphere. The physical environments of the Regional Hubs varied widely, from centrally located buildings in business districts to more isolated and temporary facilities. Common features included study areas, kitchens, and security measures such as swipe card access. While some Regional Hubs benefited from central locations and clear signage, others experienced reduced recognition because of limited visible branding or co-location that diluted their prominence and functionality. Although some of the infrastructure was not originally built for educational purposes, the Regional Hubs had limited existing infrastructure to occupy. As a result, they adapted their spaces to meet local needs, making the best use of available facilities. Space limitations and infrastructure damage from weather events were recurring challenges, with some Regional Hubs needing or undertaking upgrades and expansions to improve functionality.

Staffing structures were typically comprised of managers, academic advisors, and community engagement officers. Staff with local knowledge and strong community connections played a significant role in Regional Hub operations, supporting culturally responsive practices and fostering community trust. In communities with significant Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, the employment of First Nations staff was particularly important in ensuring cultural inclusivity. Operational challenges were almost exclusively linked to limited staffing and infrastructure. Observations indicated that staff frequently engaged in relational navigation, learning alongside students rather than acting as subject-matter experts. This approach contributed to building trust and fostering positive student–staff relationships, reinforcing the role of staff as key enablers of student engagement and success.

Student engagement levels varied across Regional Hubs, influenced by accessibility, availability of dedicated spaces, infrastructure suitability, and the timing of fieldwork relative to academic calendars. Common engagement activities included workshops, social events, and academic support sessions. Widening participation activities were also observed, often involving multiple university and community stakeholders, as well as industry partners. These activities aimed to expand access to higher education and build educational pipelines in the local communities. Regional Hubs with purpose-built or well-adapted spaces and targeted activities generally enjoyed higher levels of student participation, while those without such facilities experienced lower engagement. The timing of observations further

influenced these findings, making it difficult to determine whether lower participation levels were due to structural limitations or temporal factors.

Community involvement and partnerships featured prominently in the observations. Collaborations with local councils, universities, and industry partners supported educational pathways and community engagement initiatives. In many cases, these partnerships facilitated widening participation by aligning educational offerings with local needs and employment opportunities. However, some Regional Hubs faced challenges in securing sustained partnerships with HEIs. Community partnerships were particularly visible in Regional Hubs operating from community-owned infrastructure, reflecting strong place-based connections and contributing to perceptions of long-term sustainability.

The cultural and social atmosphere in the Regional Hubs consistently reflected a commitment to inclusivity and belonging. Many Regional Hubs incorporated First Nations artwork and used local Aboriginal languages for room names, signalling an acknowledgment of Country and cultural inclusivity. Signage supporting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and other diverse sexual orientations and gender identity (LGBTQIA+) inclusion, as well as the availability of mental health and wellbeing resources were also common features. Social spaces, such as kitchens and communal areas, were designed to encourage student interaction, contributing to a supportive and welcoming environment.

Additional observations highlighted a broader cultural shift in how education is perceived in regional communities. Informal conversations during site visits—in local shops, cafes, and community spaces—revealed a growing aspiration to position education as a central element of community identity. In regions where higher education had not traditionally been seen as accessible or integral, Regional Hubs appeared to be contributing to a shift in perception, with education increasingly viewed as a viable and embedded aspect of community life.

These observations suggest that Regional Hubs play an important role in shaping environments where higher education is normalised and valued. The presence of physical and cultural markers of belonging supports the development of educational identities in these communities. While some Regional Hubs operated in infrastructure not originally designed for educational purposes, the adaptive use of available facilities demonstrated resilience and commitment to meeting local needs. By fostering environments where education is visible, accessible, and culturally inclusive, Regional Hubs contribute to the broader cultural reimagining of education as an achievable and desirable pursuit in regional and remote areas.

To conclude the section, Table 7 collates the key themes and sorts them by method. These themes serve as the basis of the recommendations presented in the front matter of this report, the practitioner guide in Appendix B, and the four findings of this research, discussed in the next section.

Table 7: Themes from each of the methods of study

Interview	Survey	Observations
Widening participation	Widening participation	Physical environment and infrastructure
Future	Future	Staff and operations
Partnerships with HEIs	University partnerships	Community involvement and partnerships
Accessibility		Student engagement and activities
Operational and financial		Cultural and social atmosphere
Funding model		
Student belonging		
Regional development		
Impact of staff		
Community partnerships		
Student difficulties		
Place-based		
Social capital		
Governance		
Regional hub and policy recommendations		
Importance of education		
Student safety		

7. Findings

In this section, I discuss the four findings of this research, three of which address the main objective of the research regarding assessing the efficacy of the Regional Hubs in widening participation. The fourth finding does not necessarily relate to widening participation, but it recurred so frequently that a separate finding is included. Whereas in the previous section I provided a summary of the results from each of the three methods, in this section I view the results as a corpus of evidence and—where appropriate—contextualise them against the wider literature on Regional Hubs.

The first of the four findings is that Regional Hubs do widen participation. This finding is supported by both the data collected through this research and the postcode analysis presented in Section 4.4. The finding that Regional Hubs widen participation has two supplementary aspects: 1) access and place-based factors enhance the widening participation power of Regional Hubs; and 2) through using Regional Hubs, students develop a sense of belonging that helps to create the student identity, both in the individual and in a community serviced by a Regional Hub.

The second finding is that staff play an essential role in the widening participation functions of Regional Hubs. Staff widen participation through developing self-efficacy and resilience skills within students, making them more likely to succeed in their studies. Further, many staff and students commented that there is a friendly and collegial relationship between them, which in turn impacts the identity fusion as described in Finding One.

The third finding is that the partnerships that Regional Hubs have enable their widening participation activities. This research has identified three key partnerships that influence a Regional Hub's ability to widen participation: partnerships between universities and Regional Hubs, partnerships between communities and Regional Hubs, and partnerships between other education providers and Regional Hubs. Each of these partnerships has its own unique strengths and challenges that influence widening participation in their own unique ways. For example, partnerships between universities and Regional Hubs may widen participation through the increased availability of resources, which is a characteristic unique to the university–Regional Hub partnership.

The last finding is that Regional Hubs contribute to prosperous communities. They do this by developing skillsets to meet labour shortages in local workforces, which has the additional benefit of easing pressure on the limited housing stock in RRR areas. This is because RRR communities can “train their own” rather than having to get external candidates to fill vacancies, who would also require housing. Further, I suggest that Regional Hubs contribute to prosperous communities by reducing the “brain drain” that many RRR communities experience. Regional Hubs do this by enabling those who wish to study to stay in community, instead of having to leave for metropolitan areas.

7.1 Finding One: Regional University Study Hubs widen participation

Widening participation is a core part of the RUSH program, as evidenced in the funding conditions for each Regional Hub as well as other government documents, such as the Accord (Australian Universities Accord Panel, 2023), the Auditor-General's report *Access and Participation Programs for Regional and Remote Students* (Australian National Audit Office, 2023), and information from the Department of Education (2024d) itself.¹¹ Despite this, there is little evidence regarding whether the Regional Hubs do in fact widen participation, and of mechanisms that might facilitate widening participation. In this section, I first recapitulate the definition of widening participation I have adopted, before demonstrating through the evidence collected during this study and other sources that Regional Hubs do widen participation. As part of this, I have separated out the different enabling aspects of widening participation (access, place-based, etc.). Although for the purposes of this report these factors are separated into three unique enabling aspects, they are in fact deeply intertwined, as is evident throughout this section.

It is useful to make a distinction here between widening participation efforts and actual widening participation. Where the former denotes attempts to bring equity in the wider education sector (for example, outreach activity), widening participation in the context of this report is about an actual increase in the participation of students from RRR areas to levels of the broader Australian population (Grant-Smith et al., 2020).

To remind the reader, the postcode analysis presented in Section 4.4 suggests that areas within a 30-minute drive of a Regional Hub (where most users of Regional Hubs reside) experienced a greater increase in tertiary student enrolments than did regional areas with no Regional Hub. For example, between 2011 and 2016—prior to implementation of the RUSH program—areas in which Cohort One Regional Hubs were later introduced experienced a decline of 7% in enrolments. However, once the program had been set up and funded (2016–21), areas with Regional Hubs experienced an increase in enrolments. For example, areas with Cohort One hubs enjoyed a 24% increase in tertiary student numbers, greatly exceeding the 9% Australia average and the 8% for the control group (areas with no Regional Hub yet established). It is my understanding that forthcoming data from the Department of Education's RUSH evaluation will show a similar trend. To link this back to widening participation as defined throughout this research, these data suggest that Regional Hubs promote an increase in the number of students from RRR backgrounds enrolling in higher education and thus are widening participation.

The role of Regional Hubs in widening participation can also be seen in the interview data, particularly from student participants. As previously established, widening participation was the most common theme in the interviews but the impact of the Regional Hubs is particularly evident in data from the students themselves. For example, one student who used a Regional Hub discussed how having access to a Regional Hub enables young people to stay in their community and be able to participate in higher education. The student said:

¹¹ It should be noted that widening participation was originally not an explicit goal of the program; it was more of an implied outcome. This changed with Cohort Three and the refunding of Cohort One and Two.

I think that kids in regional areas are really disadvantaged and a hub, to me, is amazing ... To be able to study regionally and still live at home and not be disadvantaged because you're from the country is amazing ... It opens up so much more possibilities.

This impact of Regional Hubs in widening participation was particularly clear when I asked staff members how they defined the success of their Regional Hubs. Many participants discussed how their metric of success was seeing students being able to effectively engage with their studies because of access to a Regional Hub. For example, one participant said their definition of success was:

But for me, the success is listening to some of the comments from the students, comments such as someone saying that they were studying in their car before we opened because their kids and their husband were distracting and they needed somewhere quiet where they could actually read their course content, and that they thought that they would've actually pulled out of their study if it wasn't for us. They're still going in there, so they're working, they have family commitments. It's very stressful, but the centre gives them somewhere to come to.

These quotes encapsulate the widening participation function of Regional Hubs as they demonstrate how the hubs reduce the disadvantage of living in RRR communities. By doing so, they are actualising widening participation by diminishing barriers to enrolment and completion of studies. This type of comment was reflected in the other 163 comments that were coded under the widening participation theme.

7.1.1 School and vocational widening participation

The widening participation effects of the Regional Hubs should not be seen as limited to higher education, but to all levels of education. Many staff members said that while their remit did not include school students, they welcomed them nevertheless with access to the Regional Hub as they saw it as building aspiration by exposing them to a higher education environment. TAFE and other vocational students also have access to many Regional Hubs for similar reasons. This access, and the aspirational impact of accessing a Regional Hub, was a theme that emerged from staff and student participants.

For example, one staff member linked TAFE students using their Regional Hub to actualised widening participation through growing aspirations. They said, "Having a TAFE course has been a really big stepping stone for lots of students because it's shorter. It's cheaper. They can get in and get it done. Then they go, actually, maybe I could do university". They suggested that TAFE students could use their TAFE experience as a "stepping stone" to university studies. This theme was demonstrated by staff members at other Regional Hubs, such as in the following response:

Yeah, so most of [the recent graduates] have been students that started through TAFE, which I see as such a critical pathway—just throwing that in there. Like, we work with TAFE a lot, a really good connection with them and making sure those students know that they can come here when they're ready to take the next steps, it's really critical. So yeah, that's why some students have already completed, they've often started off with TAFE.

This access to, and the aspirational power of, Regional Hubs in widening participation was also recognised by TAFE students themselves. One TAFE student who learned from their local library about the Regional Hub—which had better opening hours and free printing—said they were now “passionate” about promoting the Regional Hub: “I joined then, and I’ve told everyone that I know that’s studying about it too”. Another TAFE student discussed how having access to a Regional Hub allowed them to participate in higher education while staying in community:

I have the opportunity of [Regional Hub] just down the road to do all my studies through, and to have the support and the facility to be able to complete them with little to no issues. It’s truly just something I’m so grateful to have, and honestly, I think being in a real community, you don’t get that anywhere else. It’s just something that I’ve just—I couldn’t say no. What am I meant to do? Move to [city] and go to uni? No, not if I can stay at home.

This comment encapsulates many themes related to enabling widening participation, including access and staying in community. These themes are discussed throughout this section.

7.1.2 Access/place-based

A recurring theme in the interviews was the role of access to Regional Hubs in widening participation, as was the physical space of Regional Hubs. Within this overarching theme, several sub-themes emerged, including the value of a dedicated study space that is free of distractions; the ability to access Regional Hubs at times that are convenient to the students; the facilities at Regional Hubs; and the impact of Regional Hubs in keeping students in community. I contest that all these elements contribute to the widening participation abilities of the Regional Hubs.

7.1.2.1 *Dedicated study space*

Having a dedicated study space that was removed from their home environment and free of the pressures of home life (for example, washing, childcare, domestic chores) was a recurring theme for participants. For example, one participant said that “When [I’m] at home you look around you go, oh, it’s such a mess, and it’s really hard to look around at all that mess and not want to clean it up”. This was echoed in many interviews, such as the participant who said they would not be able to complete their studies if it was not for the Regional Hub and the dedicated space that it provided. They said:

Because I have to do [study] around work. My kids are always around me around work ... I think I started [studying] at home, so I was doing it in the bedroom and there was no desk or anything, so I was using my nightstand with multiple books, sitting on an uncomfortable chair. The kids are still screaming in the background and because my youngest at that point would’ve been just over a year old, she still obviously, [mimics baby sound] a lot. The attention span was not there to really take it in and so my husband actually was like, why don’t you just go sign up to the thing? I’m like, yeah, I will, and he’s like, no, I need you to go and do it. The kids won’t stop. So yeah, I don’t think I would’ve been able to really focus on it and actually knuckle

down and get it done, because I'll be able to finish it before the 18-month mark and I think that's only purely because I've got this space.

It was not just children at home that could offer distractions, many participants discussed the distraction that animals at home have on their studies. This distraction is, perhaps, compounded by the fact that many students in rural areas come from pastoral and/or farming backgrounds. The following reference to “60 million animals” demonstrates this well:

The main challenges that I face would honestly be that environmental, external sort of factors of, it's the distractions. I live at home with my parents and my sister, and 60 million animals and having that out is so beneficial.

The sentiment of being distraction free was echoed in other comments from student participants, including the following example, which demonstrates how important having a dedicated space that was not their home or their work was to their successful study behaviour:

I wanted to have somewhere I could go and study that wasn't home. I had a lot of things going on. Obviously, I work full-time, study, and then I also [unclear] athletic stuff as well. So, I needed to have something where I could just come and be safe, I guess, and then when I went home it was just home, instead of not having that aspect of it ... So, I guess in some ways it was more that it was a space for me to be—that wasn't in my house probably more than anything.

These comments, particularly the latter, reinforce the role of Regional Hubs as “third places”. Third places are a theoretical concept developed by Ray Oldenburg in his 1989 book *The Great Good Place* (Oldenburg, 1989; White, 2018), which suggests that there are communal places that are not home (the first place) or work (the second place) that are a common good for society. Regional Hubs fit six of the eight criteria of being a third place, including being a societal leveller; being accommodating; and that students are not obliged to be there. Conceptualising Regional Hubs as third places is useful when positioning them in the wider higher education environment: they are not only academic, nor are they only professional, but sit somewhere within the third place of higher education. Conceptualising third places in this way reinforces the finding of Blunden et al. (2024, p. 79) that the purposeful nature of Regional Hubs enables widening participation as the physical space is “proximal, familiar, and communal which helps students overcome barriers”.

7.1.2.2 *Facilities, amenities, and physical space*

The facilities in Regional Hubs, as well as the physical space, were identified through this research as an enabling factor in widening participation. Common facilities include access to high-speed wireless networks (Wi-Fi), dual screens, kitchens, and air conditioning. Amenities such as food and toiletries (deodorant and sanitary items) were also identified as factors contributing to widening participation.

Through the site visits, I observed that the physical environment plays an often overlooked yet significant role in student engagement. Welcoming reception areas serve as the first point of contact for students and set the tone for their experience at a Regional Hub. I observed how friendly, approachable staff, combined with a comfortable, organised space can make students feel valued and supported, creating an atmosphere of belonging. This

sense of connection is particularly important in RRR contexts, where students may feel isolated or disconnected from the broader university community.

Similarly, I observed that the kitchens are informal but essential spaces for student interaction and engagement. Kitchens are more than places to grab a quick coffee or meal; they act as communal areas where students can take a break, socialise, and share experiences. These interactions contribute to building peer networks, alleviating feelings of isolation, and fostering a sense of community. While this link was not explicitly demonstrated in the interviews, other positive experiences of having access to a kitchen were articulated by participants. For example, one student discussed how having access to a kitchen enhanced her study routine through the incorporation of breaks:

I love that there's a kitchenette here. It's got everything that you need, so I can pretty much bring my breakfast, lunch, and dinner here if I need to. Sometimes I do spend the whole day here. My house is freezing, so I really appreciate the heating ... it's like I don't even need to have a cup of tea or coffee, but I make it part of my routine. It also causes me to have a break, so I'm not sitting at the computer all the time.

This student's reference to their house being too cold to study in reflects just one of the many financial and social pressures that students face (Devlin & McKay, 2018) and is an issue of which staff are cognisant. For example, one staff member discussed how the facilities at Regional Hubs act to welcome students through enhancing their wellbeing:

I just think students, because they're not earning money, a lot of people they can't afford to turn on the heater, things like that, so to have a place where you can come and you can be warm. It sounds a bit hypothetical, whatever, but it gives you a sense of wellbeing that makes it one less onerous thing. You've got all these studies that at least you're warm and you're not freezing. They even have snacks, [I] think that's just lovely.

This comment from the staff member touches on two key elements that are pertinent to the facilities' sub-theme: the heating aspect as discussed; and the snacks that many Regional Hubs offer. In my observations of Regional Hubs, many offered small snacks (such as muesli bars) at either little or no cost. In addition, I observed some Regional Hubs offering menstruation products and other personal hygiene items (such as deodorant). These amenities contribute to an environment in which students feel welcome and like they belong there (a theme discussed later in this report), which is a contributing factor in students returning to Regional Hubs and succeeding in their studies (O'Keeffe, 2013).

Other facilities and amenities mentioned by participants were the technology provided by Regional Hubs. In particular, the availability of laptops and computers, dual screens, and high-speed, reliable internet. This is demonstrated in the following quote from a student participant:

So, access to internet is really good and the facilities are really good. I can do a Zoom if I need. I can type up my assignments with Word and those kinds of apps and that. That's probably the biggest tick.

Access to the internet is a particularly important factor in Regional Hubs' ability to widen participation. As RRR areas across Australia have poor internet access (Archer et al., 2024; Parke, 2024) Regional Hubs' ability to provide free, high-speed internet acts to widen participation through filling a deficit in a student's study infrastructure. The importance of the role of internet access was recognised by many participants with all three research methods, including one staff member who said that many in their region did not have internet at home (a fact shared by many in this research), and that having access to internet was a "really big driver" for some of the students who used Regional Hubs, including one who would travel to their Regional Hub with parents and study while they "were in town doing jobs" because of the internet access, and then go home with them. While this is only one anecdote, it is likely that most Regional Hubs would present similar stories.¹²

In my observations, it was evident that many of the Regional Hubs were designed with Universal Design for Learning principles, providing multiple means of engagement and access (Meyer, et al., 2014). Assistive technology was available to support students with diverse learning needs, and communal spaces facilitated both social interaction and peer learning, reinforcing a sense of community. The Regional Hubs featured multiple room layouts to accommodate different study preferences, including individual study spaces, group collaboration areas, sit-stand desks, and noise-cancelling headphones to cater to students who required different levels of sensory input and focus. During observations, staff noted an increasing number of neurodiverse students among their cohorts and were actively implementing physical and environmental adjustments to support diverse learning needs. These included flexible study spaces, the provision of quiet areas, and the integration of tools like "timed timers" that helped students self-regulate their learning environment.

