SPRC UNSW Social Policy Research Centre

Country Universities Centre Program Evaluation: Final Report

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Glossary

CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
CSP	Commonwealth Supported Places
CUC	Country Universities Centre
DGR	Deductible Gift Recipient
DoE	Department of Education New South Wales
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
LSA	Learning Skills Advisors
NGOs	Non-Government Organisations
NSW	New South Wales
SAP	Special Activation Precinct
SERAP	State Education Research Applications Process
RDA	Regional Development Australia
RFT	Request for Tender
RPPPP	Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program
RUSH	Regional University Study Hub (formerly Regional University Centre, or RUC)
SPRC	Social Policy Research Centre
UNSW	University of New South Wales
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VFFF	Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation

Executive Summary

Regional people participate in higher education at half the rate of metropolitan Australians (Halsey, 2018; Commonwealth of Australia, 2019; Productivity Commission 2019). The mission of the Country Universities Centre (CUC) program is to address under-representation of regional, rural, and remote students in higher education by providing quality opportunities for local students to pursue higher education without the need to relocate.

The NSW Government supported establishment of CUCs in NSW and most recently allocated an $8 million grant to the CUC program to establish five new centres in regional locations by 2024. An evaluation of the CUC program is required under the Funding Agreement. The evaluation assesses CUC outcomes to see whether the aims of the program have been met. This evaluation was informed by primary data collection from key stakeholders, CUC-provided data, and ABS data.

Have the CUCs met their funding agreement KPIs?

Under its Funding Agreement with the NSW Government, CUC must meet Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). Table 1, below, summarises their performance against these.

Table 1 CUC (NSW) performance against Key Performance Indicators

KPI	Performance to date
KPI 1 – Maintain successful student engagement (existing and new hubs)	
1.1 Maintain enrolments from a diverse range of students.	To date, all nine operational CUCs established through the NSW Government program have met or exceeded their student registration KPIs for their first three years of operation. All NSW CUCs have had an upwards trajectory of first-time student registrations over the last five years (2019-2023). Student diversity indicates the majority are female, and that Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders are mainly well-represented on a par with local population levels or in excess of these.
1.2 Support students to succeed in their studies.	Data on graduations, and student surveys and interviews, indicate CUCs provide important supports for students to complete their studies. • CUCs (NSW) have supported 560 graduates over the past 5 years (as of October 2023). • CUCs student experience survey (2022) found that 89% of students indicated they are more likely to continue with their studies as a result of the help they received from the CUC (CUC Central, 2023).

KPI	Performance to date
	• There is a gap in CUC data on how many students commence, but do not complete, their studies.
1.3 Provide opportunities for students to study a range of courses.	Students are able to study a wide range of courses. As at semester 2, 2023, CUC students studied 616 unique courses at 171 universities and other institutions across Australia and the world.
1.4 Support students to stay and work in their communities.	The vast majority of CUC students stay local and/or regional. Few migrate to metropolitan areas. • The evaluators' CUC Alumni survey indicated 89% of students remain in the local area (or another regional area), however this was from a small survey sample size (N=44) • CUC Central estimates the rate of students who remain in the local area is 91% (based on its graduate data)
KPI 2 – Establishment of five new hubs	
2.1 Establishment of Tranche 1 (2019/20) CUC	Parkes CUC opened on 20 November 2020.
2.2 Establishment of Tranche 2 (2020/21) CUCs	Macleay Valley CUC opened on 30 April 2021, and Southern Shoalhaven CUC opened on 13 December 2021.
2.3 Establishment of Tranche 3 (2021/22) CUCs	Cowra CUC opened in February 2023, while an opening date for Mudgee CUC is still to be determined in 2024.
KPI 3 – Effective engagement and reputation building	
3.1 Establish financial partnerships with industry, government, corporations and philanthropists.	CUCs have established financial partnerships with a range of external stakeholders, including: • Local Governments • Industries and corporations: Snowy Hydro, Santos, and small business owners and farmers • Philanthropists – Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation.
3.2 Establish financial or in-kind partnerships with universities.	CUCs have established financial partnerships with a range of universities.

