

The University of Sydney response to the Commonwealth Department of Education's Consultation Paper: Implementing Suburban University Study Hubs, October 2023

The University of Sydney welcomes the opportunity to respond to the [Consultation Paper: Implementing Suburban University Study Hubs](#) released 4 September 2023. The University is keen to be part of the design process for the Suburban University Study Hubs, particularly given the potential for their establishment in Greater Western Sydney. We attract many students from this region, have an extensive presence there and plans for significant expansion – especially at Westmead and Parramatta.

The University supports the concept of Suburban Study Hubs. The initiative aligns with our [2032 Strategy](#) aspirations, including that our student-focused education is transformational and that we will expand our education offerings in Greater Western Sydney.

The key features of the Suburban University Study Hubs will make it easier for people living in outer-metropolitan and peri-urban areas to access educational infrastructure and support services, thereby increasing tertiary education participation and success. This has been reaffirmed by recent qualitative research we have completed, which found that current and prospective students from the region regularly experience significant barriers accessing tertiary education.

Specifically, participants in our research who pursue education later in life have tended to prioritise local study options that allow better management of their other commitments. Most participants have expressed a strong preference for studying in a library rather than in the confines of their own homes. For some, the distractions and disruptions of living in a multi-generational household made it challenging to concentrate effectively on their studies. For others, a lack of understanding around study from their family members created an unsuitable environment for academic work. Many young participants who rely heavily on public transport choose to study locally when they can to save money and time on their daily commutes.

There is strong alignment emerging from our research between the needs identified in the consultation paper and the challenges faced by residents of Greater Western Sydney. Many of the key pain points could be addressed for some students through the establishment of Study Hubs within easy reach of where they live and work.

Our commitment to serving Greater Western Sydney's needs is evidenced by our current presence and plans for the region. We have recently invested more than \$100 million as a partner in the [Westmead Health Precinct](#) – to create state-of-the-art education, research and IT-enabled study facilities – many of which can be accessed openly by students from other educational institutions. We conduct extensive veterinary science, agriculture, environment and sustainability education and research at our working farms at Camden. We have a clinical school at Nepean Hospital and are currently involved at the development stage in several new ventures targeted at building new industries in the region. Long-term, we are also considering building a new multidisciplinary campus at Parramatta/Westmead and will explore academic and development partnerships as part of this opportunity.

We have received mixed preliminary feedback from our faculties and university schools on the opportunities that participation in the Suburban Study Hubs would present for their diverse programs. Many are keen to explore the opportunity to increase their presence in Greater Western Sydney and to provide improved support to students from under-represented cohorts who live far from our main campuses. There is, however, some perceived tension between the concept of the Hubs and the provision of a rich place-based experience for students. For our many programs with significant practical elements, particularly at undergraduate level, they would not be in a position for students to participate appropriately from a remote location, while a lack of engagement in on-campus activities would not be conducive to student success and overall enjoyment of their learning experience.

Nevertheless, even students completing our programs with significant practical requirements would benefit from convenient access to places for individual and group study closer to their homes.

Some faculties also expressed concerns regarding operational costs for the Hubs, especially noting the need for them to be equipped with excellent IT resources and support services. Overall, however, feedback has been generally supportive of the initiative and our faculties look forward to receiving more details about the operational details of the Suburban University Study Hubs, including the funding model.

We are interested in better understanding how the University of Sydney could play a helpful role in the design and implementation of this initiative. Noting that if up to 34 new Regional and Suburban Study Hubs are to be established with the \$66.9m, presumably funded for multiple years, the total value Commonwealth funding available to support each Hub's establishment and operating costs will be relatively small and potentially unsustainable.

We therefore strongly support the consultation paper's suggestion that the Suburban Study Hubs are likely to be co-located at existing educational, library or community facilities. We have previously provided department officials with tours of our Westmead facilities and would be more than happy to do so again, if that would assist the department's understanding of the costs involved in building high-quality student study facilities in the region, supported by excellent IT infrastructure.

As the department consider the detailed design of the initiative, we would appreciate clarification on the following questions:

- What locations are being excluded/included? For example, is Parramatta or Westmead, where the University of Sydney has a presence, considered peri-urban?
- What support for student safety and wellbeing might be entailed in running a Hub and how is this envisaged to articulate to general support for students already provided?
- From our experience, the co-location of student study facilities with social spaces, affordable food and beverage outlets that are accessible to students outside standard business hours, are strong attractors. Will the department be considering the availability of such amenities when locating the Suburban Study Hubs?
- How might the Hubs support students transitioning between different stages and forms of education, particularly from high school to tertiary studies?
- What assurances can be given to community groups, providers or consortia of providers, that the investments they make in Suburban University Study Hubs will continue to be supported long-term by the Commonwealth?

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the implementation of the Suburban University Study Hubs initiative. We look forward to receiving more details about the opportunity in due course and are keen to assist the department with its planning and implementation.

Please do not hesitate to contact Professor Joanne Wright, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education), should you require any further information from the University of Sydney, joanne.wright@sydney.edu.au, ph 02 9351 3517.