Additional observations relate to the academic support I observed to be embedded through multiple access points, catering to the varied needs and circumstances of students. Signage, QR codes, and digital booking systems allowed for easy scheduling of assistance, while staff availability extended beyond traditional hours, including online options for academic services and home visits where necessary. These flexible support structures ensured that students—particularly those balancing study with work and family commitments—had access to guidance in a way that met their needs.

The extent to which facilities contribute to widening participation depends on an individual's access to such resources outside a Regional Hub. Those who benefit most from the facilities, amenities, and physical space are typically those without comparable access in their personal lives. This reinforces the role of Regional Hubs as third places as discussed earlier; places that are neither for home nor work that are welcoming, free to use, and act as a societal equaliser.

7.1.2.3 *Extended access to Regional University Study Hubs*

Access to Regional Hubs was a recurring theme from participants across all three participant category types, and I consider it a factor in Regional Hubs ability to widen participation. As discussed earlier in this report in the summary of themes (Section 6.1.1), the ability to access Regional Hubs at times that suit students meant they were more likely to use them.

¹² I have a similar anecdote from my time as the Centre Manager for CUC Far West; because of the public health measures implemented during COVID-19, CUC Far West had to be closed to students. However, I observed students on many occasions parking as close as they could to the Regional Hub to access the internet to complete their studies. They would sit in their cars and conduct research, write essays, or take exams. This is the very definition of widening participation.

International evidence suggests there is a relationship between increased access and longer opening hours (Delafontaine et al., 2011), and positive educational outcomes associated with extended opening and/or access hours, providing that there are also safety measures in place (Budzise-Weaver et al., 2023). This evidence is echoed in the comments from our participants, such as the following quote demonstrating that although the relevant Regional Hub was meant to be open from 9am they could usually gain access from 8am:

I really like having a physical place to come ... I love that they have afterhours access here, because I do like to start a bit earlier so I can come in—although they say they're open from 9am but there seems to always be someone here from 8am anyway.

It should be noted that for extended access to widen participation, there needs to be safety/security precautions in place. As suggested earlier, this is a precondition in the international evidence of increased opening hours facilitating more access that also applies in this context, particularly for female students. For example, one participant was particularly concerned about their safety as it related to the physical layout of the Regional Hub because of a blind corner along the route to the carpark that felt unsafe to them. However, staff corrected the safety issue once they were made aware of the problem. The student recounted this:

I study at night too, I at first—was a bit weird because of the corner, and as soon as I said something to the girls they're like, they put mirrors up and they put floodlights on, and I feel totally safe coming to study and then leaving by myself, as a female, at 9pm at night, which is important.

This quote from the student reinforces the relationship between extended access, safety, and widening participation. While in this instance the participant was already using the Regional Hub during extended hours, the increased safety made the space more welcoming and hospitable, which has the potential to increase participation and retention. The link between extended hours, access, and widening participation was further evidenced by enabling students to study at times that suited their individual schedules. This was articulated well by a student at a different Regional Hub who said they fit visiting the Regional Hub around their life, which often meant they visited it at night:

Yeah, absolutely, especially at night, because I usually study around about late hours of the night, between 8 and 10, just because I knock off work, I have to go home, do all the things, have dinner, then I go to the [Regional Hub] and study for a couple hours. Because that has that security system, and all that kind of stuff, even in some of the study areas they have lockable doors, just tap ones, which also I always do it when I'm there alone, just because being a female in a way, it's always scary going somewhere by yourself, even when you know the facility is safe, it's still nerve-wracking, you're always extra cautious. So just having that accessibility, and knowing that it's a safe environment, and that there's all these precautions in place to make sure you're safe, I think definitely makes me feel a little better.

The importance of access was also recognised by staff of Regional Hubs. The following dialogue between myself and a staff member of a Regional Hub demonstrates how they

ascertained what the opening hours should be. Please note that some details have been withheld to ensure the participant's anonymity:

Interviewer: Do you think having that access from 5am to midnight is important for the students?

Interviewee: How we arrived at 5am is that we used to open at 7am. [The hospital nearby] is a teaching hospital [...] and they get groups of doctors there for 3, 6, and 12 months. [Participant] had a request from a group of doctors because their shifts start at 7, so then they weren't able to study fresh—while they were fresh. They said, do you think you could open at 5 and then we could come in at 5 and do two hours' study before our shift starts? It's just an example of how we are able to pivot to meet people's needs.

This comment illustrates the flexibility that Regional Hubs have regarding their operations, and how being responsive to the needs of the community in changing the opening hours can widen participation. To conclude this section on extended hours, safety, and widening participation I share a comment by a Regional Hub staff member who observed that since adapting a fob-style system to allow for late-night access they had increased accessibility. The staff member said:

When we first got the fob out of hours I would drive home, you know, from grocery shopping and I would see a car in the car park, and I would be like yes someone is there using it ... Or, like, driving to town on a Saturday morning and seeing two or three cars there and be so excited.

In this section of the report, I have discussed how the dedicated study space, facilities and amenities, and (safe) extended hours of access to Regional Hubs enable their widening participation function. Next, I discuss how the Regional Hubs widen participation by creating a sense of belonging and identity.

7.1.3 Belonging and identity

Regional Hubs also have an impact on the individual identity of students, as well as the collective identity of the area they service. I suggest that the identity effects of Regional Hubs are widening participation because they have the potential to increase the retention and completion of students who use them while encouraging others to use the Regional Hubs or enter (or re-enter) higher education through a culture shift in the communities in which Regional Hubs are located. In this section, I first briefly discuss the established evidence for a link between belonging, identity, and higher education before moving onto the evidence collected through this research.

A substantial body of evidence identifies identity and belonging as having a positive effect on higher education participation, retention, and completion (J. Crawford, 2024a, 2024b; J. Crawford et al., 2023). In the introduction to the literature review *Belonging During University*, commissioned by the Universities Accord, Crawford (2024a, p.1) summarises that there are many positive aspects that fostering a sense of belonging has for students, including retention, inclusion, wellbeing, and achievement.

Identity—like belonging—can have a positive effect on student success and retention. In a United States (US) study, Talaifar et al. (2020) found that when students felt a “oneness” with their university (which the literature calls “fusion”) they were up to 9% more likely to remain in university compared with those who experienced low rates of fusion. The positive role of identity in academic retention and success has been demonstrated in a large number of other studies (Larsen & James, 2022), including for international students in Australia (Cruwys et al., 2021), students in the United Arab Emirates (Al Hassani & Wilkins, 2022), and Black STEM students in the US (Oseguera et al., 2019). However, as Cain and Willis (2022, p. 74) suggest, there is “limited information about the identities of college students from rural areas because this student population is often neglected as a distinct group in higher education literature”.

Despite this gap in the literature, I suggest that through using a Regional Hub, students will identify more strongly with being a student and thus will experience similar benefits from retention and completion that other groups experience. Further, the feeling of belonging is a contributing factor in the identity creation that occurs through use of a Regional Hub. Because of the increased chance of retention and completion that identity creation can bring, this should be seen as a widening participation effect of Regional Hubs because students from RRR backgrounds are less likely to enrol in and complete higher education. This issue is explored throughout this section.

7.1.3.1 Individual identity and belonging

Increased student identity was expressed by many of the participants in a variety of ways, including a feeling of welcomeness and belonging, and through developing a community of scholars in their Regional Hub, often via group studying or social events. Further, having access to a dedicated study space can contribute to a more stable sense of student identity (Bunn & Lumb, 2024).

Staff were cognisant of the effect of being welcoming and how the sense of belonging could foster an identity shift. One staff participant said, “It has all of those elements to it. If someone's going to be friendly to you here and you're welcome and safe, then you're more than likely going to study”. This was articulated by one student who said that studying at home could be isolating, and “you don't really feel like you're part of the world. You feel like you're just kind of on your own”. But when the student went to the Regional Hub, a feeling of purpose, compounded by being around other people, emerged. They said:

You come down here, there's other people. You feel a little bit like you are—even though you're not working for money, you still kind of feel like you're working because you're working to learn for the future to get back into work, so you don't feel cut off from everybody.

One student shared that using a Regional Hub made them feel less alone, and that they highly valued the interactions and sense of connection this fostered. The participant said that these types of interactions were “important because otherwise you'd be in here and you'd be sterile, and you need interaction. I've met other people that actually work here as their job that use the facilities, as well as other students. It's good just to say, hello, how you going”.

Some participants who were new to their area found that using a Regional Hub removed barriers to joining their community. When people are new to a RRR community—and this perceived newness can last a long time—they are often considered “outsiders” or

“newcomers” (S. Davis et al., 2012, p. 343). Outsiders or newcomers can find it difficult to be welcomed to the community, as did one participant who described the town as “cliquey” but through use of the Regional Hub she found she was more welcomed into the community, saying “I think, for my own self, study has—it’s grounded me within the community, it’s given me a sense of purpose and a place within the hierarchy here”.

A further way in which welcomeness and belonging were fostered for students at Regional Hubs was through the creation of communities of scholars. For example, one student said that being in the Regional Hub with other students, “breaks the uncertainty and the feeling that you’re not alone”, while a staff member said, “[The students] enjoy that camaraderie that comes from just that there are other people in [the Regional Hub] too”. Another student expressed a similar sentiment:

I know a couple of [the other students] so of course you say, hi, to them, but I find Mondays the most fascinating because there’s quite a few people that come on a Monday night, so I do end up having to use this room, but there’s something about studying alongside someone that makes you feel like you’re not the only one studying if that makes sense.

This feeling of community was articulated by other students. For example, one student said that while they did not really engage with other students at the Regional Hub, they still found a community there. The student explained:

To be honest, it’s just kind of a quiet space. It’s a space where you can catch up with friends and make this beautiful circle of people that also use the uni. I’ve met many other students that are learning completely different degrees that I’ve never even heard about. It’s really interesting, and we talk about the study plans that we’re doing and what assessment we’re stressing about and all that kind of stuff. It really just creates a small kind of community where we kind of just talk about our studies, and like, oh, I’m really struggling with this, and somebody goes, oh, I’ve done that before, I can help you out. It’s really just a beautiful community, small community, to work with within.

It should be noted that community building is not inherently an organic process. Creating communities requires staff and volunteer effort, as well as the facilities and amenities described earlier, for identity-building effects to take hold. For example, one staff member articulated how the Regional Hub volunteers helped foster a sense of community, saying:

Even our volunteers and even the people we had working on our [project] that we had funding for that has just finished, they just bring so much and yes, they’re local, but they have not always been local. So I think it’s important to try and really create that sense of community with the people who are working in the space, yes.

Interviewer: Yeah, beautiful.

Interviewee: So create a sense of community before them, but they then create the sense of community for everybody else.

It is this community building alongside the feeling of being welcome and belonging at a Regional Hub that I suggest helps to create identity fusion in students of Regional Hubs. When students feel welcome, like they belong, and that they have a community of like-minded scholars, this creates an environment for them to identify as students. Once this identity fusion has occurred, students are more likely to continue their educational journey and be successful at it.

One barrier to community-building identified by participants was an inability to attend social events at Regional Hubs, or low turnout at events. For example, one student described how they could not access social events because they occurred during work hours or were aimed at first-year students. The student explained how having access to social events would enhance community-building effects:

I think that sort of thing would be the next thing, I think, building that sense of community so it's not just a place you come. It's a communal—it is community-based, obviously, but having more of a communal feel within the people that utilise it would be good.

Some staff members said they had tried to create a sense of community in the past but were unable to as they could not encourage students to engage with social events, or the turnout was too low to make the events an ongoing activity. This inability to get students to engage in social events was described by a staff member, who, when asked if they were getting students to engage in social events, said this happened on a “limited scale” but:

This has been a challenge of mine, because I think this is an area that is, yeah, a big gap for our regional students, is that ability to connect with other students. But my challenge is if you advertise, hey, we're having a barbeque, or, we're doing a social event, which we've tried a few times, no one comes. [...] with social connections, it's a bit challenging. I think students need to already have some relationships with existing students to feel comfortable, to then make that step to come to a social event. I think the idea of going to a social event and not knowing anyone that's going to be at it, very daunting, no one's coming. I sort of hoped with the academic support workshops at the start of the year, part of my plan was really, let's see if we can leverage this and keep it going into social things. But that didn't work. So it's really about, yeah, finding the things that are of value for people that's going to actually get them to engage with.

I suggest that if these social events were better attended, the identity fusion effect would be felt more strongly as students would experience greater community identity. Nevertheless, to summarise this section on identity, the following interaction between myself and a participant highlights well the effects that studying at a Regional Hub have on student identity:

Interviewer: Do you feel more like a student when you're here, rather than like working from, say, from home?

Interviewee: Yeah absolutely because there are other students here as well, it's like similar experiences with online study. It kind of relates to what I'm feeling as being a student instead of just being someone who just comes in here.

7.1.3.2 *Collective identity*

In addition to their effects on individual identity, I suggest that Regional Hubs influence the collective identity in the area they service. Participants discussed how Regional Hubs had been changing the culture of higher education in their communities, or that they wanted to change the culture of higher education in their communities.¹³ For example, one participant said that even though the word “University” in the name of their Regional Hub might be confusing for some as it was not a university, it forced members in their community to acknowledge that their community was deserving of higher education access. Another participant discussed the role of intergenerational rules that have dictated that people who stay in the community attend school, start work, and then have children. However, they said that the Regional Hub was starting to shift these rules, saying:

Probably in a way the culture around here, the parents—[they all] went to school to a certain age and then started working and having babies. So that’s a little bit of a barrier, trying to get a cultural shift to say, hey, you can still study, you don’t have to leave home, and you can be better than just, you know [...] And there’s value in education.

Another participant articulated their desire to create a culture of learning in their community, and how they felt it was the responsibility of the Regional Hub to grow this.

I feel like the biggest impact has been—we keep on coming back to this feeling that we want to build a culture of learning in the community. Like [town] has a university, it’s a town that’s like, oh yeah, that’s an education town. We’re never going to—like okay I should dream big—one day we might be thought of as a real education town. I think it’s our responsibility to grow that. We’re just calling it the culture of learning at the moment.

In the survey responses, one aspiration of participants related to creating a culture of higher education in their communities: one said, “To change the education culture in our region by increasing the participation of a diverse range of [community] people engaged in higher education”. An interview participant expressed a similar sentiment, saying that they needed to be “doing culture change” and it was not enough to just provide a physical space for students to study in. They continued:

[If] we’re wanting to upskill people here, it’s about trying to not just create dreams among young people, but finding ways they can then sustain those dreams and think seriously about tertiary education. It’s not just about—I love just talking about the young ones, but the mature aged ones as well, giving them opportunities to finally get qualifications and do things they never thought they could do. It’s just—you would know, it’s so rewarding.

¹³ Reflecting on my experience at CUC Far West, I observed how the presence of the Regional Hub influenced the community’s perception of higher education. Community members would sometimes express surprise that higher education was accessible locally, highlighting underlying assumptions about who higher education was for and where it should occur. Over time, the Regional Hub appeared to normalise the idea that higher education could be pursued without leaving the region. Its presence provided a consistent point of reference that challenged existing expectations and contributed to shifting conversations about educational opportunities within the community.

These comments from participants reflect my observations at Regional Hubs and through informal conversations in the broader community during site visits—at local shops, cafes, and community spaces—revealing a strong, collective aspiration to reshape the culture of education. In many locations, particularly those with limited education pathways or a narrow economic landscape, education has not traditionally been seen as a viable or embedded part of community identity. However, both in the Regional Hubs and in everyday discussions with community members, there was a clear sense that Regional Hubs were shifting this perception, with education increasingly viewed as a key mechanism for change—not just for individuals, but for the broader social and economic fabric of the region.

In areas where traditional industries were limited or economic diversification was lacking, Regional Hubs were seen as new avenues for liveability, offering a tangible reason for young people and professionals to remain in or return to their communities. Conversations with community members outside the Regional Hubs reinforced this sentiment, with locals expressing that Regional Hubs were not only expanding access to higher education but also serving as symbols of aspiration. Learning was no longer perceived as something that had to happen elsewhere; instead, it was becoming part of everyday life, deeply embedded within the region, regardless of its existing industry landscape.

This cultural shift was particularly evident in the way Regional Hubs fostered collective ownership over education. Both formally—within Regional Hubs—and informally, in community discussions, there was a strong sense that education was becoming more accessible, visible, and normalised as a community expectation. More than just physical places, Regional Hubs represented a reimagining of what education could mean for these communities, signalling a move towards long-term sustainability and local empowerment.

This changing culture should be seen in the context of identity building. If we consider that identities are not simply innate to an individual but instead are informed by—and through—social interactions, then living in communities where higher education is valued acts as a positive influence on student identity. This culture change should enhance the effects of the individual identity change described above.

To summarise these two sections on individual and collective identity I present an excerpt from an interview between myself and a staff member. In this excerpt, I asked what barriers local people had to higher education. The interviewee discussed the relationships between identity, welcomeness, belonging, community, and how these relationships could be seen to widen participation:

Interviewee: I can't tell you that because I think there's people in regional areas or even remote areas believe that—it's probably stereotyped, particularly when I went through school, that you only went to university if you were really smart, you were the top percentile of the class. I think that anyone can do university if they apply themselves. I think the stereotype in these regional communities is evident. I think the fact that, unlike larger urban centres, you're on campus, you can mix with other students and that gives you a sense of belonging I suppose. But sometimes there's a sense of isolation out here without other student relationship can help towards—could help with stereotyping, that's what I think.

Interviewer: Do you see it as a place where students can now get together and engage, do you see that as part of the function of it?

Interviewee: From some of the conversations I hear in the community that is starting to emerge. So, it's not about—it is about learning but it's also about forming relationships when you come here. So talking about the students and what they're doing, what subjects they're doing, how they're going and things like that. Which is really important just obviously in an educational context, but even post educational context you've still got those relationships.

7.1.3.3 *Cultural responsiveness*

Across the observations, interviews, and survey, a recurring idea about how Regional Hubs were fostering identity was by being responsive to the identity needs of their users. For example, I observed the physical and cultural markers of belonging and identity that were embedded in the Regional Hub environment. Most Regional Hubs had First Nations artworks, and some used the naming of rooms in local Aboriginal languages to signal an acknowledgment of Country and a commitment to cultural inclusivity. This was further reinforced by the presence of ACON (or equivalent) “Welcome Here” signage, indicating a space that actively supports LGBTQIA+ inclusion, as well as an array of mental health and wellbeing resources, ensuring students could access support without stigma.

This cultural responsiveness was a recurring theme in the interviews and the survey, with many staff from Regional Hubs working to make their hub more responsive to the cultural needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. For example, one staff member at a Regional Hub discussed how the culture of their hub tried to replicate the holistic nature of Aboriginal culture in that the Regional Hub was:

not only for studies but everything else that comes with that. So [...] food, cultural support, academic support. Bringing families in if students are lonely. It's—we try and just create that big safety net. So, students don't fall through the cracks as they are—as they would at other sort of bigger institutions.