KPI	Performance to date
	• University partnerships are a source of CUC external income. • Key University partnerships of NSW CUCs include Central Queensland University, Charles Sturt University, Southern Cross University, University of New England, among others.
3.3 Positive endorsement of the CUC model from a range of stakeholders.	CUCs engage with and are viewed positively by local communities and other stakeholders. • CUCs have strong approval ratings from CUC clients (students), as evidenced in CUC annual student satisfaction surveys. This evaluation also found evidence of high levels of student satisfaction, with students attributing study and employment success to the crucial support provided by the CUC. • Employers who participated in this evaluation endorsed the CUC role of supporting local people to gain degrees thus creating a 'pipeline' of graduates/future skilled employees in rural and regional areas. • CUCs attract strong community support and involvement on their Boards including from local government, industry, small businesses, agricultural research, high schools and other sectors.
3.4 Maintain relationships with wider Regional University Study Hub community.	CUCs are maintaining relationships through the following. • The delivery of Regional Partnership Project Pool Program (RPPPP). CUC Central and NSW network have worked with RUSH locations including Taree Universities Campus and Gippsland East Higher Education Study Hub. This has both maintained and strengthened relationships with the Regional Study Hub community. • CUC co-facilitated the Cohort 3 Bootcamp alongside Regional University Study Hubs Network lead aimed at new staff, hosted at Bass Coast CUC.

KPI	Performance to date
	• The CUC occupies a permanent position on the Commonwealth's Regional University Study Hub Advisory Committee. • As part of the 2022 National Conference for Regional Rural and Remote Education, the Commonwealth Department supported a one-day Regional University Study Hubs symposium, drawing all RUSHs from across Australia to share ideas and best practice. This positioned the CUC as the leading advocate and model for widening participation in regional Australia and supporting regional students to succeed.
3.5 Ongoing formative evaluation of the program.	CUC Central and all CUCs in NSW have participated constructively in the formal evaluation of the program. • CUC stakeholders participated in interviews and focus groups, and facilitated access to community stakeholders and registered students, who also participated. • CUC Central assisted the evaluators with a range of data requests and facilitated the distribution of the CUC Alumni survey.

Findings and recommendations

Key findings and recommendations are summarised below. Recommendations have been linked to each of the research questions,

RQ1: Are CUCs successfully supporting regional students to meet their higher education goals?

- CUCs are well-utilised and supporting students to reach their higher education goals.
- While CUCs are successfully maintaining student engagement, there is no hard data on student disengagement (due to study dropout, for instance). More data are needed on course completion rates in order to determine how successfully students' goals are being supported.
- CUC students typically balance work and study with family responsibilities and need academic skills support. After-hours access/sessions are important aspects of CUC facilities.
- CUCs are supporting a diverse range of students, with females over-represented (79%), and a reasonably good representation of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders (9%)

compared with the NSW averages (females 50.6%; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders 3.4%).

Recommendations:

1. CUC Alumni surveys could be carried out annually for former CUC students, two years after their last registration with the CUC, to track outcomes. This would include course completers and non-completers. Consideration needs to be given to maximise response rates, such as offering incentives/a prize draw.

2. CUCs should continue to liaise with the Commonwealth to access any relevant other data – e.g. detailed ABS area data, in order to understand the impact of the program in the longer term.

3. The Learning Skills Advisory roles are very important in student success. CUCs should survey their clients at the start of every semester (and/or term) to ascertain if regular evening sessions could be made available to accommodate the needs of working CUC students.

4. Students with children appreciate any childcare so CUCs could consider working with the NSW Government and local providers to offer childcare programs (where resourcing allows) during school holidays.

5. While 9% of CUCs students are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, some CUCs include higher proportions than others. CUCs need to continue community outreach programs, especially to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and male students. CUCs should follow best practices of those Centres with registration percentages higher than the surrounding population for engaging with local communities. This may include developing a Reconciliation Action Plan, including local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander elders (or Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander former CUC students) on the CUC Boards, and requesting Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students become 'CUC ambassadors', going to school visits and to CUC community events to explain the benefits of the CUC to other Aboriginal people.

6. To maximise student experience and networking opportunities, CUCs should offer student study groups to help students meet their peers and share key learnings across the network to support student experience, for example as Snowy-Monaro is doing with its 'Academics Anonymous' group

RQ2: Are CUCs concentrating on their core business, or is unnecessary time and energy being taken up with non-core activities such as the administrative burden attached to, for example, reporting, or fundraising?

- Reporting requirements seem normal and appropriate to this type of operation. Managers and Board members did not complain they were excessive.

- Fundraising activities take up managers' time, but not to an excessive level.

- Managers' reporting burden may be reduced if financial reporting was standardised as there are some variations in the reporting format in profit and loss statements and annual audited reports.

