

Submission to the Independent Review of Education in Tasmania Public Consultation Paper (September 2024)

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In response to the call for evidence-based submissions to this Review, our research team has prepared a brief summary of the findings from our national study. Our research findings speak to Theme 2 of the September 2024 Consultation Paper: ***Strengthening supports and engagement for all learners at all stages of their education.***

In Theme 2, the Consultation Paper raises questions about educational engagement, aspirations, and attainment in Tasmania. We applaud the paper's recognition of the imperative to support educational equity for a geographically dispersed population and for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. We add a few points in response:

- While the paper is focused only on schooling through to Year 12, post-secondary vocational and university education are also vital components of education in Tasmania. Attention to learners at 'all stages of their education' should attend to educational equity post Year 12 as well.
- Post-secondary education is particularly relevant to questions of educational engagement raised by the Consultation Paper in that it provides opportunities for parents and other community members to re-engage with education, with flow-on benefits to families and communities.
- In responding to the question of 'what works' to enhance educational equity, engagement, and attainment across Tasmania, our work highlights the vital role of regional campuses in supporting these goals. **Specifically, we have identified that place-based local university campuses in Australia provide critical access to tertiary education for disadvantaged and underrepresented students.**

Our research has also generated **targeted recommendations to support educational equity** across diverse and dispersed communities across Australia. These recommendations are applicable to the Tasmanian context and include strengthening investment in place-based regional campuses that make engagement in post-secondary learning directly accessible to more Tasmanians.

The background, key findings and recommendations of our research are summarised below.

Background to the Research

'Studying regionally: Experiences of University Students on Regional Campuses' was a national, interdisciplinary study investigating regional students' experiences on small university campuses in Western Australia (Bunbury), Victoria (Shepparton) and Tasmania (Burnie). Funded by the US-based Spencer Foundation, the study engaged with students across a range of degree programs (Arts, Business, Education, Health and Social work) and generated important evidence about the role that regional university campuses play in enabling university aspiration and achievement for Australians who face significant barriers to engagement with higher education. Regional Australians enter and complete university at lower rates than metropolitan residents and are half as likely to hold university qualifications. Persistent inequities in the distribution of higher education opportunities in Australia were

recognised in the recent Australian Universities Accord Final Report (2024), which has recommended greater investments in regional higher education. For these investments to be effective in raising educational attainment, we need to understand the experiences of regional students and address how they can be better supported to enter and complete their tertiary studies.

Key Findings and Recommendations

1. Regional university campuses provide critical access to tertiary education for underrepresented groups

We found that many students on regional campuses face intersecting disadvantages over and above being located in a rural and regional area. These include gender, cultural diversity and refugee status, First Nations, caring responsibilities, disability, first in family and socio-economic status. While participants noted that negative perceptions of higher education are often a part of life in regional communities, they did *not* lack aspiration to study at university, despite their multiple disadvantages. Rather, they were proactively choosing to improve their futures and to make a positive difference in their communities through higher education by, for example, becoming skilled members of the local regional workforce.

Regional campuses in mid-sized towns provided these students with accessible pathways to university study. Many students were not in a position to relocate to a city due to existing commitments and/or strong community ties and identities. The regional university campus, however, enabled such students to undertake tertiary study close to home, where they enjoyed social support from friends and family, a small and supportive campus community, and felt they could achieve work/life balance while also giving back to their local community. Some participants captured the importance of regional university campuses in statements such as, *'I think it's incredibly important to have a regional campus.'* (LTU13) and *'My on-campus experience had always been great'* (UTAS12).

RECOMMENDATION: Reframe investments in regional campuses as investments in place-based tertiary education to improve access for non-metropolitan students with the potential to lift themselves, their households and communities out of disadvantage.

2. Regional campuses provide essential study space and face-to-face interaction to support educational attainment

We found that having access to a dedicated study space on campus is crucial for studying regionally. As one student stated, *'...when you step into this building, it's like stepping into your workplace.'* (UTAS3). Many students in our study reported not having a private study space at home, free from interruptions. In part this was found to be a gendered issue with some female students reporting that studying at home increased their already significant responsibilities for domestic work, such as washing clothes and dishes, cooking and childcare.

Accessing a study space on-campus also provided opportunities for essential face-to-face interactions and on-campus learning and support. Face-to-face support on regional university campuses provided by lecturers, student advisors, librarians, IT, admin staff is key to student success. Students described the high levels of individualised social interaction on regional campuses as integral to their capacity to persist and successfully complete their university studies.

RECOMMENDATION: Recognise the critical contribution of interaction and academic engagement provided to students on regional campuses for its capacity to support student graduate outcomes; and resource it appropriately.

3. Regional campuses are facing disappearing support and resources

The findings demonstrate the powerful role regional university campuses play in supporting regional students, however their capacity to do so is constantly under threat. Students highlighted the reality of disappearing support and resources on regional campuses, especially since the COVID pandemic with teaching and course offerings being transferred permanently to online platforms.

Further, it was found, whenever it came to restructuring universities, students experienced a shrinkage of course offerings, increased requirements to travel to city-based campuses to access equipment and facilities, as well as face-to-face teaching of courses being replaced by online delivery only, all without local consultation or input.

RECOMMENDATION: Make resourcing for vibrant regional campuses central to any strategy for a stronger regional Australia and equitable access to higher education regionally.

RECOMMENDATION: Distinguish between regional university campuses and Regional University study hubs. While both have their place in the Australian tertiary sector, study hubs cannot replace the interactivity and academic engagement available at a campus when appropriately resourced.

Conclusion

Our study demonstrates that regional campuses play a vital role in facilitating educational engagement and attainment across dispersed and disadvantaged populations. By engaging with people 'where they are' across socio-economic and geographic divides, and by providing supportive and interactive educational opportunities, regional campuses are able to make tertiary education accessible. They do this by embedding engagement opportunities in the fabric of local communities.

Nationally, a failure to understand and resource regional campuses' role has diminished their ability to address educational disadvantage. As these campuses face resource constraints, they provide fewer opportunities for post-secondary education. Consequently, community engagement with education diminishes and educational inequities grow. Tasmania has the opportunity to recognise the vital role played by regional campuses in tackling educational disadvantage, and to advocate for greater investments and support for place-based education. This is a promising strategy to strengthen educational equity and support for the engagement of Tasmanian learners of all ages, at all stages of their education.

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