These comments were echoed by other participants, such as one community member who talked about the relationship one of the staff members had with their local First Nations community and how these facilities widened participation, and accommodated students with disabilities. They said:

[Staff member has] just got the most beautiful relationship with our [Indigenous] community, you know, really inclusive of our Elders in terms of getting them involved and really understanding that that's a connection to the youth is through our Elders. It's really important because they really do respect and look up to that generation. We have Uncle on our board, which really helps with that connection as well because he's a very highly respected member of the community. So from an Indigenous perspective, I feel like we go above and beyond, and really work well with that community. In terms of disability, we will accommodate wherever we can for anything that a student would need.

This type of comment illustrates the importance that Regional Hubs place on embracing the plurality of identities of students. One Regional Hub was actively incorporating Aboriginal icons, objects, and culture to continue with the Indigenising that is occurring at primary and secondary schools. The staff member said:

The other part was around building a space here where people felt welcome and definitely focused on our [Aboriginal community] because there hadn't really been a hub that brought all their cultural objects together. We wanted to start storytelling and sharing language. To me that was really important because when I got this job I was going into the schools, I could see it at the preschool level, primary school level, high school level, it was language in all the schools, it was all being taught. When I went through school none of that was there, it was back in the terrible dark ages when none of that was revealed. So I felt as an ongoing educator in the community it was our responsibility to take them to the next level.

These data suggest that a combination of cultural, social, and academic inclusivity in the Regional Hub environment fostered a strong sense of belonging, reinforcing that education was not only accessible but also deeply connected to the identity and lived experiences of students. When this is considered through an identity development lens, it can be seen to aid in the identity fusion of users of Regional Hubs as both students and their other identities. This is because positive identity affirmation by others, especially those in positions of authority or trust, is a key driver of identity development (including fusion) (Cottle, 2003; James, 2024; Siteine, 2013), and the cultural responsiveness shown by Regional Hubs provides that affirmation.

To summarise Finding One in its entirety is to say that the evidence collected through this research suggests that Regional Hubs widen participation, and this widening participation is facilitated through access/place-based mechanisms as well as the identity development that occurs at Regional Hubs. In the next finding, I discuss the role that staff play in widening participation in Regional Hubs.

7.2 Finding Two: Staff have an essential role in widening participation

Staff have an essential role in the widening participation effects of Regional Hubs. Participants—particularly students—frequently discussed how the positive relationship they had with staff made the space feel more welcoming, as well as motivating them to continue their studies. Further, the interviews highlight the role of staff as relational navigators who teach and foster resilience and self-efficacy. In this finding, I start by presenting the interview results on the relationship between staff and students, before moving onto the evidence that suggests staff act to foster resilience and self-efficacy. I conclude this finding by linking the discussed evidence to the literature about widening participation.

The relationship between staff and students was a recurring theme across the interviews, with many saying that it had a positive effect on feelings of belonging, welcomeness, and the desire for students to keep using Regional Hubs and persisting in their studies. From the student perspective, one respondent said that they “always” took the time to talk with the staff at their Regional Hub as “they’re lovely”. At a different Regional Hub, another student described how grateful they were for staff, saying: “For me, the support and encouragement that they gave when I was—when I’m studying here is more than what I could ask for. I’m very, very grateful for [the staff]”. This support and encouragement were noted by most student participants; for example, one said that they would have withdrawn from study

because of confidence issues but the support they received from staff made them feel like they could do it. They said:

When it came time to do placement, I was extremely scared. [Staff A] and [Staff B] really—not pushed me, but made me feel like I could do it. I know that if they hadn't, I wouldn't have because I was a phone call away from telling them I'm done.

Interviewer: Are you glad that you've progressed with that placement?

Interviewee: I'm so glad I did it. After the first day there, I was like, okay [laughs]. I can do this. [Staff A] and [Staff B] were right. I can do it. I'm really proud of myself for doing it.

This was echoed by a student at the same Regional Hub who said “staff are great, they’ve been so supportive. Without that support, I don’t think I would still be enrolled to study, because last year was really stressful”. One student recognised how much the staff at their Regional Hub cared about their students, saying: “[Staff] love their people, they love them. That is one thing that I do love about this place. It’s like the guys really do care [...] and as a team, they’re great too”. The support and encouragement that staff show towards students can also be as simple as just being at the Regional Hub to provide a human touch. For example, one student was prompted to give their opinion on which factor they found more important—staff or the physical space—to which they responded:

I’d have to say the staff. I mean that support is invaluable, it is, especially starting off. But equally I mean the space is good too. If I had to choose, I’d have to say staff ... You need people to talk to, and especially this day and age, everything’s electronic and phone and people don’t answer phones.

The role of the staff in being welcoming and fostering belonging was identified by the staff themselves. One staff member discussed how they identified students who might need extra support and then ensured that these students were contacted, while another staff member discussed how they wanted the students to feel like it was their study space and that they had ownership (and agency) over the physical space. When showing students through the space during their orientation, she said: “This is your study space, I don’t use it, it’s yours so if you think it’s lacking in something or something needs fixing or being added to the environment you have to tell me”. The staff member provided the following anecdote describing one way in which the students had exercised agency over the space, by suggesting the implementation of lockers:

She said, “I just ruined a laptop because I left it in the car for a day. Also, if there are lockers here, I could lock my laptop up and go and do my jobs.” So, we got lockers. And she was like, “Thank you so much.” Like, she was really appreciative, so that’s another success.

In the context of creating, fostering, and sustaining a student identity in the users of Regional Hubs, these relationships between students and staff are fundamental. As discussed earlier, positive identity affirmation from those in positions of authority and trust go some way to facilitating identity fusion. Underpinning this identity affirmation is the relationship between

the two subjects: if there is a positive relationship then the identity development will be stronger. I suggest that these positive relationships between staff and student are one way for staff to widen participation. Creating an environment that is friendly and welcoming, fosters a sense of belonging, and gives agency to students means that students are more likely to want to return and identify more as students—in effect widening participation.

The second aspect of the role of staff in widening participation is through their role in teaching or fostering self-efficacy and resilience. In the context of this research, self-efficacy is described as the belief in the competency of the self and is “a significant variable in student learning, because it affects students’ motivation and learning” (van Dinther et al., 2011, p. 96). This developing of self-efficacy and resilience came through strongly in the student interviews. For example, one student said they were not “fantastic” on a computer, but the staff of the Regional Hub helped them understand how they work. The student continued:

I didn’t know how to use Zoom or Teams, or anything, until about seven months ago. That all definitely helped out a fair bit in just the education side of things, because they’re bloody knowledgeable down there, and they know what they’re talking about.

Teaching the student how to use the computer, Zoom, Teams, and so on, is in effect teaching resilience and self-efficacy because the student will then know how to use these vital tools in the modern education landscape.

This fostering of self-efficacy was echoed by another student, who said that during placements for the studies there was a set of mandatory tasks of which the Regional Hub staff advised them and then sent them reminders about due dates, and checked on how they were feeling as they progressed through the tasks. While this is a more hands-on approach to developing self-efficacy, as the staff member was enabling the student to succeed, it still fits within the broad parameters of fostering self-efficacy. This development of self-efficacy extended to helping navigate the complex enrolment processes that many HEIs have, and many staff played a navigator role for students at Regional Hubs. This is evidenced in the following quote from a student:

[Staffer] straight away was like this is what we need to do, you can apply and if you get it, if you get accepted, great, you don’t have to accept the acceptance, you can pull out and you’re not locked into it. The whole you’re not locked in even, and like you can start it and then pull out before census date. So I didn’t know any of that information about universities, I was like where, what happens. So just that initial interview, talking with [Staffer] and the possibilities then open up. She goes what study have you done, and the application, the online application, I think I would have even baulked just trying to apply to uni because it’s a lot ... The whole—I think helping you through like the website and for the online studies, so this is what you need to do ... It was really good, that support was amazing.

In addition to this self-efficacy, one student discussed how staff (and other Regional Hub users) modelled good study behaviour for them. The student said how seeing the staff member working “forced me to keep studying and be on task, like do my tasks”. The student continued:

I leave the door open, I usually [can see a staff member] across from me. If I see her studying, I'm kind of forced to study as well. Sometimes if I'm using the conference room, and I'm studying there and someone's there as well, even if I don't feel like studying, I'll pretend to study.

Staff were well aware of their role in fostering self-efficacy and resilience. For example, one staff member who provided academic support said that one of their measures of success was that they saw the same people on a less frequent basis as they had taught them sufficient skills to navigate the academic environment by themselves. It should be noted that the ability for staff to grow self-efficacy in students may be impacted by how connected the staff are to their local community. Many community members expressed the importance of this local connection, with one saying that:

You've got to have someone on the ground that knows community. They've got to have those connections, so you're not going to get buy-in from the various stakeholders. Even the local schools, you're not going to get that buy-in easily if you haven't got somebody local, I think. I think it's really important.

This was echoed by another staff member who said that being embedded in their community prior to starting their role at the Regional Hub meant that the students had a greater level of trust in them, and that they could be more open with them because of this trust. The staff member said:

I often debrief on how stressed they are about their workload or how they're not feeling comfortable with their subject and things like that. That's been really good. It's also meant that when I've gone out to explain what the [Regional Hub] is, that people listen to me. I've done two or three presentations to the community when we've had the business expos on.

Therefore, when assessing the ability of Regional Hubs to widen participation through developing self-efficacy and student identity, this staff connection to their community should be considered a factor. Nevertheless, the improved self-efficacy is best summarised by a quote from a student participant who discussed how even if you had no resources, if you had access to a Regional Hub then you would be able to succeed in your studies. They said:

There's that old analogy, you teach a man to fish, he'll fish for life; you give a man a fish, he'll eat one meal. It's giving tools to people to empower them to make choices if they like to about further study that they may not be able to make if they didn't have access to those resources.

This evidence of staff teaching and fostering self-efficacy and resilience should be viewed as widening participation because increased self-efficacy and resilience have been shown to have a positive impact on identity and belonging, retention, and completion of studies (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Picton & Kahu, 2022; Schütze et al., 2021). Self-efficacy can—among other effects—help:

individuals to decide how much effort they will spend on a task, how long they will persist when experiencing difficulties, and how resilient they will appear in

detrimental situations. The stronger their notion of self-efficacy, the greater their effort, perseverance and elasticity (van Dinther et al, 2011, p. 96).

In the context of this study, increased self-efficacy among RRR students enables them to more successfully complete their studies, as well as other higher-education-related tasks, such as enrolment and other tasks.

Further, this evidence speaks to the role of staff as relational navigators. Relational navigators, as defined by Burke et al. (2021, p. 3) are:

fundamentally a pedagogical encounter, in which the navigator and young person learn together ... We see navigation as scanning the horizon and making sense of possibilities and futures, and the meshing of possibilities for action in the here and now on the basis of accompanying young people through interpersonal encounters that are initiated by practitioners and worked through on the basis of mutuality and solidarity.

In the context of this study, the staff at Regional Hubs fulfill this role as a relational navigator through guiding many of the students through the formal steps of their education journey: from helping them with enrolment, building their academic skills, and—for many—developing education plans that are aspirational and drive students to be the best version of themselves.

In my observations during site visits, I found that staff were not expected to be experts in the wide array of subjects that students were studying, nor the wide array of HEI systems or support services, but that they found joy in learning about these alongside the student. This reinforces the mutual gain of the relational navigator and assists in building trust and positive relationships between staff and students, further influencing the identity affirmation that may occur and ultimately making students more successful in their studies. Further, staff carried the knowledge gained during this relational navigation to their other student relationships, equipping them well across a diverse range of subject areas and systems.

To conclude this finding that staff are a contributory factor to Regional Hubs' ability to widen participation, I revisit the analogy of teaching a person to fish so that they will be able to eat for life. This analogy came up no less than four times across the interviews, and to an extent encapsulates the role of the staff at Regional Hubs. In the context of this study, if you give a student the answer, they will return with more questions. However, if you guide students through their studies, they will find the answers themselves.

7.3 Finding Three: Partnerships enable widening participation

Regional Hubs have a range of partnerships that enable their widening participation activities. Three key partnerships emerged through this research: partnerships between Regional Hubs and universities and HEIs; between Regional Hubs and other educational organisations (for example, schools); and between Regional Hubs and local organisations such as councils and regional development organisations. In this section, we separate the

findings across the three partnership types, explore the strengths and challenges of each partnership, and link them back to widening participation activities.

This finding, alongside other evidence collected for this research, serves as the basis for the practitioner resource I have developed: *Roadmap to Success: A What Works Guide to Regional University Study Hubs Partnerships*. The resource can be found in full on the ACSES website.¹⁴

7.3.1 University and higher education institution partnerships

This research demonstrates a vast array of perspectives on partnerships between Regional Hubs and universities. The three main ones were the strengths and challenges of the partnerships; the importance of key stakeholders; and partnerships being culturally responsive. Regarding the strengths and challenges of the partnerships, participants had a wide range of perspectives, from mentioning positive partnerships with universities where they felt they could approach universities with anything, to more challenging partnerships where they feel that universities view Regional Hubs as competition and thus were unwilling to partner with them.

Many respondents indicated that partnerships between universities and Regional Hubs were an important part of their remit and helped them in their widening participation efforts. For example, one participant said that Regional Hubs exist to support universities, because they support universities' students. She continued: "If we can support their students and they honestly believe that we are doing that, because that's what we're doing". The participant identified that once that a partnership had been established, the Regional Hub could then ask for more services for students from the university:

Then after a while, I can put my hand up and say, hey, listen, there's an underrepresented group here. While you're down here, by the way, how about while you're here, we can target. So, we get to where my board wants and what I want too. But you can't start with it. You have to build a partnerships.

This quote encapsulates the give–take partnership many Regional Hubs experience with universities. Similarly, one participant said that as part of their partnership with universities it was the universities' obligation to tell students about Regional Hubs as a student was:

the one that benefits from having all of the information to be able to make really good choices about their study. And that choice might be to not use a hub but knowing that that hub is within proximity of where they're living is something that's really important that the university can work with us to get that information to them.

One participant discussed a positive partnership between their Regional Hub and a university in the co-creation of a school-based program that ultimately did not go ahead because of bureaucratic difficulties:

¹⁴ <https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/assets.acses.edu.au/app/uploads/2025/11/Roadmap-to-success-a-what-works-guide-to-partnerships-D-Keenan-2025.pdf>

they definitely were wanting to actually run a course up here and come up here once a month and actually deliver it in person, yeah. They've been up here and visited us and the schools, and we recently connected with one of their [Aboriginal staffers] who's asked us if we can contact her about going out to [Aboriginal communities] as well.

Another participant said that they would simply be a space—much like a library—if it was not for their university partners and partnerships. Hypothesising what this would look like, the participant said that they would still support students who visited the Regional Hub, but that this would be for “a different purpose” as there would be no way to match a student's passion to a formal course of study. The participant concluded that, “it's not the model that we were built for”. This comment suggests that for some Regional Hubs, their entire *modus operandi* involves partnerships with universities, underscoring the importance of partnerships to the success of Regional Hubs.

While some participants had more positive partnerships with universities, some participants discussed how they perceived the partnership between their Regional Hub and universities to be unequal. Many characterised this poor partnership to be driven by the one-sided nature of the partnership: they suggested that universities take more than give, or that they are only interested in partnerships to increase their student numbers or their own financial gain. For example, one participant discussed an interaction with a university that had received their CSPs but could not convince them to increase their services to the relevant Regional Hub. The participant was left with the feeling that they were only partnering to receive the CSP funding, not to better student outcomes. Another participant said that the attention that the RUSH program was receiving because of increased media and policy attention had made universities want to partner with them, but not for altruistic reasons, saying, “Because I think the RUC program's been front and centre of the Accord, the Vice-Chancellor's gone, gee, we need a piece of this action out here. How can we work it to their advantage?”

This was echoed by another participant who said that while universities were starting to collaborate with them more, it was only for their financial gain, saying that:

I think the unis have realised that these things are here to stay, we'd better actually work with them, it'd be better ... I think there's been a complete change of heart by their Vice-Chancellor about engaging with us, but ... he only wants to engage with us on his terms.

However, some participants attributed the renewed university attention to more altruistic reasons, with one saying, “Initially it was really hard for the university system to recognise the needs of our students. But exposure over time and creating that really strong support system has [...] forced them shift their ways and also their thinking”.

One participant recognised both perspectives, saying that universities had changed their approach towards Regional Hubs and were trying to build a more meaningful partnership because Regional Hubs were seen to be growing their student numbers. They said:

I think real success will come when our university partners really show that they value us and that they can see we're making a difference. That we're collaborating with them and not competing. I think, I can feel that's happening with [University A]

and [University B] because we've been with them for a few years and we have a great relationship with [University A] staff. They can appreciate what we're doing to grow their numbers particularly because that's what seems to be important to our university partners. But for us it's about seeing change in community.

This quote captures well the tensions in the partnerships between universities and Regional Hubs. It identifies that there may be differences in priorities between the two, but that through years of relationship-building partnerships start to develop in a more meaningful way.

Despite this developing relationship, some challenges remain. Some participants felt that universities were not interested in providing support to students who were enrolled with their institution but used a Regional Hub instead of studying on campus. One participant said she was "very frustrated" when she informed a university of the number of their students using the Regional Hub and realised, "They just don't really care". This was echoed by another participant who said that they would like to have a "lot more support from whoever they're studying through". When I asked if this meant more recognition that the Regional Hub exists, the participant said:

Yeah, and that they do give their students that support that they need because it's [endless] times where students are frustrated because they email, they call, and they do not get a response. [...] that's where we feel we get frustrated as well because we are so anxious and we do everything in our power to give [the students] everything they can to achieve their goals because we know their challenges they have to overcome to get to that point, and then when the [...] institution's barriers come up, that sets another challenge for them that shouldn't be there".

It was suggested by some participants that their ability to develop a partnership with universities was hampered by universities' belief that they were competing for students. One participant suggested that they felt universities did not want to partner with Regional Hubs as this would diminish the number of students living in on-campus residences as more people stayed in community, impacting university finances. They said:

They want their student to be living in their student accommodation that they've built. They don't really want them to be studying online. They want them to be filling up their accommodation and giving them extra income I guess. I feel like that's where the competition comes from. [...] Obviously they don't need accommodation if they're with us, well that takes away an income stream.

This was echoed by another participant who felt that universities did not want to engage in partnerships with Regional Hubs as they were a "bit cheesed off" that there was another higher education service entity in town providing services in an institution-neutral way. One participant characterised regional universities as the "worst partners" for Regional Hubs because, "regional universities feel like they have a footprint, have a catchment and feel like they own communities without actually necessarily asking those communities if they can or want to be".

Underpinning the partnerships between Regional Hubs and universities is often one or two key stakeholders within a university. One staff participant described an upcoming dinner with

a Vice-Chancellor who, despite visiting their Regional Hub wanted to visit again to build that partnership. This was echoed by a community member from the same Regional Hub, who said:

[University] are very supportive of [town] as well. We seem to have a very good relationship with those guys. Whether that's just because of the close proximity or not, I'm not sure. But [Vice-Chancellor] there has taken a passion for our little town. Not just this particular program but a whole bunch of stuff. So, we've been working with [University] on all kinds of things and trying to get more kids studying and adults as well.

Because of this relationship with the Vice-Chancellor and the partnership with the university, participants from this Regional Hub said that they were able to access more services delivered by the university, saying:

there is nothing so far that I haven't been able to ring them and ask for something to be sent, like, something to put out for them to reference or them to come out in person that they haven't been able to help me with so far.