Recommendations:

None for this section.

RQ3: Are the CUCs promoting themselves effectively in the local community, and the broader region, to ensure students know about what the CUC offers, and engage with it?

- CUCs seem relatively well-known in local communities. Having a prominent position on a main street helps.
- Word-of-mouth is a key way in which CUCs attract new students (students tell their friends and family).
- Centres carry out a range of engagement strategies, primarily through community consultation, advertising, and outreach programs.
- First-time student numbers are increasing across all CUCs over the past five years, demonstrating effective promotion.
- While some CUCs have strong university partnerships, they would benefit from university promotion in general universities to raise awareness of the CUCs.
- Peer support is also an important part of the CUC experience.

Recommendations:

7. Explanatory text should accompany the CUC logo/branding wherever possible, so that its function is clearly signaled to the public. Some mistake the CUC for a private college or a university. Acknowledgement of federal and state government funding may also be appropriate.

8. Universities should promote CUCs to their students at roadshows, careers days, Open Days, during O-Week, through marketing materials, and in other ways, for example using student address data to alert rural and regional students of the CUCs' existence (in partnership with CUC Central).

RQ4: What is the CUC business model and is it sustainable over the long term?

- The CUC business model is to use funds to support rural and regional students successfully complete their studies. To do this CUCs use government grants, and also seek other funding sources (that typically form about 30% of their overall incomes).
- The CUC's mission is similar to other support services in in the education sector and has an equity purpose which is to redress the significant underrepresentation of rural and regional people in higher education. Therefore, like for other programs with a social equity core mission, government has a role to play by contributing recurrent funding.
- Existing NSW Government grants are for centre establishment, rather than ongoing operations.

- In general, the longer the CUC has been in operation, the lower its government grant component as a percentage of its total income. After the high initial investment required to establish a new fit-for-purpose facility, Centres then typically increase non-government sources to roughly a quarter to a third of total income over time.

- Centres receive government funding for establishment and operations. Some CUCs are supporting more registered students with less funding ‘per capita’ than others. Funding is not linked to student numbers which for centres that are at or near capacity creates budget pressure.

- Support from industries in the private sector is ad hoc and sporadic. Some industries do not feel they benefit from having university-educated local populations as they do not require this for their workforce. However other industries do benefit from a local graduate pipeline. The only way to guarantee funding from the private sector would be to impose a development consent contribution requirement or a levy on certain business types. The alternative is to accept the need for recurrent government funding with some supplementary funding from private sources expected from CUCs.

- CUCs have similar fixed costs (wages, rents, computer and IT, utilities). However, CUCs can leverage partnerships (such as with local councils) to reduce ongoing costs (e.g. via discounted rents). Other fixed costs such as computers/IT are not as amenable to reductions.

- Establishment of premises and whether to do a new-build or refurbishment depend on a range of local factors including land/building ownership (private or council), opportunities for reduced rent or needing to pay commercial rent, and opportunities to leverage spaces for community benefit to generate alternate income streams, etc.

- Funding does not restrict essential services or prevent students from accessing centres, but there are capacity constraints during busy periods.

- There is currently genuine need and demand for the CUCs. Increased registered user numbers attest to this. No similar services are available currently. Benefits for universities may include a lower cost of supporting online students, and students using CUCs and not attending a university campus may place less demands on university services like academic skills support, counselling, etc.

- A model for understanding Cost-Benefit Analysis for CUCs for the NSW Govt (in light of Commonwealth and NSW funding commitments) is to compare the costs of providing local education support versus the benefits to regional communities and employers, including NSW Government agencies as major employers of CUC graduates. The relative value proposition to NSW and Commonwealth Governments of the CUCs is that CUCs generate a local skilled workforce, which clearly benefits those completing their education as well as employers and communities in general and provide a pipeline of graduates locally to fill positions that may reduce the need to attract graduates from elsewhere (along with payment of relocation incentives).

- While some efficiencies could be introduced across the network, including centralised accounting, insurance, auditing, legal and other services, typically these items are a small proportion of total expenditure (as small as 1%). The 'big ticket' item of expenditure is computers (licences, maintenance and IT including internet), rent, and electricity/gas, so these could be the focus of cost-savings.

- CUC Central could stipulate KPIs or targets in Affiliate Agreements (or government could via funding contracts). Certain outcomes could include: a reasonable proportion of funding from external sources (based on the average – about 30%), student registration targets (based on catchment population).