This positive partnership between Regional Hub and university enables a Regional Hub to increase its widening participation activities through increased access to university resources and services. I should note that this raises the risk of partnerships being dependent on one or two relationships, which makes them subject to "key-person risk". If one of the people in the relationship that underpins the partnership leaves the sector or their position, it makes sustaining the partnership more difficult.

Regarding university partnerships as they pertain to being responsive to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and students of Regional Hubs, some participants expressed that in their experience university partnerships had not been as culturally aware as they could be. For example, one participant said that universities continued to deliver programs that were not culturally sound and, "do more damage to the students than good". Another participant said that the "systemic university world" did not recognise cultural values, and universities showed an inability to acknowledge or adapt their policies to be understanding of First Nations practices. The participant continued to say that:

Sometimes you just have to [say], you can't be there. Sometimes these things happen where you can't tell the university because it's cultural business so you can't share it and it's not just around men's and women's business it's other stuff.

Last, one participant expressed that their personal experience with a university had left them deeply distrustful of the university's intentions, saying, "they give lip service that they [support Aboriginal students] but real life is a different story".

However, one participant identified that through partnerships between their Regional Hub and universities there had been a shift in universities' approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and First Nations curricula. The participant said that they had "seen some awesome de-colonising stuff come out of [the partnership and] we are seeing a shift, [the university staff] are starting to recognise the unique—not only needs, but the talents of

the students too". This (in)ability of universities to be culturally sound in their partnerships will impact on Regional Hubs' ability to widen participation with First Nations communities.

There is a sentiment that university partnerships are not substantially important to Regional Hubs, and the survey findings suggest that Regional Hubs do not view these partnerships as important to their widening participation activities. When asked to rate the impact of different factors in the widening participation activities of Regional Hubs, participants gave university partnerships the lowest number of "most important" rankings of all of the partnerships. This perceived low-value partnership is demonstrated by the response of one interviewee who, when asked if their university partnership was critical to the Regional Hub, said, "I think it's critical to funding. I think it's good to build relationships. Is it critical to the purpose of [Regional Hub]? I would say, probably not".

To summarise this section on Regional Hub–university partnerships, this study has identified significant diversity in the opinions of Regional Hubs regarding the value and function of their university partnerships. It should be noted that this is only one set of perspectives and does not include how universities experience these partnerships. What this section does show is that there are challenges to Regional Hub–university partnerships, but with these challenges come opportunities. An increase in number and quality of partnerships benefit both Regional Hubs and universities, but most importantly, high-quality partnerships benefit students in a number of ways:

- increased knowledge of available study and support options
- increased delivery of courses that provide options for students—both currently enrolled and future students
- outreach activities that promote higher education aspirations and pathways
- financial support for Regional Hubs, providing better resources for students.

If these partnerships can be further developed and strengthened, these four outcomes will be realised, which in effect will widen participation in RRR communities.

7.3.2 Community partnerships

Two key community partnerships emerged through this research: partnerships between Regional Hubs and their local councils; and partnerships between Regional Hubs and the community at large. By this, I mean that hubs had existing relationships with several organisations in the community. Local councils were singled out as there was a greater response to this partnership than other community partnerships. Some of these community partnerships were facilitated by the governance of Regional Hubs, as they often had community organisation representation. Because of this governance–community conduit, I also include a discussion about Regional Hub–governance partnerships.

Regarding local council–Regional Hub partnerships, many participants expressed that these were strong, with many existing right from the application stage. For example, one participant said that their local council was their "founding partnership" as they helped with the initial investment and application but had since taken "more of a back seat" to the operations of the Regional Hub. Despite this, the participant said that "they're just happy to be there but not necessarily having so much input into what we're doing anymore". Two other participants indicated that their local councils helped set up their Regional Hub, particularly through financial means including a physical space. For example, one participant

said that their Regional Hub was in a council-owned building, and that they wanted to develop a “symbiotic” partnership with their council in that the Regional Hub receive subsidised rent and in return added value to the community by enabling access to higher education. This was echoed by another participant who indicated that the partnership between their Regional Hub and council was established at the outset, with the council providing a building to serve as the base for the Regional Hub, saying that:

Council did own a property that was regarded as suitable and we were happy—the elected members were happy for that to be offered as a base for a university Hub. So then it was a case of working with the property manager to get it set up, refurbished. That was quite a big job because it was really just a shell of a building.

However, this partnership had since diminished as the participant believed that the council had other financial priorities, and there had not “been an appetite” to invest new funding into the Regional Hub. The participant had hoped that this partnership would be strengthened in the future as they still had a positive partnership with some elected council members. These partnerships may proceed in formal or informal ways. For example, one participant described how excluding their council from the governance board was a “conscious decision”, yet despite this they still had a positive relationship with the councils in their areas:

in terms of partnership, I really rate [the local councils] highly because they can drive a lot of—well, we can assist them with their social planning, their strategies into the future and they really appreciate that I think so that works well.

These local council–Regional Hub partnerships may not inherently have a widening participation factor, but I suggest they promote the visibility of Regional Hubs and further embed them in their communities. This increased visibility and embeddedness means that more students can find them, or be referred to them, thus widening participation. Further, the status of a Regional Hub is elevated through its partnership with the local council as it follows that the status of the local council acts to provide validity or authority to the Regional Hub. This increased validity and authority could also influence the widening participation factor of Finding Two through increasing the trust of Regional Hub staff, affirming the student identity of Regional Hub users.

Regarding wider community partnerships, many participants recognised the importance of being strongly partnered to their community. This is demonstrated remarkably well by one participant whose Regional Hub often allowed community organisations to use its space at no cost. They said:

On the weekend, [Company] came in and did their training here with their staff, [we] have the football crews come here to do their upskilling for their refs and umpires and stuff. Anything that’s got skill-building, education, or whatever, this is what this hub is for.

When I asked if they charged organisations to use the space, the participant said that they did not, as there was very little cost to hosting them but enormous benefit to the community and to the Regional Hub if community groups used the space for upskilling. Further, as the Regional Hub was still testing what worked in the widening participation outreach space, the

participant said that they should be trialling different engagement tactics to “see what the community wants, and then we can grow from that”.

One of the ways in which Regional Hubs are building partnerships with their wider community is just by being visible. For example, one participant discussed how they sponsored a local netball team, while others were involved in running youth events. Not only did this lead to wider community-building, but it also promoted the Regional Hub to the community and built its profile. It also invited conversations about the purpose of the Regional Hub: one participant described how at an event they were running they were asked by the community, “what is it that you actually do? What subjects do you teach?” This type of interaction allowed for Regional Hub staff to better inform the community of their purpose and function.

The responses from the survey administered to Regional Hubs also demonstrate the importance of community partnerships. Survey participants indicated that the two most important factors in their widening participation efforts were local partnerships and community engagement. Of the 26 participants, 23 indicated that community engagement was either “very important” or “most important”, and 21 indicated that local partnerships were “very important” or “most important”. However, participants in the survey had a desire to grow these partnerships even further, with 42% of respondents wanting to increase their community and student engagement, and 25% wanting more meaningful partnerships. To summarise the importance of these partnerships, one participant said that “[community partnerships are] absolutely critical. Those partnerships are 100 per cent critical”. Underpinning these community partnerships is the fact that many Regional Hubs measure their success in terms of how their community views them. This is best summarised by a quote from a participant who was asked how they measured the success of their Regional Hub:

The community is satisfied that it can chart its educational future. So if it feels in control of the Community's educational future, that is success. That's the highest level of success.

This quote demonstrates the widening participation effects of good community–Regional Hub partnerships. Having the community invested in the outcome of the Regional Hub has an impact on the collective identity of the community in that higher education is accessible and important. This enhances the outcomes of Findings One and Two. However, these community partnerships should not be seen as altruistic on behalf of Regional Hubs as they also have real benefit for the operations of Regional Hubs. One quote from a participant discusses the value of having wide networks represented in the governance of their Regional Hub:

Our community arms, if you like, go out through just a whole range of our networks that the boards have. It's interesting, the board members, if we're looking for something, the board members will say oh, I know somebody who can help with that. Whether it be—now we've got [board member] on, he does a lot of pro bono and legal stuff for us as well as [another organisation], but before that we were reliant on connections being made in the local area with say solicitors who would give us advice and not charge us for it and stuff like that which I never felt comfortable with.

This quote demonstrates the benefit of having a governance structure that is ingrained in the community, and that Regional Hubs are considered valuable enough for someone to volunteer their time with. One of the interesting aspects of this research is the relationship between Regional Hubs and their governance structures. Many participants felt that the governance system worked well, and that they were well supported. However, there were some outliers. For example, one survey respondent said that they wished they had whistleblower protections as they felt they could not air grievances properly as their employer was in effect their board. This, the participant said, created a detrimental work environment, which limited the efficacy of the Regional Hub. While this was a minority opinion, it did arise and suggests that for proper community partnerships to be established there must also be good Regional Hub–governance partnerships.

To conclude this section on community partnerships, I reiterate the importance of community partnerships in widening participation. For the RUSH program to be successful, there must be strong, flexible, and sustained community partnerships. This is to ensure that the RUSH program is viewed positively in the community and to maximise the number of people who want to use Regional Hubs to upskill. Developing strong community partnerships ensures that students continue to use Regional Hubs and builds the culture of higher education in their communities. Regional Hubs should be beholden to their communities and champions of higher education. It should be noted, however, that partnership-building is time-consuming “unfunded” work, which currently limits Regional Hubs’ abilities in this regard.

7.3.3 Partnerships with other education providers

Partnerships between Regional Hubs and primary and secondary schools were seen by Regional Hubs as beneficial to growing the higher education ambitions of their communities, and many viewed Regional Hubs as a natural conduit between primary/secondary education and higher education. Growing the aspirational pool of students is a necessary aspect of both widening participation and ensuring that there is a continued and widened pipeline of future students. In this section, we discuss how participants viewed their partnerships with other education providers such as schools.

Most participants expressed either good or growing partnerships with primary and secondary schools. For example, one participant said they were “developing a really good partnership with the school here”, which had led to the Regional Hub running some programs in the school. Another said that developing a strong partnership with schools meant that the Regional Hub could be more responsive to their community’s needs, as they can assist schools in organising university ambassadors.

The value of Regional Hubs in building aspiration in students was recognised by one participant who said that the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) funding for universities was not sufficient to build capacity to deliver meaningful programs to connect young people to higher education. The participant said that their Regional Hub had stepped in to fill this void:

We walk in there now, and those kids know us really well. They go, oh, I was meaning to ask you, I wanted to know, what kind of jobs are in the mines? Then they can connect to us through our website, and send us a note, and we email them, the students, and whatever. So I think connection is key.

The type of partnership the participant was describing is crucial to the widening participation activities of Regional Hubs and reinforces the role of Regional Hub staff as relational navigators. Another participant described a similar scenario, but instead of HEPPP funding limiting the capability of universities to build aspiration in young people in their region, the program they ran in schools had limited impact as university staff would visit the community only to deliver the program. This further reinforces the point made in the previous finding that connections to the local community are integral to the success of the RUSH program.

This local community aspect was further identified by participants in the context of the RPPPP and school partnerships. For example, one participant who was involved in conducting an RPPPP program in a school said that:

running it through [Regional Hubs] is absolutely critical because even just the logistics of liaising with the schools, having local people come in and talk to the kids [...] the really big thing that came from our students when we were doing our Phase One was, we just want to hear real, like, actual stories of real life, and what it actually feels like and looks like and is like, and what's really hard about it, rather than just here's logistics. So that has been really good.

It should be noted that RPPPP funding was only available between 2022 and 2024, and not all participants in this study were part of the RPPPP funding scheme.

These partnerships enable widening participation through growing the aspirational pool of their local community by normalising higher education as a potential future for young people in RRR areas. Widening participation effects are heightened as Regional Hubs often employ locals who are familiar to (and trusted by) the young people, especially relative to the situation with university outreach-type programs. However, these findings need to be contextualised in the wider RUSH program, particularly regarding how little this type of partnership was discussed by the participants. Working with schools in this manner is not explicitly part of the core business of Regional Hubs and although many participants indicated they needed more funding (as per the survey results), there are insufficient funds to make this possible. Those doing this type of outreach and partnerships with schools without RPPPP funding are either doing it unpaid or re-organising funds to conduct partnership building.

To summarise this finding about partnerships, through a textual analysis of the interviews and surveys as well as drawing on my observations during site visits, I suggest there are three key partnerships that widen participation:

- Partnerships between universities and Regional Hubs: I suggest these partnerships widen participation through increased knowledge of available courses, services, and resources as well as financial services to Regional Hubs and increased outreach activities.
- Partnerships between communities and Regional Hubs: I suggest these widen participation by increasing trust and visibility of Regional Hubs, furthering their ability to create a culture of higher education in their communities.
- Partnerships between education providers and Regional Hubs: These widen participation through normalising higher education to young people.

To conclude this finding, it is important to discuss how these partnerships often work together to widen participation. In my observations, partnerships were pivotal to widening participation in Regional Hubs, though their effectiveness varied. Key patterns emerged around how these partnerships contribute—or sometimes fail to contribute—to broader access and participation goals.

There were standout examples of collaborative HEI partnerships where reciprocal value was clear. The students, staff, broader community, and universities all benefited, with partnerships offering tailored educational resources, responsive services, and community-aligned initiatives. For universities, these collaborations extended regional reach and strengthened community engagement, fostering a shared sense of purpose. However, not all partnerships demonstrated this reciprocity. For some Regional Hubs, the benefits were less obvious, with students expressing frustration about limited provider choices, which they felt restricted their educational pathways. Additionally, staff reported challenges in securing sustained engagement from the higher education sector. Some partnership efforts were described as unproductive and resource-intensive, with instances where the contributions of Regional Hubs to student success were perceived as undervalued or overlooked by institutional partners.

Community partnerships were the most visible and often most impactful. Many Regional Hubs operated from community-owned infrastructure under advantageous agreements, reinforcing place-based connections and long-term sustainability. These arrangements anchored Regional Hubs within the social and cultural fabric of their communities. Outreach activities highlighted a strong sense of “whole community” engagement, extending beyond Regional Hubs to include industry, local government, local schools, training organisations, and other educational providers. These collaborations reflected the potential of Regional Hubs to contribute meaningfully to the communities they serve, connecting diverse stakeholders to support local learning opportunities.

7.4 Finding Four: Regional University Study Hubs contribute to prosperous communities

Through upskilling the community to meet workforce shortages, adapting to changing economic needs, and working in partnership with industry, Regional Hubs contribute to prosperous communities. In the process of upskilling the local workforce, Regional Hubs further contribute to the economy by easing housing pressure. An additional impact of Regional Hubs is through enabling the public to stay in their community, as they do not need to travel outside of community to study, which has the economic benefit of reduced migration from RRR to metropolitan areas (that is, stopping the “brain drain”).

In this finding, I first discuss how some of the Regional Hubs had an explicit focus on regional development from their inception, before then discussing how participants viewed Regional Hubs’ contributions to the prosperity of their communities. I conclude with a discussion on the partnership between industry and Regional Hubs, as well as the impact that Regional Hubs have on keeping people in community.

For one participant, the goal of regional development was one of the reasons why the Regional Hub was started: “It was actually around workforce development right from the

start”. The participant continued by saying that at the time of the Regional Hub’s inception, the region was having a wider conversation about its severe lack of skilled workers, which coincided with vocational and higher education services declining in their area:

We just saw a real retraction of tertiary education provision in the region, at the same time that there was a massive—all this foreboding about the economic transition of the region basically being completely hammered by a lack of skills.

While not responding to an impending skills shortage like the above participant, another participant said that the regional development focus was part of their Regional Hub from “the outset”. The participant described how as part of their application for funds, they surveyed businesses, schools, and the wider community to assess where the industry gaps were so they could tailor services to meet those needs. The participant continued to say that this was necessary as they found it difficult to attract skilled talent to their community, and thus must grow their own talent. Both cases, and many others articulated through the research, demonstrate how the prosperity of communities runs through the design and delivery of each Regional Hub.

Many staff and community participants indicated that prosperous communities need a good business base, which in turn requires a sufficient workforce. For example, one participant said the goal of all places “should be to aim for a thriving community. To get a thriving community, you need healthy businesses”. The participant highlighted the role of the Regional Hub in supporting a thriving community, noting that it created a “local context” for students to pursue study pathways that aligned with local business and workforce needs. When asked what the future of their Regional Hub would look like, they said that they would like to see it develop an ability to promote soft skill learning to enable future students to adapt to the changing industry of their community. They said:

So, the social—I think the social learning and soft skill building is part of preparing for future workforces. I think there should be connections with, probably every business. The tricky bit with some of the businesses is, we’ve got different sizes. So, you’ve got small sizes which can walk through the front door, but you’re also dealing with HR departments in, maybe [Town] or someone else. With renewables coming through, you might not even know who to talk to, at this stage. But all of those links being really connected to here. Which means people have to do things probably a bit differently, but that’s the way I think you can provide really responsive training. Which then supports the industry to be competitive, which means they want to be here, and it’s a good place to live and all of that [...] in a workforce context, it would be great to mix that up a bit more.

This ability for Regional Hubs to be flexible and adaptive in the way they meet the economic needs of their communities was raised by other participants. For example, one participant discussed how, while they had been focusing on developing the pool of workers in the childcare and disability space, they were now moving into developing the aged-care workforce. A community member identified the economic benefits of Regional Hubs, not just through the increased skill capacity of the community, but because of the increased innovation that education can bring. The participant said:

Interviewer: So from a council perspective, do you see an economic benefit?

Interviewee: Absolutely, yeah absolutely. So people might move here because of this setup here. The fact that you will have people with higher education, you'll have people that are obviously earning and learning, which is a good thing. If they're learning they can instil some of those skills in what they're doing. But you're also bringing innovation to the community in my opinion. So I think that people that are being educated, every new idea that they can actually implement in the community that we live in. So that contributes to economic benefit, contributes to further innovation, definitely contributes to the economic activity of the town in my opinion.

Another participant reiterated the regional development that upskilling enables, particularly through utilising the untapped potential of residents. They said:

It is. It is a regional development because we want people to be able to actually be upskilled enough to apply [...] for work, and from their community, they have their own accommodation here, so it's the next step up for a lot of people. A lot of people in this area have had the potential, but they've just never had the actual qualification. So, this is allowing them now, with their potential, to actually utilise that and to go to the next level of staying in their area and encouraging their children as well, this is adults and encouraging the young children and teenagers to actually think about, you can stay in your local area. You can develop in your local area and grow and become whatever you want to be in your local area.

One student participant discussed how they had initially used the Regional Hub to study business, which led to a clerical job with a mining company. This exposure to the mining industry led them to study metallurgy, also using the Regional Hub. The participant said, "If I want to get into the mining industry, to be a mining professional, I have to upskill". This demonstrates the integration between local industry and Regional Hubs, while the reasons for the initial exposure to the Regional Hub was not necessarily to contribute to the local economy, but led to the long-term impact of developing the local economy.

One of the recurring themes from participants as to why they needed to upskill their local communities was because of housing pressure. As many RRR communities across Australia currently experience a shortage in supply of housing (Beer et al., 2024), upskilling those who are already residents in a community reduces housing pressure because it removes the necessity to fill vacancies with people moving to the community. This benefit was articulated by many participants, including one who discussed how their community could not fill vacancies in aged care or nursing because those who might want to move to their community could not find housing. They said:

I mean, economic development wise, it's about solving our problems with staffing, which are significant. The one beautiful thing about taking locals here and training them up, reskilling them, upskilling is that they don't have to go and find a house in town, they already live here, and housing's an issue everywhere. So I know for a fact we've got people working in aged care and nursing, who want to work more hours. But they can't get childcare or they want to move here from outside but they can't get accommodation. So success is upskilling our existing workforce to the point that they can provide more services and help with our shortage of staff, without having to build new houses.

Another participant echoed this statement, saying that one successful outcome of their Regional Hub would be to “increase the overall employability of people in [town]” as they had very low housing availability and low unemployment. The participant said that it was difficult to find people to fill gaps in the workforce, and if they did hire someone, they could not find housing for them. The participant said that this was starting to change as the Regional Hub was increasing the education level, which was impacting on the services to the community by filling roles with locals rather than having to attract them to their town. They said, “it just ticks a lot of those boxes without the problems of having to find homes for people or finding skilled people that want to come to the bush”.

Regional Hubs do not work in isolation in their contributions to the prosperity of their communities. For example, when asked if the partnerships were important to the functioning of Regional Hubs, one participant said that their partnership with industry was “incredibly critical”. The participant went on to discuss how one large company in their community had not historically “participated very well in community” but had recently begun to take apprentices from the local community and was using the Regional Hub to complete the study side of the apprenticeship. Another participant described how they were currently working with their local Regional Development Australia committee, local council, and industry to develop resources and programs that promote regional development. The participant said that while it was not their “core business”, they had taken the lead on this as the Regional Hub is community-owned and had contacts across the region.

Two participants—from separate Regional Hubs—identified room for growth in their partnerships with industry. One participant said that they found it challenging to promote the benefit of the Regional Hub to the community, particularly businesses. The participant said that despite the benefits to the business, which they suggested were more skilled workers that would give their business an advantage, they found it difficult to engage businesses to encourage their staff to use the Regional Hub. The second participant expressed a desire for employers in their community to engage the Regional Hub to develop their workforce in a more meaningful way, because in their experience businesses were happy to employ upskilled workers but did not want to assist in their upskilling. The participant said that they left one meeting thinking that industry did not “even have the audacity to acknowledge or be creative [to fix the skills shortage]” and they “want someone else to do the hard work”. These two participants’ views suggest that while some Regional Hubs have good partnerships with industry, there are other communities where the partnership could be stronger.

7.4.1 Staying in community

Regional Hubs impact on a person’s decision to stay or leave their communities. This effect, “staying in community” has economic consequences and can be considered widening participation. Many students, especially those who have recently graduated secondary school, face a dilemma: do they stay in community and not pursue their aspirations of higher education, or do they leave their community to study? Access to a Regional Hub helps students access higher education *and* stay in community.

There is evidence to suggest that once young people leave a rural environment to pursue higher education or employment in metropolitan areas, they are unlikely to return (Archer et al., 2024). When presented with a lack of opportunity, either education or employment, some young people will move away, creating what is often called the “brain drain”. The evidence

presented in this section suggests that Regional Hubs can work against the brain drain by keeping young people in community. For example, one student said, “I could see that the support offered through the [Regional Hub] here was a pretty good incentive to not move”. When I asked the student if they would have stayed in their hometown had the Regional Hub not been there, they said decisively “No, [I] 100 per cent wouldn’t have”. Having the ability to stay in community and study without having to leave family and friends was a common response from students, as demonstrated by one participant quote:

But for me, [studying in person] didn't really suit because I would have had to leave my rural area to move to a city to do that course ... The main reason I didn't really want to move away is because of my friends and family that I have up here ... I had great connection with my friends and I just love the rural community that I'm in. So I just didn't want to really leave all that behind just for educational purposes. So I would be very—it would be like I was leaving all the things that I loved behind just to pursue something, which I didn't think was fair because you need that kind of equalness between your life and your study life.

While many participants indicated that Regional Hubs allowed them to stay in community as they would otherwise have had to leave their community to study, there was one dissenting opinion. When asked if they would have left their community to study in the absence of a Regional Hub, they said they would not, but studying would have been more difficult. This is still in effect widening participation as it allows those who are not willing to move to achieve their aspirations of studying, but such students would experience more barriers to successful completion of their studies, and their likelihood of dropping out would increase (O'Callaghan et al., 2021). A further dissenting opinion came from one staff member who said that moving away from an RRR area to a big town was a “really valuable experience” that widens the worldview. However, the participant added the caveat that it was important for those who left to return to their communities with their widened worldview and new skills. However, these two opposing opinions are a minority in the data, which suggests that Regional Hubs help people to stay in community. One participant said that many people were studying for “workforce development” to work in the regions and “to stay here and not leave”. Another participant said that the Regional Hub aimed to “keep working professionals and prospective working professionals in town”. They continued:

[Students] don't have to leave town and go to [city] to go to uni. You can do uni here and you can continue working in the job where you've got an internship, or you've been working at since however long. It's keeping that workforce. We're so short staffed everywhere as it is. So, it's trying to get those people that, some have the ability to be away for uni and I guess it's keeping them here in the workforce in [community] while they're studying.

The staying in community factor is perhaps best summarised by the following quote from a student participant, who emphasised the multitude of connections to their community as a reason for wanting to stay. They said:

when the [Regional Hub] opened, it definitely helped me to think, oh, I can do all these things. I've got this beautiful space to work with, I've got this help and support, I've got all these different career paths I can take to get to my ultimate educational

goal. So yeah, that was a really big help and that did make me feel more comfortable staying in [community]. It gave me more of an idea that I can pursue the careers that I want to do without leaving my rural community.

To conclude this finding, it is useful to contextualise it against the other three findings. While Finding One–Three explicitly focus on the widening participation effects of Regional Hubs, this finding does not overtly relate to these widening participation functions. However, through their contribution to prosperous communities, Regional Hubs might foster a limited widening participation effect through impacting the culture of higher education. I suggest that the economic benefits that the Regional Hubs bring—either through skill development, developing workforces in areas of labour shortages, easing pressure on the housing stock, or through encouraging people to stay in community—the culture of higher education gains increased importance as it is seen to be economically valuable. This economic value is then associated with attaining higher education, thereby reinforcing the culture of higher education in a town, which acts as a positive reinforcement of student identity and the benefits that this brings, especially regarding increased retention.

To conclude the section, the four key findings are as follows: Regional Hubs widen participation through student identity creation and the physical space and access they provide. Staff play an essential role in this process by fostering self-efficacy and resilience in Regional Hub users, and act as relational navigators for students. The partnerships enabled by Regional Hubs also contribute to widening participation, with key partnerships identified with universities, communities, and other education providers—each serving distinct functions. Last, Regional Hubs contribute to prosperous communities by meeting local skills needs and enabling people to stay in their communities, thereby reducing the effects of the brain drain. In the next section I discuss the two-type typology I have developed, as well as the limitations of this research.

8. Proposed Operational-Distinction Model

A missing component of contemporary scholarship on the RUSH program is a robust typology. Despite efforts to establish typologies (such as Urbis, 2021), there is a significant gap in the literature in this regard. I seek to fill this gap with the Operational-Distinction Model, an experimental typological model that more fully encapsulates types of Regional Hub in the contemporary environment. Typologies are a “well-established analytic tool” as they assist in “forming and refining concepts, drawing out underlying dimensions, creating categories for classification and measurement, and sorting cases” (Collier et al., 2012, p. 217). Further, as George and Bennett (2005, p. 233) write, typologies can help us understand “complex phenomena without oversimplifying” the subject matter. In the context of this research, I have developed a typology, the Operational-Distinction Model, to facilitate deeper analysis of the RUSH program.

The purpose of creating a Regional Hub typology is not to needlessly group them together, as Regional Hubs are inherently bespoke by virtue of their community ownership. This typology instead serves as an analytical tool for future researchers, communities, and evaluations. For example, prospective communities seeking to access RUSH funding may not know which type of Regional Hub they want to pursue, but with the aid of this typology may gain a deeper understanding of which type will be best suited for their community. There may also be benefit for existing Regional Hubs in that the typology will help them to better describe themselves.

The Operational-Distinction Model was developed according to the principles of ideal-type typology. The “ideal” in ideal-type does not imply perfection but instead refers to certain elements that have commonalities and that can be grouped (Aronovitch, 2011). Drawing on Stapley et al.’s (2022; see also Stapley et al., 2021) guide on how to construct typologies using the ideal-type method, the typology was developed by summarising the data and then constructing, defining, and refining the types. The typology was then checked by others working in the Regional Hubs sector. It remains experimental pending more testing of the types.

In the Operational-Distinction Model, there are two distinct types of Regional Hub: the Partnered Course and General Institution-Neutral models. Central to this typology is the relationship that Regional Hubs have with universities. While all Regional Hubs have the core requirement to operate on an institution-neutral basis—providing access and support to students regardless of their enrolled institution—there are notable differences in how these partnerships influence operations. This section outlines the two types in the Operational-Distinction Model that emerge when various university partnerships are examined. This typology helps to clarify how institutional relationships affect student experiences, service delivery, and community engagement.

The Partnered Course Model characterises formal partnerships between Regional Hubs and universities to deliver or support specific courses. These Regional Hubs are actively involved in promoting and facilitating the academic and pastoral needs of students enrolled in their partnered programs. Key features of this model include the active promotion of specific

university courses aligned with local workforce needs, tailored academic and support services designed around these courses, and potential involvement of university staff in course delivery or supplementary teaching support. Marketing strategies are often aligned with partner university branding and offerings, and there is potential for co-designed curriculum delivery, providing clearer pathways to employment.

In contrast, the General Institution-Neutral Model describes Regional Hubs that operate agnostically: that is, while they maintain formal and informal partnerships with multiple universities, these partnerships do not dictate service delivery or influence student recruitment strategies. Instead, these Regional Hubs prioritise flexibility, allowing students to access support regardless of institutional affiliation. They provide equal support services to students from all institutions, avoid preferential promotion of university programs, and leverage partnerships for general service improvements. The focus here is on community needs and student choice, with an emphasis on place-based engagement to ensure responsiveness to local demand rather than institutional interests.

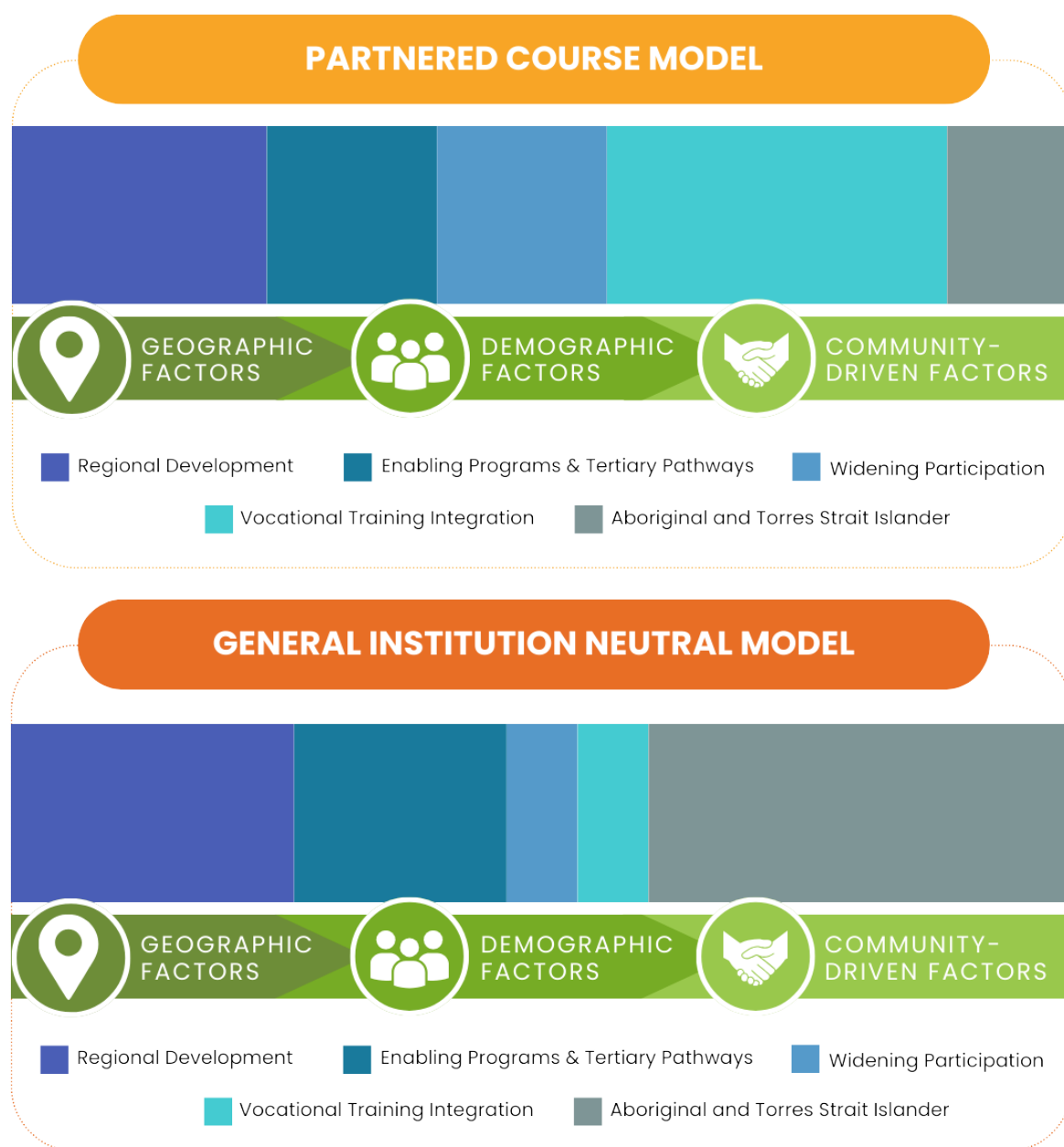
To classify Regional Hubs using this typology, several features of their operational characteristics have been assessed:

- Course promotion and recruitment practices: whether the Regional Hub actively promotes specific university courses, or has recruitment targets that are linked to specific institutions.
- The level of university involvement in delivery of content or support: the presence of university staff for on-site teaching.
- Service delivery features: the extent to which support services are tailored to specific institutional programs.
- Branding and marketing features: the prominence of university branding and co-branded community outreach activities.

Understanding these factors is essential for policymakers, practitioners, and communities seeking to enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of the RUSH program. Recognition of the different types of Regional Hub will provide critical insights into how they shape student access, support, and success. These models not only influence operational decisions but also affect the long-term impact of Regional Hubs in terms of addressing educational inequities in RRR communities.

Figure 8 shows the two types in the Operational-Distinction Model as well as the operational characteristics of each type. These characteristics are discussed in detail in the following sections.

Figure 8: A visual representation of the two-type Operational-Distinction Model typology



8.1 Partnered Course Model

Regional Hubs that fit within the Partnered Course Model primarily offer administrative, pastoral, and academic support tailored to specific partnered universities and their courses. These Regional Hubs emphasise tertiary pathways aligned with industry needs, providing course-specific teaching, clinical skills training, and placements. However, the sustainability of this model has declined because of the cessation of CSP allocations and the challenges of maintaining partnered courses in smaller communities. Despite its reduced prevalence, the Partnered Course Model remains relevant in Regional Hubs that serve a variety of communities, particularly where industry-driven programs can attract sufficient enrolment.

While Regional Hubs operating under this model maintain institution-neutral access as a condition of funding, their approach to neutrality differs from that of General Institution-Neutral Regional Hubs. Rather than providing broad support across all courses and institutions in a proactive manner, Partnered Course Regional Hubs often take a more reactive approach to students studying outside their partnered programs, offering general assistance but without the same level of structured academic or industry-aligned support.

The promotion of courses also differs between the models. Regional Hubs that fit into the Partnered Course Model actively promote specific programs aligned with their partnerships, ensuring students are aware of industry-relevant pathways and structured support services. In contrast, General Institution-Neutral Regional Hubs focus on promoting tertiary education broadly, providing students with information on multiple providers and pathways without favouring any HEI.

8.2 General Institution-Neutral Model

Regional Hubs within the General Institution-Neutral Model prioritise equitable access to tertiary education by proactively supporting students regardless of their institution or course. These Regional Hubs offer broad, generalist services, including academic skills support, administrative assistance, and pastoral care, without aligning with specific universities or programs. This model is particularly well suited to communities with diverse student cohorts, where demand for partnered courses may not be viable or sustainable.

Regional Hubs that fit into the General Institution-Neutral Model actively engage students from multiple institutions, providing comprehensive assistance that includes study skills development, mentoring, and access to digital and physical resources. This ensures that students receive consistent and structured support, regardless of their field of study or university affiliation.

Additionally, these Regional Hubs take a broad approach to course promotion, ensuring that students have access to information about a wide range of higher education pathways. Rather than promoting specific programs or institutions, they facilitate informed decision-making by offering impartial guidance on study options, application processes, and career pathways. This neutrality enables students to explore and select courses that best align with their individual aspirations and local employment opportunities, without institutional bias.

The flexibility of the General Institution-Neutral Model allows Regional Hubs to remain responsive to changing community needs. They can adapt their services based on local student demand, workforce requirements, and emerging education trends, ensuring that regional learners continue to have access to high-quality, locally supported tertiary education.

8.3 Underpinning operating characteristics

Five core operating characteristics have been identified through this research:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
- enabling programs and tertiary pathways
- regional development
- vocational training integration
- widening participation.

These operating characteristics, visualised in Figure 9, describe the way that Regional Hubs operate, but the priority of each is dependent on the Regional Hub, the needs of their community, and availability of resources (either financial or social capital). While these operating characteristics do not define the typology, they provide a high-level perspective of the operational characteristics that underpin the Operational-Distinction Model. The following characteristics offer deeper insight into the operational dynamics that support the distinctions within the typological model.

For both types, the emphasis placed on each characteristic differs. For example, widening participation is a characteristic of both the Partnered Course Model and the General Institution-Neutral Model. However, regional development is a more strongly emphasised characteristic of the Partnered Course Model than the General Institution-Neutral Model.

There is also variation within types: Wuyagiba Bush Uni, for example, falls within the Partnered Course Model but has a stronger Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander characteristic than does the Uni Hub Spencer Gulf, another Regional Hub in the same model. In this section, I summarise the operating characteristics before offering a visual guide on how these characteristics inform the typology.

Figure 9: Operating characteristics of Regional Hubs



8.3.1 Widening participation operating characteristics

Widening participation is a core function of most Regional Hubs, ensuring access to higher education for historically underserved students. Regional Hubs that emphasise widening participation implement equity-based approaches, providing tailored support to students from diverse backgrounds. A key aspect of this work is outreach and community engagement, extending beyond enrolled students to include prospective learners across the region. Regional Hubs often partner with schools, community organisations, and employers to raise awareness of educational pathways and encourage participation in higher education. Programs may include school-based initiatives, information sessions, and preparatory courses designed to build aspiration and readiness for tertiary study.

8.3.2 Regional development operating characteristics

Many Regional Hubs contribute to regional development by aligning their services with local economic growth strategies and workforce needs. These Regional Hubs work closely with industry, employers, and government agencies to ensure that higher education pathways support regional sustainability. Through targeted initiatives such as industry placements, work-integrated learning programs, and skills-based training, Regional Hubs play a role in strengthening local economies, increasing employment opportunities, and assisting in building long-term regional resilience by fostering direct connections between education and workforce demands.