- Centre locations have been appropriately selected, including criteria of being at least 50 kilometres from the nearest university campus, and local population demographics. New CUC sites to be funded by the Commonwealth or NSW Governments in future should have similar criteria applied.

- CUCs have used the grant funding responsibly, effectively, and efficiently. We did not find any instances of irresponsible use of monies.

- As regional NSW towns grow and diversify, CUCs are an important part of contributing to new local 'ecosystems' in regional centres, through flexibility of education delivery and online work, making regional centres more attractive places to stay and settle in.

Recommendations:

9. NSW should consider recurrent funding of CUCs, recognising their broad benefits, while requiring them to seek other sources of funding (perhaps via targets, through funding to CUC Central and affiliation agreements).

10. NSW Government could quantify the costs and benefits by carrying out a cost-benefit analysis (CBA) to estimate costs of the program versus benefits itself (as employer of graduates), regional employers, regional communities, and to CUC graduates who typically have higher incomes. A model for this could be Holden and Zhang report (n.d.) for the Gonski Institute (UNSW) that looked at education in regional and remote Australia, human capital formation and GDP, as well as potentially including the multiplier effects of having more educated and higher-waged populations.

11. Universities could consider paying CUCs (through CUC Central) a consistent but modest per capita payment for CUC students where they are studying online, rather than in person/on campus. CUC Central could quantify this annually and the payments could come either from the Universities, or from Commonwealth funding to them.

12. Cost savings/efficiency measures should be focused on the major areas of expenditure: rent, computers/IT/internet and utilities (as other costs are marginal, or unavoidable).

13. CUCs should where possible create revenue from occasional venue hire, where this does not interfere with student requirements and core function. As with CUC Snowy Monaro and the Snowy

Monaro Regional Council, CUCs should continue to work with local employers to offer opportunities for events and training facilities on an ad-hoc basis.

14. The NSW Government should see CUCs as part of value-adding to population skills, education, workforce and community prosperity in the regions, including attracting new residents and fostering a greater range of economic and cultural activities and diverse communities in regional NSW towns.

RQ5: What are the major learnings, strengths, and areas for improvement?

- Overall, CUCs are offering the same types of support, but have access to very different levels of resourcing per student (registered student numbers). The funding formula is based on three-year centre-based cycles without a per capita element.
- While CUCs have pursued other forms of funding, some have built university partnerships at a higher level than others. Positive practices should be shared, and those CUCs with few or no partnerships may need to increase their efforts and require more support.
- There is too much variation in annual audited financial reporting, with inconsistencies across CUCs in profit and loss statements and annual reports.
- CUCs currently report on numbers of 'registrations' but use Unique Student Identifier numbers as well. Students may be registered for several years, for multiple semesters or terms.

Recommendations:

15. The funding formula could take account of the number of individual students (using Unique Student Identifiers) and registrations.

16. Financial reporting should be standardised to include standardised line items in finance records and in audited reports. There is too much variation, making income and expenses comparisons difficult.

17. CUCs could offer educational childcare programs during school holidays (following the model of Snowy Monaro), space permitting.

Conclusion

CUCs help educate people who would likely struggle to engage in and complete university study without some form of support. CUCs, therefore, are likely supporting the graduation of students who would otherwise have not studied if it were not for the existence of the CUC. While the proportion who would have undertaken study is unknowable, a consistent message from the students to whom we spoke was that without the CUC's support, they would not have been able to study.

CUCs allow for community-based and accessible higher education for adult students. As noted in the report, when a student moves to a regional centre or city for a period of three years or more,

their rental costs are significant, and they may not return to their point of origin. This is assuming that students can or want to move; many of the students we spoke to were committed to living in their hometown/area because of family, caring, work, or other personal reasons.

Moreover, CUCs are incredibly important for equity. This has been acknowledged in the awarding of funding by the federal government following the Universities Accord Interim Report 2023. CUCs, like other RUSHs, offer opportunities for community inreach and outreach that universities, and to a lesser extent VET colleges, cannot achieve. Being able to access facilities that are proximal, familiar, and communal is helping students who have primarily chosen online modes of study, to access the kinds of services and supports that would otherwise be inaccessible because of distance, thus helping to retain enrolled students.

Many of the students that CUCs support have intersecting educational disadvantage that create acute challenges for engaging with higher education. In addition to living in regional, rural, or remote NSW, other factors include:

- Gender: a high proportion of CUC students are women (79%), some mature-aged who have returned to education. Many of these women have caring responsibilities that meaningfully impact on their capacity to concentrate at home and make relocation closer to a university campus impossible.