8.3.3 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander operating characteristics

Some Regional Hubs operate with a strong commitment to supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, embedding culturally safe and community-driven educational practices. These Regional Hubs recognise the importance of First Nations knowledge systems, language, and connection to Country, creating learning environments that reflect and respect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Their programs often involve strong community partnerships and dedicated support services that address the unique challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners. This approach ensures that students are supported in ways that acknowledge their cultural identity while also facilitating access to mainstream higher education.

8.3.4 Enabling programs and tertiary preparation operating characteristics

Enabling programs are a key operational feature for Regional Hubs that support students in preparing for tertiary study. These programs assist individuals who may require additional academic skills, confidence building, or transition support before entering higher education. Regional Hubs collaborate with universities and education providers to offer foundation courses, bridging programs, and preparatory workshops. These services often cater to mature-age learners, individuals returning to study, and those from non-traditional academic backgrounds, ensuring that higher education remains accessible to a broader population.

8.3.5 Vocational training integration operating characteristics

Some Regional Hubs integrate vocational education alongside traditional university pathways, recognising the role of skills-based learning in regional workforce development and its potential to support lifelong learning. By providing access to both vocational training and higher education, these Regional Hubs create seamless educational pathways that not only meet immediate employment needs but also foster aspirations for further study. This integration enables students to build confidence, develop foundational skills, and transition into higher education, supporting long-term educational and career progression.

Collaborations with TAFE institutions, registered training organisations, and local employers allow Regional Hubs to offer hands-on training, upskilling opportunities, and pathways that

lead to immediate employment. This blended approach supports regional industries while also expanding post-secondary education choices for students.

8.4 Factors that influence operational characteristics

The difference between Regional Hubs in their emphasis on each operational characteristic can be explained by three key factors identified through this research:

- 1) geography and state-based factors
- 2) demographic factors
- 3) community-driven factors.

These factors influence operational characteristics because of the place-based nature of the RUSH program: Regional Hubs are inextricably linked to the physical location, the people in community, and the needs and wants of their communities by virtue of being community owned. These factors are interwoven, and at times overlap, as represented in Figure 10. The three factors are discussed in detail in the following sections.

Figure 10: Three key factors that influence the operational characteristics of Regional Hubs



8.4.1 Geography and state-based factors

The geographic distribution of universities across Australia significantly influences the operation of the RUSH program, particularly in states and territories where university campuses are concentrated in capital cities. While online education has expanded access to a broader range of providers, some regions have fewer universities offering fully online degrees, limiting students' options for flexible study pathways. This is particularly significant in industries such as health, education, and social work, where regulatory and accreditation requirements are set at the state level. As a result, students must consider not only course availability but also the ability to meet professional registration and placement obligations, making higher education participation more complex. For example, in states such as Western Australia (WA) and South Australia (SA), where university campuses are concentrated in metropolitan areas, students face additional logistical challenges in meeting these requirements.

To address these barriers, some Regional Hubs operate in a way that enables students to access industry-aligned courses by offering localised teaching, clinical skills training, and placements necessary for accreditation, all of which fit into the Partnered Course Model of this typology. Some Regional Hubs partner with state-based universities to strengthen pathways, while others collaborate with institutions outside their state to broaden course availability and provide alternative options for completing required components.

While WA and SA illustrate these challenges, they are not unique, as similar constraints exist in other regions where higher education infrastructure is centralised. Regional Hubs mitigate these barriers by connecting students with multiple providers, ensuring regional and remote learners can access accredited education without needing to relocate. This approach aligns with Australian higher education research, which highlights the importance of place-based strategies in improving regional student retention (Pitman, 2022).

8.4.2 Demographic factors

The demographic composition of RRR communities directly shapes the operations of Regional Hubs, influencing both service delivery and student support structures. Population size, age distribution, socio-economic background, and cultural diversity all impact the types of programs, outreach strategies, and student services required to ensure equitable access to higher education.

Many RRR regions have aging populations and declining youth retention rates, meaning that Regional Hubs must cater to a mix of school leavers, mature-age learners, and career changers (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2024). The demand for enabling programs, pathway courses, and flexible learning options is often higher in these areas, as students may require additional academic preparation or prefer to balance study with work and family responsibilities. Regional Hubs in communities with lower levels of tertiary attainment may also place a stronger emphasis on widening participation initiatives, embedding outreach programs that build aspiration and preparedness for university study.

Socio-economic factors also influence Regional Hub operations, as students from lower-income backgrounds often require additional financial and academic support to persist in higher education. Many Regional Hubs offer targeted assistance, such as scholarships, digital access support, and dedicated learning spaces to create an environment conducive to success. Given the significant overlap between socio-economic disadvantage and geographic isolation, these services play a critical role in reducing barriers to participation.

Regional Hubs must also respond to local migration patterns, including the presence of newly settled communities or industries that attract transient workforces. In areas with diverse cultural demographics, Regional Hubs may incorporate multilingual support, community-led mentoring, or partnerships with organisations that assist new arrivals in navigating the Australian higher education system. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, Regional Hubs play a vital role in providing culturally safe learning environments, mentors, and partnerships with local Elders, allowing students to study locally while staying on Country. Recognising and responding to these demographic trends ensures that Regional Hubs remain relevant and effective in addressing the needs of their communities.

8.4.3 Community-driven factors

Beyond geographic and demographic factors, the aspirations, priorities, and needs of local communities significantly shape the way Regional Hubs operate. Each is embedded within a unique regional context, where local industries, economic development goals, and cultural expectations influence the courses, partnerships, and services that Regional Hubs prioritise.

In regions with strong local industries—such as agriculture, mining, tourism, or renewable energy—Regional Hubs often develop targeted initiatives to align higher education pathways

with workforce demands. This may involve collaborating with universities and employers to facilitate industry placements, work-integrated learning opportunities, or tailored qualifications that support regional job markets. Some Regional Hubs work closely with local councils and economic development agencies to ensure their services contribute to long-term workforce sustainability and community growth.

The role of Regional Hubs as community anchors also means they engage in broader civic, social, and cultural initiatives beyond education. In areas where tertiary education participation has historically been low, Regional Hubs often serve as vital spaces for community engagement, providing outreach to schools, facilitating career transition programs, or hosting events that promote lifelong learning. This community-centred approach strengthens regional education ecosystems, fostering a culture where higher education is seen as a viable and accessible option.

Moreover, the governance structures of Regional Hubs—many of which involve local advisory boards or community partnerships—reinforce their place-based nature. These relationships ensure that Regional Hub operations are responsive to local needs and evolving regional priorities. By maintaining strong community ties, Regional Hubs adapt to emerging challenges, whether they be economic shifts, policy changes, or new educational demands.

While these community-driven influences vary across regions, they collectively highlight the importance of flexibility in Regional Hub models. The ability to respond to local aspirations, industries, and economic conditions ensures that Regional Hubs remain relevant and effective in their mission to expand access to higher education in RRR Australia.

8.5 Application of the Operational-Distinction Model

To illustrate the application of this typology, four case studies are presented here: two representing each of the Partnered Course and General Institution-Neutral models. This typing has been conducted using evidence collected during fieldwork, data collected in surveys, and my practitioner knowledge. These case studies provide practical insights into how the operational characteristics manifest in real-world settings and demonstrate how different factors influence operations of the Regional Hubs within each model. The four Regional Hubs I have typed are:

- Wuyagiba Bush University
- Uni Hub Spencer Gulf
- CUC Far West
- CUC Cape York.

These four were selected as they provide diverse examples of how the typology can be used. While all four Regional Hubs have the common goal of increasing higher education access in regional and remote areas, their operational priorities differ because of the unique characteristics of the communities they serve. This variation illustrates how, even within the same typological framework, approaches differ to reflect local needs. This highlights the

critical role of a place-based approach that prioritises community responsiveness over uniform operational strategies.

Wuyagiba Bush Uni and Uni Hub Spencer Gulf both operate within the Partnered Course Model and demonstrate how community context shapes priorities. Wuyagiba Bush Uni, located in a remote region with limited higher education provision, partners with Macquarie University to deliver first-year university units locally. This partnership addresses significant access barriers by creating structured academic pathways for students from regional and remote Aboriginal communities. The focus of Wuyagiba Bush Uni is strongly centred on cultural responsiveness. Curriculum co-design incorporates two-way learning approaches that value both Indigenous and Western knowledge systems, while cultural leaders are embedded in teaching to strengthen cultural identity and ensure learning remains deeply connected to community traditions. While widening participation is an essential objective, Wuyagiba Bush Uni places its primary emphasis on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific support, with less focus on broader regional development.

Conversely, Uni Hub Spencer Gulf uses the Partnered Course Model to prioritise regional development. Through partnerships with multiple universities, it offers a diverse range of courses aligned with the workforce needs of the communities it serves. This Regional Hub plays a vital role in addressing local skills shortages and supporting regional economic growth by fostering a “grow our own” skilled workforce approach. Collaboration with industry and community stakeholders ensures that educational offerings are closely aligned with regional economic priorities. Unlike Wuyagiba, where cultural responsiveness is central, Uni Hub Spencer Gulf’s operations are driven by the need to strengthen the region’s economic resilience through workforce-oriented education.

While the Partnered Course Model facilitates university-led delivery, the General Institution-Neutral Model allows Regional Hubs to operate independently of direct university partnerships. This flexibility enables them to provide student-centred support tailored to community needs. CUC Far West and CUC Cape York exemplify how this typology can be adapted to local contexts, with each prioritising different aspects of support.

CUC Far West focuses primarily on widening participation through outreach initiatives that showcase higher education pathways. In a region with historically low levels of higher education attainment, CUC Far West plays a pivotal role in building aspiration and awareness among potential students who may not have considered university as an option. By demystifying higher education, providing clear information on pathways, and supporting students throughout their educational journeys, CUC Far West addresses structural and informational barriers. This approach is particularly important in areas where the absence of visible university pathways can discourage participation. The CUC Far West emphasis on outreach contributes to regional growth by ensuring students understand how higher education can fit into their lives and benefit their communities.

In contrast, CUC Cape York, while also committed to widening participation, places a strong emphasis on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-specific support. The demographic composition and cultural context of Cape York influence a model that prioritises culturally responsive education. CUC Cape York creates a learning environment that respects and reflects local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems, cultural practices, and community aspirations. Its approach ensures that educational experiences are not only accessible but also meaningful and relevant, strengthening cultural identity and community

connection. By embedding cultural leadership and support within its operations, CUC Cape York addresses the unique challenges faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in accessing and succeeding in higher education.

These examples demonstrate that regardless of typology—whether the Partnered Course Model or the General Institution-Neutral Model—operational characteristics play a defining role in shaping hub operations. This underscores that the effectiveness of Regional Hubs lies in their ability to adapt their approaches to reflect the specific aspirations, cultural contexts, and economic priorities of the communities they serve.

To further demonstrate the application of the Operational-Distinction Model, Table 8 categorises the 34 Regional Hubs operating at the time of writing.

To conclude this section on the Operational-Distinction Model, I suggest that using this model allows for deeper analysis into the relative success of Regional Hubs and will facilitate further research and thinking on the subject. I invite other academics, practitioners, and policymakers to test, re-test, and retheorise this typology because greater scrutiny of the RUSH program will benefit the RRR communities they serve.

Table 8: Categorisation of the 34 Regional Hubs operating at the time of writing

Regional Hub Name	Location (State)	Cohort	Model
Geraldton Universities Centre	Geraldton (WA)	One	Partnered Course
Pilbara Universities Centre*	Karratha, Port Headland (WA)	One	Partnered Course
Arnhem Land Progress Aboriginal Corporation	Nhulunbuy, Galiwin'ku, Ramingining (NT)	One	General Institution-Neutral
Wuyagiba Bush Uni*	Wuyagiba, Southeast Arnhem Land (NT)	One	Partnered Course
Barossa Regional University Campus	Nuriootpa (SA)	One	General Institution-Neutral
Murray River Study Hub	Murray Bridge, Berri (SA)	One	General Institution-Neutral
Uni Hub Spencer Gulf*	Port Augusta, Port Pirie (SA)	One	Partnered Course
Goondiwindi Regional University Centre	Goondiwindi (Qld)	One	General Institution-Neutral
CUC Clarence Valley	Grafton (NSW)	One	General Institution-Neutral
CUC Far West	Broken Hill (NSW)	One	General Institution-Neutral
CUC Goulburn	Goulburn (NSW)	One	General Institution-Neutral
CUC North West	Narrabri, Moree (NSW)	One	General Institution-Neutral
CUC Snowy Monaro	Cooma (NSW)	One	General Institution-Neutral
CUC Western Riverina	Griffith, Leeton (NSW)	One	General Institution-Neutral
Gippsland East Study Hub*	Bairnsdale (Vic)	One	General Institution-Neutral
Study Hub West Coast*	Zeehan, Circular Head (Tas)	One	General Institution-Neutral
Greater Southern Universities Centre	Albany (WA)	Two	Partnered Course
Uni Hub Spencer Gulf Copper Coast University Centre*	Kadina (SA)	Two	Partnered Course
CUC Balonne	St George, Dirrandandi (Qld)	Two	General Institution-Neutral
CUC Maranoa	Roma (Qld)	Two	General Institution-Neutral
CUC Macleay Valley	Kempsey (NSW)	Two	General Institution-Neutral
CUC Parkes	Parkes (NSW)	Two	General Institution-Neutral

Regional Hub Name	Location (State)	Cohort	Model
CUC Southern Shoalhaven	Ulladulla	Two	General Institution-Neutral
Taree Universities Campus	Taree (NSW)	Two	Partnered Course
CUC Bass Coast	Wonthaggi (Vic)	Two	General Institution-Neutral
CUC Ovens Murray	Wangaratta, Corryong, Mansfield (VIC)	Two	General Institution-Neutral
Kimberley Universities Centre*	Broome (WA)	Three	Partnered Course
Lumen Wheatbelt*	Narrogin, Merredin, Wongan Hills, York (WA)	Three	General Institution-Neutral
Uni Hub Spencer Gulf*	Port Lincoln (SA)	Three	Partnered Course
Uni Hub Spencer Gulf*	Roxby Downs (SA)	Three	Partnered Course
CUC Cape York**	Cooktown (Qld)	Three	General Institution-Neutral
CUC Mount Isa**	Mount Isa (Qld)	Three	General Institution-Neutral
Tablelands University Centre*	Atherton (Qld)	Three	General Institution-Neutral
CUC Mallee	Swan Hil (Vic)	Three	General Institution-Neutral

Note: WA, Western Australia; NT, Northern Territory; SA, South Australia; Qld, Queensland; NSW, New South Wales; Vic, Victoria; Tas, Tasmania.

Regional Hubs operate under a range of governance structures. Some follow a centralised governance model*, where a single entity oversees one or more Regional Hubs, streamlining administration while maintaining local engagement. Others, such as those linked to a CUC, are network affiliated** and locally governed by an independent board but supported by CUC Central for systems, expertise, and resources, allowing local staff to focus on students and community needs. Some Regional Hubs are independent entities that are newly established body corporates, granting full local control but requiring strong governance frameworks.

Regardless of structure, all Regional Hubs must demonstrate community ownership and governance processes that ensure transparency, accountability, and long-term sustainability.

9. Discussion

In this short discussion, I reflect on how I experienced conducting the research as a practitioner, before presenting the limitations of the research, and conclude by suggesting areas for future research.

My first reflection is on my role as a practitioner conducting research, and some of the difficulties I experienced because of this. While I am an experienced practitioner, I found it difficult to navigate some of the research elements. For example, managing the ethics process and the other requirements of research (such as a Research Data Management Plan) were difficult, and as they occurred at the outset of the research it felt demoralising to begin the research journey in this manner. While I acknowledge the benefits of ACSES funding more practitioner-led research, I feel that this needs to be coupled with academic assistance from the outset of the project for practitioners to succeed.

The second reflection also relates to my role as a practitioner from a regional area; however, rather than being a barrier, I believe this strengthened this research because my experience living and working in a regional community gave me an authentic understanding of place, relationships, and the nuances that shape access to higher education.

My third reflection is that through this research I am reminded of the importance of being a practitioner: as a practitioner I felt I could navigate the complex interpersonal relationships of Regional Hubs more easily as I have had to do this over the past decade in my professional capacity. I do not view myself as an outside academic flying into regional areas, extracting information, then publishing from it to benefit myself. I instead view myself as a practitioner who is deeply invested in the RUSH program and working with Regional Hubs to improve the program.

The fourth reflection relates to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. My time at Wuyagiba Bush Uni was a transformational time for me, and I have a deep appreciation for the contributions of the community, whose generosity, knowledge, and cultural strength profoundly shaped my understanding of place-based education. I would advise future researchers who are outsiders to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with whom they are researching that they will require a deep knowledge of the community and Country, and need to act flexibly (and appropriately) when encountering new cultural knowledge and practices.

I have identified two key limitations to this research: the time pressures of conducting research of this size and scope, and the small sample size of the research. Addressing the first limitation, that of time, I had originally planned to visit thirteen Regional Hubs, but time constraints meant that I had to scale this back to nine. Even this reduced number produced over 40 hours of recorded interview material, and it would have required substantially more time to analyse additional interview data. Compounding the issue of time in this research was the subject matter itself: regionality. As I live regionally and had to travel regionally to visit the Regional Hubs, there was significant time (and cost, discussed later) involved in my travel for the fieldwork. Figure 11 illustrates the travel path I took to visit the Regional Hubs. The image was made with Travelmap and depicts the flights (in grey) and driving routes (in blue) that I took through this fieldwork: an estimated 28,000 kilometres of air travel and 6,800

kilometres of driving. This travel time should be seen not as a limitation of this study, but a natural byproduct of conducting research in RRR areas as a RRR person. However, it does need to be acknowledged that this is a unique barrier that I—and other RRR researchers—face.

Figure 11: Travel to and from the Regional Hubs to my home in Broken Hill



An additional implication of the travel necessary for this research was the associated cost. As RRR areas are poorly serviced by airlines (Commonwealth of Australia, 2024), the cost of travelling to the Regional Hubs for fieldwork was large. I am thankful for funding support that enabled this travel, as it was necessary for this research.

Additionally, the lack of literature on Regional Hubs compounded the limitation of time, as considerable time had to be spent gathering both primary and secondary sources to adequately establish the context for the research to build on. Where there is literature on Regional Hubs, it does not typically examine the program as a whole, and where there is government data about Regional Hubs it is often fragmented and inconsistent across networks and Regional Hubs. While I acknowledge Department of Education staff as exceptionally helpful in this research—particularly in providing the data they did hold—I found the lack of consistency across systems a particular frustration in this research. I acknowledge that the RUSH program is still in its infancy and thus it is understandable that there are some growing pains regarding data collection and analysis. I look forward to robust frameworks of evaluation and analysis to be rolled out in time.

The second limitation relates to the sample size of this research. The sample of Regional Hubs where observations and interviews took place was smaller than I had planned, but I believe the analysis is nonetheless rigorous. I conducted research with an appropriate cross-section of Regional Hubs (typology, cohort, state/territory) and with an appropriate number of participants. This represents a careful balance between what is possible with available time and funding and what constitutes good, reliable research. However, the implication of this sample size is that there may be some difficulty in generalising the findings across Regional Hubs. Further, there is some risk that the findings as presented here cannot be generalised into the future given that the Regional Hub user is changing, community needs change, and communities continue to experience migration.

While this study presents useful insights into the RUSH program, considerably more research is needed in this area. I have listed some of the future potential avenues of research that I believe will aid in our understanding of Regional Hubs:

- The community ownership structure of the RUSH program is a unique feature that may contribute to their success. Further research could investigate whether there is a relationship between a Regional Hub's success and its governance model, to better understand how community-led approaches may impact outcomes.
- Inter-hub learning practices require further study. Regional Hubs are frequently in contact with each other, through both formal and informal means, and these interactions should be studied to inform best-practice principles.
- The effectiveness of staffing models, and other operational factors, need to be better understood to determine how they impact on widening participation.
- The impacts of the diverse employment practices of the sector need to be better understood. For example, many contracts do not include provisions for long service leave or adequate redundancy plans. This needs to be studied in the context of building community trust and support for Regional Hubs; if staff, who are often well liked, are negatively impacted by a Regional Hub's staffing model this may lead to negative public perceptions about the program.
- The impact of Regional Hubs on their regional economy requires investigation. While this research has identified a relationship between Regional Hubs and the economies they service, this has only scratched the surface.
- Last, further analysis is needed using the Operational-Distinction Model I have proposed in this research. For example, the typology could be used to assess and compare the effectiveness of Regional Hubs on widening participation, or compare their economic impacts, according to type. This is a non-exhaustive list, as there are a plethora of potential applications of the Operational-Distinction Model.

Those conducting further research should appreciate the place-based nature of Regional Hubs and ensure that their methodologies reflect this. For example, being on Country and in community is a vital component of understanding Regional Hubs and I encourage future researchers to incorporate this into their research. While it can be considerably more expensive and time intensive, as demonstrated through the above reflections, being present in the RRR areas under study is essential to fully grasp the impact of Regional Hubs.

In this discussion I have included my reflections and limitations of the research. As a practitioner conducting research, I experienced several barriers that are unique to the practitioner status, such as navigating ethics and research procedures. Further, the

considerable cost of being a regional practitioner travelling to RRR areas to conduct research acted as a barrier. Nevertheless, I found the experience of visiting Regional Hubs incredibly fulfilling and key to the success of this research.

10. Conclusion

This research demonstrates the efficacy of Regional Hubs in widening participation in higher education and the mechanisms that enable this widening participation (Finding One–Three); further, that Regional Hubs contribute to prosperous RRR communities (Finding Four). In addition to these four findings, I provide a characterisation of Regional Hubs in the Operational-Distinction Model, a two-type typology that will facilitate a future deeper analysis of Regional Hubs. In this section, I summarise the four findings and the Operational-Distinction Model and consider the long-term future of the RUSH program.

Finding One suggests that Regional Hubs widen participation. A recurring theme from student participants of this research was that their Regional Hub enabled them to pursue higher education, which is in effect widening participation. This was echoed by staff and community members through interviews, as well as in the survey itself. Two contributing factors widening participation emerged: the creation of a student identity in users of Regional Hubs and a culture of higher education in the community. International evidence suggests that a high level of identity as a student is positively correlated with student retention and success. Therefore, when users of a Regional Hub *feel* more like a student, they are more likely to succeed in their studies. Further, the culture of higher education that the Regional Hub helps to foster acts to reinforce this student identity because the perceived value of studying is improved and the peer feedback they receive for studying is greater. This reinforces their student identity, again leading to increased retention and positive academic benefits.

The second identified attributive factor in Regional Hubs' ability to widen participation is access to a Regional Hub and features of the physical space itself. Regarding the former, participants said that having access to a Regional Hub outside "business hours" made studying easier; therefore, they were more likely to study. Further, the issue of safe access was raised by some participants, indicating that safety was a consideration for students in deciding to use Regional Hubs. The facilities of Regional Hubs such as a kitchen, and amenities such as high-speed internet, were also recognised by participants as important features of Regional Hubs. Both these factors (identity and space) contribute to the widening participation effects of Regional Hubs. This finding should also be viewed in the context of the postcode analysis I conducted in this research, which suggests that in areas within a 30-minute driving radius of a Regional Hub there was a greater increase in enrolments in higher education than in areas without a Regional Hub.

Finding Two is that staff have an essential role in the widening participation effects of Regional Hubs. The impact of staff in widening participation was a prominent theme in the evidence collected in this study. Students reported that staff were well liked and responsive to their needs. I suggest that this positive relationship acts to reinforce the student identity developed through use of a Regional Hub. The evidence also suggests that staff of Regional Hubs act as relational navigators, acting to build self-efficacy and resilience in students who use them. I suggest that both the positive effects on student identity and the relational navigation further increase retention and other favourable outcomes of Regional Hubs.

Finding Three is the importance of partnerships in the widening participation functions of Regional Hubs. I identified three key partnerships that Regional Hubs have: those between

themselves and universities/HEI; communities; and primary/secondary schools. These partnerships are dynamic, and participants expressed a range of views on their strengths and challenges. These partnerships also impact on widening participation in different ways; for example partnerships with universities/HEIs widen participation through increased resources (academic and financial) and services, while partnerships with the community impact on the culture of higher education in the community. Last, partnerships between Regional Hubs and other education providers such as primary/secondary schools work to expose young people to higher education and grow the higher education aspirations of those in the community.

Finding Four is that Regional Hubs contribute to prosperous communities. While this research did not set out to understand the impacts of Regional Hubs on economies, this was a recurring theme across the data collected. I identified several ways in which Regional Hubs can contribute to prosperous communities, including an ability to develop workforces in industries that experience labour shortages, and how the upskilling of the local workforce can ease pressure on the housing stock. I also suggest that Regional Hubs enable people to stay in community, contributing to prosperous communities. I suggest that Regional Hubs work to stop the “brain drain” from RRR communities to metropolitan areas as individuals do not have to leave their communities to pursue higher education or upskill. It should be noted that more research is needed on this, as this research was not designed to assess regional development: economic analysis should be undertaken. Regardless, the evidence collected and presented in this report suggests that Regional Hubs do contribute to more prosperous communities, even if the contribution cannot be quantified.

In addition to the four findings, I present the Operational-Distinction Model, an experimental two-type typology that categorises Regional Hubs as following either a Partnered Course or a General-Institution-Neutral model. The Partnered Course model emphasises tertiary pathways aligned with industry needs and offers academic support tailored to specific universities or courses, whereas the General Institution-Neutral model provides equitable access to tertiary education by offering broad, generalist services. In determining which type a Regional Hub belongs to, I considered several types of operational focus:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- regional development
- enabling programs and tertiary pathways
- widening participation
- vocational training integration.

Both models have a mix of these characteristics, but Regional Hubs that fit into the Partnered Course Model tend to have an operational focus more on regional development while those that fit the Institution-Neutral Model have more of an operational focus on widening participation and enabling programs/tertiary pathways. The emphasis of each characteristic assigned to a Regional Hub is dependent on three types of factor: geographic, demographic, and community driven. I have typed all existing Regional Hubs in Table 8, and this should provide the basis for future academics, researchers, and practitioners to use this two-type typology in their own research. As this is an experimental typology, I encourage those in the sector to test the typology and publish their results, as a strengthened typology will benefit the sector, particularly through allowing prospective communities to understand what type of Regional Hub would meet the needs of their communities.

These four findings, and the Operational-Distinction Model, were established through a mixed-methods approach: interviews with 57 stakeholders across three participant categories (student, staff, community), a survey to 26 Regional Hubs, and ethnographic observations at the 9 Regional Hubs I visited. These methods represent a delicate balance between what was doable in a one-year Fellowship and what was necessary to answer the research goals of this research, chiefly the efficacy of Regional Hubs in widening participation.

Placing this research in its wider societal context demonstrates the importance of this and other research on Regional Hubs. There is a substantial gap in our knowledge of whether, how, and why, Regional Hubs work. Considering the RUSH program is continuing to expand, the need for high-quality research is greater than ever. Further, the relevance of this research is cemented by the Accord's lofty goal of increasing higher education participation to 80%; to meet this goal the number of people participating in higher education in RRR areas must increase.

However, the importance of the RUSH program is not simply as a policy tool for increasing higher education participation, but as a way to tap into the minds of RRR communities so they can contribute to Australian and global challenges. To meet the challenges of the twenty-first century, and to prepare for those of the twenty-second century, the intellectual contribution of those who live in RRR communities must be developed and recognised. People from RRR areas can make important contributions to tackling issues like climate change, global food scarcity, renewable energy, and the revitalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and custom. Having access to higher education will enable them to make their contributions more effectively.

The recommendations I made at the beginning of this report will strengthen the RUSH program. These recommendations include funding more Regional Hubs; strengthening funding mechanisms to focus on flexibility and innovation; developing and implementing standards of practice across the sector; and strengthening partnerships between Regional Hubs and their stakeholders. The recommendations are based on the corpus of evidence I have collected and reflect both this evidence and my thinking as a practitioner working in this area for nearly a decade. These recommendations, if adopted, will strengthen the RUSH program and improve its widening participation effects. In addition to these recommendations, the partnership guide that I have developed can serve to enhance partnerships between Regional Hubs and universities, further strengthening the RUSH program.

In Section 4.2, I discussed the user profile of Regional Hubs. I am—or rather, I was—the typical user. An “equity” student. A woman with family responsibilities, raising a child with a disability, working full-time, and juggling countless community commitments. Middle-aged, living in a geographically isolated community, without friends or family who had pursued higher education. There was no one around me who could influence or even fully understand my desire to take that path.

My journey into higher education was not linear. I entered postgraduate studies through a vocational pathway, but despite working in higher education for years, I did not hold a qualification myself. Time and time again, I started postgraduate coursework, but never had the confidence or tools to persist.

That changed when CUC Far West opened.

CUC Far West did not just provide a space; it provided a possibility. It was there that my student identity was finally able to take shape. The barriers that had always held me back—geography, finances, and a lack of support—no longer stood in my way. I did not necessarily feel connected to my education provider, but I felt connected to CUC Far West. The space itself, and the people within it, made all the difference.

I asked participants in the interviews how they would define the success of Regional Hubs. To me, success of a Regional Hub will be when every person—regardless of background or circumstance—can experience that same transformation. When the barriers we discuss today no longer exist. When walking into a Regional Hub means walking into opportunity. A place where anyone can see themselves as a student. Where they know they belong. Where they can thrive, and where they will succeed.

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Appendix A: Data on type of educational institution attending, by postcode

Note that the EHE and EVE in this appendix mean Enrolment in Higher Education and Enrolment in Vocational Education respectively and refer to the number of people in that postcode who are enrolled in either higher or vocational education.

Western Australia

Cohort	Hub	Place	Postcode	2021 EHE	2021 EVE	2016 EHE	2016 EVE	2011 EHE	2011 EVE
One	Geraldton Universities Centre	Geraldton	6530	541	870	504	663	366	745
One	Pilbara Universities Centre	Karratha	6714	266	427	246	306	227	327
One		Port Hedland	6721	84	103	100	90	78	90
Two	Great Southern Universities Centre	Albany	6327	4	5	0	0	0	11
Two			6326	6	8	7	14	4	14
Two			6330	634	896	479	795	445	971
Three	Kimberley Universities Centre	Broome	6713	19	26	10	14	27	18
Three			6714	266	427	246	306	227	327
Three			6718	6	6	4	7	6	19
Three	Lumen Wheatbelt Regional University Study Hubs	Narrogin	6309	3	0	0	6	0	5
Three			6311	5	7	9	5	10	7
Three			6312	68	95	61	74	52	109
Three			6313	7	4	0	8	3	9
Three			6370	5	3	0	3	3	12

Cohort	Hub	Place	Postcode	2021 EHE	2021 EVE	2016 EHE	2016 EVE	2011 EHE	2011 EVE
Three		Merredin	6413	0	0	0	0	0	3
Three			6414*						
Three			6515	37	51	23	58	3	4
Three			6421	0	0	0	0	0	3
Three			6480						
Three		Wongan Hills	6603	8	23	17	16	3	15
Three			6605*						
Three			6571*						
Three		York	6302	30	33	27	47	35	51
Three			6304	15	25	15	13	15	20
Three			6401	100	146	93	133	83	170
Three			6403	3	4	0	8	4	9
Four	Ashburton University Study Hub	Onslow	6710	8	21	53	67	28	43
Four		Tom Price	6751	46	48	82	74	80	89
Four	Katanning Study Hub	Katanning	6316	6	7	3	8	0	7
Four			6317	32	99	38	87	23	167
Four			6318	5	12	10	7	0	0
Note: *postcode changed before 2016 but the data column was empty so has been deleted									

South Australia

Cohort	Hub	Place	Postcode	2021 EHE	2021 EVE	2016 EHE	2016 EVE	2011 EHE	2011 EVE
One	Barossa Regional University Campus	Nuriootpa	5118	654	356	559	359	464	431
One			5350	21	16	8	9	14	8
One			5351	169	130	156	92	120	138
One			5352	121	86	103	71	88	101
One			5353	62	56	63	62	44	104
One			5355	165	171	105	123	98	175
One			5356	8	21	8	9	3	15
One			5360	34	30	27	16	9	16
One			5371	53	41	38	22	39	34
One			5372	58	65	48	50	51	57
One	Murray River Study Hub	Murraylands (Murray Bridge)	5253	308	373	303	324	225	378
One			5255	242	202	184	153	172	163
One			5260	26	28	10	17	19	27
One			5254	35	36	49	22	34	57
One		Riverlands (Berri)	5343	68	94	60	79	58	123
One			5345	44	57	12	14	29	65
One			5344	10	17	31	53	12	21
One			5342	7	16	9	13	12	30
One	Uni Hub Spencer Gulf	Port Augusta	5700	174	186	105	157	111	179
One		Port Pirie	5540	209	255	168	263	120	234
One			5495	11	11	9	10	0	4
One			5523	24	31	30	27	17	27

Cohort	Hub	Place	Postcode	2021 EHE	2021 EVE	2016 EHE	2016 EVE	2011 EHE	2011 EVE
Two	Copper Coast University Centre	Kadina	5554	64	91	37	67	44	97
Two			5556	0	4	4	6	9	6
Two			5558	50	65	32	43	18	61
Three	Uni Hub Spencer Gulf – Port Lincoln	Port Lincoln	5606	210	265	184	203	149	308
Three			5607	59	68	47	49	37	80
Three	Uni Hub Spencer Gulf – Roxby Downs Outreach	Roxby Downs	5722	4	0	3	3	3	3
Three			5725	72	81	82	105	84	149
Four	Fleurieu Study Hub	Victor Harbor	5202	16	18	13	8	13	12
Four			5203	22	17	18	6	8	17
Four			5211	269	239	209	187	151	242
Four			5212	35	36	33	23	28	28
Four			5213	27	25	24	14	14	22

Queensland

Cohort	Hub	Place	Postcode	2021 EHE	2021 EVE	2016 EHE	2016 EVE	2011 EHE	2011 EVE
One	Goondiwindi Regional University Centre	Goondiwindi	4498	6	0	3	0	4	3
One			4390	129	111	128	97	93	126
One			4388	0	8	3	3	3	8
Two	Country Universities Centre Balonne	St George	4487	55	39	47	31	34	42
Two		Dirranbandi	4486	13	4	13	6	8	9
Two	Country Universities Centre Maranoa	Roma	4455	177	158	164	154	117	167
Two			4461*						
Two			4428	9	4	6	5	10	3

Cohort	Hub	Place	Postcode	2021 EHE	2021 EVE	2016 EHE	2016 EVE	2011 EHE	2011 EVE
Three	Country Universities Centre Cape York	Cooktown	4895	49	55	36	50	37	49
Three	Country Universities Centre Mount Isa	Mount Isa	4825	416	373	418	321	339	401
Three	Tablelands University Centre	Atherton	4880	171	197	193	117	164	128
Three			4882	69	30	35	25	25	32
Three			4883	145	147	132	95	119	89
Three			4885	65	42	55	38	51	50
Three			4886	7	14	4	9	9	6
Four	Cassowary Coast University Centre	Innisfail	4858	14	14	20	12	9	17
Four			4859	4	7	4	13	6	4
Four			4860	160	166	157	124	135	168
Four			4871	117	113	109	89	147	117
Four	Country Universities Centre RAPAD Central West Queensland	Barcaldine	4725	29	17	28	10	27	30
Four		Bedourie	4829 / 4482 **	7	10	15	9	0	4
Four		Boulia							
Four		Birdsville							
Four		Blackall	4472	14	11	13	10	16	14
Four		Jundah	4736	0	0	0	5	7	3
Four		Longreach	4727	5	11	0	5	3	3
Four			4730	69	52	64	68	47	68
Four		Winton	4733	5	0	5	0	3	4
Four			4735	6	13	16	12	19	20
Four		Warwick	4370	324	327	291	281	260	304

Cohort	Hub	Place	Postcode	2021 EHE	2021 EVE	2016 EHE	2016 EVE	2011 EHE	2011 EVE
Four	Country Universities Centre Southern Downs		4362	37	40	32	36	38	45
Four			4372	5	0	0	0	3	3
Four			4373	10	6	12	16	16	9
Four	Country Universities Centre Western Downs	Chinchilla	4413	108	139	76	134	65	111
Four			4412	4	3	5	0	4	4
Four			4411	3	0	0	0	0	9
Note: *postcodes were separated in 2016									

New South Wales

Cohort	Hub	Place	Postcode	2021 EHE	2021 EVE	2016 EHE	2016 EVE	2011 EHE	2011 EVE
One	Country Universities Centre Clarence Valley	Grafton	2460	495	664	401	685	423	737
One			2462	31	48	13	52	27	76
One	Country Universities Centre Far West	Broken Hill	2880	314	450	263	431	237	572
One			5440	209	255	5	3	3	4
One	Country Universities Centre Goulburn	Goulburn	2580	747	833	618	611	513	787
One	Country Universities Centre North West	Moree	2398*						*
One			2399	6	0	3	9	6	17
One			2400	163	165	151	158	148	222
One		Narrabri	2390	148	208	113	145	115	229
One	Country Universities Centre Snowy Monaro	Cooma	2626	9	8	13	5	17	10
One			2630	183	225	181	168	124	259
One		Griffith	2680	491	583	357	449	345	572

Cohort	Hub	Place	Postcode	2021 EHE	2021 EVE	2016 EHE	2016 EVE	2011 EHE	2011 EVE
One	Country Universities Centre Western Riverina	Leeton	2681	30	51	25	27	15	32
One			2703	13	6	8	6	0	17
One			2705	150	260	128	175	136	240
Two	Country Universities Centre Macleay Valley	Kempsey	2440	307	509	275	354	193	439
Two			2441	76	98	57	89	90	204
Two	Country Universities Centre Parkes	Parkes	2870	179	296	213	250	179	321
Two	Country Universities Centre Southern Shoalhaven	Ulladulla	2538	54	38	41	45	27	43
Two			2539	301	367	231	259	212	341
Two	Taree Universities Campus	Taree	2430	554	847	476	685	420	773
Two			2426	12	23	12	12	6	10
Two			2427	36	45	27	52	24	31
Two			2312	17	32	13	24	11	44
No Cohort Three RUSH									
Four	Country Universities Centre Cowra Region	Cowra	2794	127	242	143	211	96	276
Four			2807	6	4	0	4	0	3
Four	Country Universities Centre Mudgee Region	Mudgee	2850	325	529	269	374	246	439
Four			2852	40	98	52	67	26	86
Note: *postcode changed before 2016 but the data column was empty so has been deleted									

Victoria

Cohort	Hub	Place	Postcode	2021 EHE	2021 EVE	2016 EHE	2016 EVE	2011 EHE	2011 EVE
One	Gippsland East Study Hub	Bairnsdale	3864	0	5	3	3	3	6
One			3865	5	11	0	6	3	15
One			3882	12	19	19	12	14	9
One			3902	0	0	6	0	0	5
One			3903	8	13	4	9	9	13
One			3904	29	25	11	15	15	32
One			3880	41	70	39	55	40	82
Two	Country Universities Centre Bass Coast	Wonthaggi	3925	98	92	50	44	42	47
Two			3992	17	28	8	17	14	16
Two			3995	225	218	123	154	101	194
Two			3996	126	80	83	57	61	55
Two	Country Universities Centre Ovens Murray	Wangaratta	3672	149	216	105	148	112	239
Two			3673	21	42	21	27	15	38
Two			3675	28	40	28	22	31	36
Two			3677	396	463	324	311	249	461
Two			3678	96	91	109	96	105	148
Two			3682	14	16	6	9	10	13
Two		Corryong	2642	5	0	79	87	94	106
Two			3704*						
Two			3705	3	4	5	4	0	12
Two			3707	27	26	17	18	22	35
Two			3708*						

Cohort	Hub	Place	Postcode	2021 EHE	2021 EVE	2016 EHE	2016 EVE	2011 EHE	2011 EVE
Two		Mansfield	3709	3	3	3	4	4	4
Two			3715	4	5	4	0	3	3
Two			3720	5	13	8	8	0	5
Two			3722	95	109	77	62	47	92
Two			3723	48	38	40	22	35	45
Three	Country Universities Centre Mallee	Swan Hill	2734	17	9	3	19	10	26
Three			3583 3584**	21	34	25	20	14	27
Three			3585	214	272	157	210	123	241
Three			3586	10	16	14	19	8	22
Three			3588	5	9	0	8	7	10
Three			3589	3	10	10	7	0	6
Four	Gippsland East Study Hub Outreach	Heyfield	3856	20	30	25	15	15	11
Four			3857	9	6	12	0	9	7
Four			3858	49	59	45	46	35	44
Four			3859	17	21	24	22	12	20
Four			3860	122	137	109	83	92	151
Four		Mallacoota	3891	0	0	0	3	3	0
Four			3892	15	8	14	7	13	10
Four		Omeo	3896	11	4	12	7	14	11
Four			3898	7	4	8	9	7	10
Four		Orbost	3886	9	7	4	3	3	9
Four			3888	56	51	43	32	48	56

Cohort	Hub	Place	Postcode	2021 EHE	2021 EVE	2016 EHE	2016 EVE	2011 EHE	2011 EVE
Four		Yarram	3967/ 3971**	41	59	50	40	39	53
Note: *postcode changed before 2016 but the data column was empty so has been deleted; **postcode split into two before the 2016 census, so merged here for consistency									

Tasmania

Cohort	Hub	Place	Postcode	2021 EHE	2021 EVE	2016 EHE	2016 EVE	2011 EHE	2011 EVE
One	Study Hub West Coast	Zeehan	7469	10	19	3	11	10	20
One			7321	94	96	81	104	61	126
One			7470	13	12	18	3	14	14
One			7466*						
One		Circular Head	7330	81	110	51	101	64	148
One			7331	6	3	5	3	8	10
No Cohort Two RUSH									
No Cohort Three RUSH									
Four	Study King Island	Currie	7256	16	24	12	15	17	22
*postcode changed before 2016 but the data column was empty so has been deleted									

Appendix B: *Roadmap to success: A ‘What Works’ guide to Regional University Study Hubs partnerships*

Roadmap to success: A ‘What Works’ guide to Regional University Study Hubs partnerships is a practitioner guide designed to support higher education institutions in building meaningful, sustainable partnerships with Regional University Study Hubs by offering practical guidance grounded in principles of effective engagement.

The guide is a resource developed as part of Danielle Keenan’s Equity Fellowship conducted under the Australian Centre for Student Equity Success (ACSES) Equity Fellowship Program, funded by the Australian Government, Department of Education. It is available on the ACSES website.¹⁵

¹⁵ <https://s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/assets.acses.edu.au/app/uploads/2025/11/Roadmap-to-success-a-what-works-guide-to-partnerships-D-Keenan-2025.pdf>

Appendix C: Semi-structured interview schedules

Student participant questions

Background and access:

1. Can you describe your initial motivations for joining the RUC?
2. How did you hear about the RUC, and what made it an attractive option for you?
3. How long have you been a student at the RUC?
4. Have you had any engagement with the RUC, besides that of a student?

Participation and experience:

1. Can you walk us through a typical day or week for you at the RUC?
2. How has the RUC addressed your educational needs and personal circumstances?

Retention and support:

1. Have you faced any challenges while studying at the RUC? How were these challenges addressed?
2. What types of support services have been most beneficial for you?

Success and outcomes:

1. In what ways do you feel the RUC has contributed to your academic success?
2. Has the RUC assisted you to stay in community?
3. Can you share a particular success story or significant improvement in your studies since joining the RUC?
4. In your view, what are the key factors that contribute to the success of the RUC in widening participation?
5. How do you measure the success of the RUC program and its initiatives?
6. How would you describe the Centre to a stranger?

Staff participant questions

Operational insights:

1. Can you describe the typical support structure and resources available for students at the RUC?
2. How does the RUC adapt its services to meet the diverse needs of students?

Program effectiveness:

1. In your view, what are the key factors that contribute to the success of the RUC in widening participation?
2. How do you measure the success of the RUC program and its initiatives?

Challenges and solutions:

1. What are the main challenges faced by students, and how does the RUC work to address these?
2. Can you describe any recent initiatives or changes that have been made to improve student and community outcomes?
3. Do you see the role of the RUC evolving in the future?

Community stakeholder participant questions**Community impact:**

1. In your view, how has the RUC impacted the local community and its approach to higher education outcomes?
2. Can you describe any partnerships between the RUC and community organisations?
3. In your view, what are the key factors that contribute to the success of the RUC in widening participation?
4. How do you measure the success of the RUC program and its initiatives?

Perceptions and aspirations:

1. How do community members perceive the RUC and its role in supporting students?
2. What aspirations does the community have for future development and collaboration with the RUC?

Challenges and opportunities:

1. What challenges does the community face in terms of higher education access and participation?
2. What opportunities do you see for enhancing the impact of the RUC in the community?
3. How can RUCs better align with community needs and development goals?

Appendix D: Survey distributed to Regional Hubs

Start of Block: Ethics and Front Matter

UTS HREC REF No ETH24- 9301 – Road map to success: Decoding the Regional University Study Hubs

WHO IS CONDUCTING THIS RESEARCH? Danielle Keenan, a researcher at UTS and Chief Investigator of the project, and Co-Investigator Joshua James, UTS.

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT? The purpose of this research is to understand the success of the Regional University Study Hubs (formerly known as Regional University Centres). These hubs have been instrumental in providing higher education opportunities to students in regional areas, significantly increasing the participation of students from diverse backgrounds. Despite their success and plans for expansion, there is still much to learn about why these hubs are so effective. This research aims to fill that gap. By examining 8 out of the 34 existing hubs, analysing the different types of hubs, and considering the impact of community-driven initiatives, we hope to gain deeper insights into their success.

WHY HAVE I BEEN INVITED? You have been invited to participate because you have been identified (or nominated) as a key stakeholder of the Regional University Study Hubs Program in the capacity of a Staff member.

FUNDING Funding for this project has been received from the Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success (ACSES). The Centre has established a strong national presence, engaging with key stakeholders and maintaining sector-wide partnerships to enhance outcomes and delivery of research and recommendations. With the pivot to 'what works', ACSES strives to support universities in implementing evidence-based student equity programs and enhancing its standing as a key contributor to the higher education sector's shared goal of improving student equity.

WHAT DOES MY PARTICIPATION INVOLVE? As a participant in this research, your involvement will include answering a questionnaire: This will take approximately 15 minutes to complete, and you may exit out and continue at a later stage if you like. The survey will be active for 14 days from the time you start it. The questionnaire will ask about your experiences and perspectives on the Regional University Study Hubs. Please note that your participation in all stages of the research is voluntary. You can choose to withdraw at any

time without any consequences. Your privacy and confidentiality will be respected throughout the research process.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS/INCONVENIENCE? Risk to participants is low

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT? Participation in this study is voluntary. It is completely up to you whether or not you decide to take part. If you decide not to participate, or to withdraw from the study, it will not affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Technology Sydney or the Regional University Study Hubs.

WHAT IF I WITHDRAW FROM THIS RESEARCH PROJECT? If you wish to withdraw from the study once it has started, you can do so at any time without having to give a reason, by contacting Danielle Keenan phone: 0431 615 481 or email Danielle.keenan@uts.edu.au. If you withdraw from the study, any information provided as previously consented will be destroyed, including transcripts, photographs and any identified survey responses. e transcripts and/or photographs will be destroyed. Please indicate that you have read the above and that you understand that your participation is voluntary and you can withdraw at any time.

1. I agree that I am voluntarily participating in this research project.
2. I understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time with no negative consequences to myself or the Regional University Study Hubs I work for.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO INFORMATION ABOUT ME? Participants' identities will remain confidential. Participant data will be deidentified, only the researchers will have access to the identity of the participants and all data will be kept in a secure location that is password protected. Any identifying information will be anonymised during analysis. Confidentiality will be strictly maintained. Personal information will be separated from research data and stored securely. Identifiable information will not be disclosed in any reports or publications resulting from the research. Participants' identities will be protected through anonymisation or pseudonymisation techniques, ensuring that individual responses cannot be linked back to them. To avoid conflicts of interest, direct supervisors or managers will not have access to information regarding who is participating in the research or their individual responses. We will schedule research activities in a way that minimises disruption to participants' academic or work responsibilities. Throughout the research, we will monitor the impact of participation on students and employees, checking in periodically to assess any negative effects or concerns. Participants will be encouraged to provide feedback on their experience, and any issues raised will be addressed promptly to mitigate potential adverse effects. We will maintain open lines of communication with participants throughout the research process. Participants will be provided with updates on the progress of the research and will be informed of the findings once the study is completed. In respecting the ethical considerations specific to our participants in accordance with Chapter 4 of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*, particularly when involving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities, researchers commit to embedding the six core values of reciprocity, respect, equality, responsibility, survival and protection, and spirit and integrity throughout our research practices. By agreeing to this consent form, you consent to the research team collecting and using personal information about you for the research project. All this information will be treated confidentially. In accordance with relevant Australian and/or NSW Privacy laws, you have the right to request access to the information about you that is collected and stored by the research team. You also have the right to request that any

information with which you disagree be corrected. Please inform the research team member if you would like to access your information.

- I understand that my data will be treated confidentiality, stored securely, and de-identified and anonymised for publication.

FUTURE PUBLICATION We would like to store your information for future use in research projects that are an extension of this research project. In all instances, your information will be treated as confidential and stored securely. It is anticipated that the results of this research project will be published and/or presented in a variety of forums. In any publication and/or presentation, information will be provided in such a way that you cannot be identified, except with your permission. The results of this research may also be shared through open access (public) scientific databases, including internet databases. This will enable other researchers to use the data to investigate other important research questions. Results shared in this way will always be de-identified by removing all personal information (e.g. name, address, date of birth etc.).

- I agree that data from this survey can be used in future, related, research projects.
- I do not agree that data from this survey can be used in future, related, research projects.

WHAT IF I HAVE ANY QUERIES OR CONCERNS? If you have queries or concerns about the research that you think I can help you with, please feel free to contact Danielle Keenan on 0431615481 or Danielle.keenan@uts.edu.au.

NOTE: This study has been approved in line with the University of Technology Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee [UTS HREC] guidelines. If you have any concerns or complaints about any aspect of the conduct of this research that you wish to raise independently of the research team, please contact the Ethics Secretariat on ph.: +61 2 9514 2478 or email: Research.Ethics@uts.edu.au, and quote the UTS HREC reference number. Any matter raised will be treated confidentially, investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.

1. I understand that I can contact Danielle if I have any questions or concerns
2. I understand that I can contact the University of Technology Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee about any concerns or complaints that you wish to raise independently of the research team.
3. I would like a copy of this information sheet for my own records.

Q31 CONSENT FORM I agree to participate in the research project being conducted by Danielle Keenan (Danielle.keenan@uts.edu.au, 0431 615 481) I understand that funding for this research has been provided by Australian Centre Student Equity Success.

I have read the preceding Participant Information material or someone has read it to me in language that I understand.

I understand the purposes, procedures and risks of the research as described in the Participant Information material.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions and I am satisfied with the answers I have received.

I freely agree to participate in this research project as described and understand that I am free to withdraw at any time without affecting my relationship with the researchers or the University of Technology Sydney [if applicable] or my organisation.

I understand that I will be given a signed copy of this document to keep if I request it.

I am aware that I can contact Danielle Keenan (or Emilie Ens, if applicable) if I have any concerns about the research.

I am aware I can contact the University of Technology Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee if I have any concerns about the research.

- I consent to participate in this research.
- I do not consent to participate in this research.

End of Block: Ethics and Front Matter

Start of Block: Regional University Study Hubs

Name of the Regional University Study Hubs (formally, Regional University Centre) that you work for? (Note that this question is asked to determine that we have all Regional Hubs represented in this survey. Your responses will not be connected to further answers).

What is your job title?

Since 2018, the Australian Government has committed \$150 million to the Regional University Study Hubs Program through grant funding to establish and operate hubs. Each hub is funded within cohort grant applications (cohorts 1 - 4). Please indicate the cohort relevant to your Hub/s. Please select all that apply.

1. Cohort One (2019)
2. Cohort Two (2021)
3. Cohort Three (2023)
4. Cohort Four (2024)
5. Unsure

A 2021 independent evaluation commissioned by the Department of Education created a typology of Regional University Study Hubs grouping Hubs into five discrete models:

1. Regional Campus Model: This model operates akin to a 'mini-campus', extending student administrative aids, pastoral care, and generalised academic support. Significantly, these campuses are associated with specific courses facilitated within their premises.

2. Affiliated, networked model: This is a centrally supported model with a strong focus

towards tertiary pathways. Predominantly, these hubs adopt a 'BYO course' approach with generalised academic support

3. Indigenous Student Focus: Located typically in more remote areas, these hubs have an explicit focus on creating a bridge between Aboriginal communities and mainstream educational frameworks.

4. Vocational and Non-accredited Training Integration: The Hubs provide access to VET or nonaccredited training as part of a generalist focus on educational pathways

5. Tertiary Hub: Like the affiliated model these hubs emphasis flexibility in access to a large range of tertiary courses. Although they provide limited course-specific support on site, they offer a platform of generalist administrative and academic support.

Which of the five models best describes your Hub? Please select all that apply.

1. Regional Campus Model
2. Affiliated, Networked Model
3. Indigenous Student Focus
4. Vocational and Non-accredited Training Integration:
5. Tertiary Hub
6. Not Sure
7. Other (please specify below)

Does your hub have financial university partnerships that have been established through:
(Please select all that apply, if none skip ahead)

1. Commonwealth Supported Places
2. Cohort 3 Regional Hubs Partnership Funding
3. The Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program
4. Other financial service level agreements
5. Unsure
6. Other, please provide details

What role do financial university partnerships have in the success of your Hub? (Please select all that apply, if none skip ahead)

1. University partnerships contributed to resource sharing (e.g. access to libraries, staff and online resources)
2. University partnerships contributed to curriculum development or enhancement?
3. University partnerships have supported the training and professional development of staff
4. University partnerships have contributed to joint research initiatives
5. University partnerships have increased the participation and retention of students through program delivery and outreach
6. Unsure
7. If other contributions are received and not listed, please provide details

How important are financial university partnerships in the success of your Hub? (if none skip ahead)

Please rate on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is 'Not Important' and 5 is 'Very Important'

0 1 2 3 3 4 5

How important are financial university partnerships in the success of your Hub?	
---	--

What role do non-financial university partnerships have in the success of your Hub? (Please select all that apply)

1. University partnerships have contributed to resource sharing (e.g. access to libraries, staff and online resources)
2. University partnerships have contributed to curriculum development or enhancement?
3. University partnerships have supported the training and professional development of staff
4. University partnerships have contributed to joint research initiatives
5. University partnerships have increased the participation and retention of students through program delivery and outreach
6. Unsure
7. Other, please provide details

How important are non-financial university partnerships in the success of your Hub?

Please rate on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 is 'Not Important' and 5 is 'Very Important' Not Applicable

0 1 2 3 4 5

How important are non-financial university partnerships in the success of your Hub?	
---	--

Does your Hub offer supported degrees*? *Supported degrees are the delivery of course specific academic teaching and learning in partnership with a University.

- Yes
- No
- No, but planning to in the future
- No, but have in the past
- Unsure

In a few sentences, explain why your hub decided to offer or not to offer supported degrees. Consider the following aspects in your response: The specific types of support offered The needs or demands identified within your community. Any challenges or barriers faced in implementing these supported degrees. The anticipated or observed outcomes of offering these supported degrees

What proportion of students registered at your Hub are through supported degrees?

- None
- 1-25 percent
- 26-50 percent
- 51-75 percent
- 76-100 percent
- Unsure

Which of the following services are offered at your Hub? (Please select all that apply)

1. Academic advising (general or broad support such as writing feedback)
2. Tutoring or mentorship (field or subject-specific advice)
3. Career counselling (by an accredited career counsellor)
4. Course navigation or enrolment assistance
5. Widening participation activities (e.g. outreach, first year transitions, pre-access programs)
6. Specific First Nations or Indigenous support
7. Local employment and workforce development networking or mentoring
8. Facilitation of placements or work integrated learning
9. Other (please specify)

Q13 Which best describes the staffing structure at your Hub?

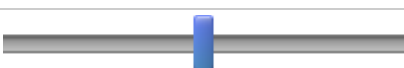
- Mostly full time staff
- Mostly part time staff
- Mostly volunteers
- A mix of full time, part time and volunteers

Q14 Please estimate the total Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) staff currently employed at your Hub under the RUSH funding?

Q34 Please estimate the total Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) staff currently employed at your Hub from external sources of funding (i.e., RPPPP funding)?

Q15 Rate the following elements in terms of their importance for the success of your Hub in widening participation (1 = Not important, 5 = Very important)

0 1 2 3 4 5

Local partnerships	
Academic support services	
Infrastructure and resources	
Community engagement	
Locally staffed student services	
University partnerships	

Q16 To what extent do you agree with the following statement: 'Our Hub significantly contributes to the academic success and retention of regional students.'

- Strongly Disagree
 - Disagree
 - Neutral
 - Agree
 - Strongly agree
-

Q17 How frequently does your Hub collaborate with university practitioners?

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always
- Unsure

Q18 In a couple of sentences, what is one policy change that you would like to see to enhance the effectiveness of RUSHs in widening participation?

Q32 What are your dreams or aspirations for your Regional Hub? Where would you like it to be in five years?

Q33 What do you and your Regional Hub require to achieve these dreams or aspirations?

Q19 Please share a brief success story or significant outcome from your RUSH (optional)

Q20 Do you have any additional comments or suggestions regarding the RUSH program?

End of Block: Regional University Study Hubs