- First Nations heritage: a significant proportion of CUC students are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders (9%), who experience some of the most profound educational disadvantage in Australia. In most CUCs, the registration proportion of First Nations students are equal to or in excess of the proportion in the surrounding population, indicating that they are attracting Indigenous people into higher education and enabling them to stay on Country.

- Low income: In addition to being able to speak to knowledgeable CUC staff who can act as education brokers and advocates, being able to access a centrally-located facility that has free super-fast Wi-Fi, printing facilities, and kitchen facilities removes financial barriers to participating in university education.

- Many students fall into more than one of the groups listed.

CUCs also respond to many of the intersecting educational challenges that students in country NSW face, such as remoteness, poor connectivity, a lack of informed support and advocacy, by providing quiet and safe spaces seven days per week from morning to night, free food and drink, dedicated support staff, and facilitating a network of students within a local community. CUCs help students to make the most of remote learning by creating a study space, a hub for aspirant and currently enrolled students, celebration of academic success, and a campus-like atmosphere.

CUCs are supporting more than just university students. CUC student data indicated that at October 2023, 89 high school students were using the centres, along with 86 TAFE students – not to mention a multitude of people studying at non-University institutions including private colleges, professional boards, etc.

While this evaluation has not undertaken a cost-benefit analysis, CUCs are important for regional economies and for development.

- CUCs are fundamental to realising a ‘grow your own’ ambition in regional areas, especially in public service areas such as health, education, and social work.

- Supporting people to stay local: CUCs offer an invaluable opportunity for students who want to stay local (to support family, to work or support family businesses, to avoid the costs of relocation), and who want to serve their local community as a future professional or public servant.

- Role modelling: The support of CUCs has opened access and ambition between members of the community; in fact, there are several examples in these Centres of family members inspiring other family members to return to education.

- Contribute to the ‘regional renaissance’: allow for upskilling of local populations, higher salaries, and attract new residents in if services and facilities are improving.

- Have synergies with the development of new Special Activation Precincts.

CUCs need certainty of government funding. Other sources of funding from corporates and CUCs’ own activities also bring in income, as do partnerships with universities (including CSP payments) and some corporates donate (notably, Snowy Hydro and Santos). However, the opportunities vary between centres. CUCs are in the main (about 60%) reliant on state and federal government funding. Given the benefits to the local regional economies, and the NSW Government itself, the issues of ‘financial sustainability’ needs to be reconceptualised to account for the benefits the CUCs bring. While established CUCs do access non-government sources of funding (typically becoming a quarter to a third of their income) CUCs are not profit-making entities. Their purpose is to support education in rural and regional Australia. Governments can, however, continue to use funding agreements to encourage CUCs to continue to seek external funding/revenue and pursue a range of efficiencies **without compromising their core mission.**

CUCs are important to the NSW Government as an employer (in particular NSW DoE and NSW Health benefit from CUC graduates), and to communities that need essential services. CUCs seek to maintain their focus and receive government funds with more certainty as well as continuing to seek other funding sources. Government could seek to levy businesses that benefit from a ready source of local graduates via seeking a mandated contribution as part of, for example, seeking development consent for new business parks or SAPs, or through some other general levy mechanism. Not all regional industries require university graduates, so a university levy on ‘business’ may not be appropriate for some sectors that are likely benefit less than others. CUCs running costs exhibit variations, and CUCs could pursue a range of efficiencies and re-examine suppliers where costs are higher than the average across the CUC network.

CUCs are offering development opportunities to country people allowing them to re-imagine what is possible for them and their families.

1. Introduction

Regional people participate in higher education at half the rate of metropolitan Australians (Halsey, 2018; Commonwealth of Australia, 2019; Productivity Commission 2019). The mission of the Country Universities Centre (CUC) program is to address the under-representation of regional students in higher education. The CUCs aim to provide quality opportunities to local students to pursue higher education without the need to relocate. Students have free access to high-speed internet, modern technology, and general academic support delivered in their local CUC. The CUC facilities provide regional people with the space and tools they need to create a vibrant and more prosperous future for themselves and their wider community (Country Universities Centre, 2023).

The CUCs address this issue by providing fully equipped and strategically located centres offering modern study facilities, high-speed internet, quiet study spaces, meeting and training spaces, kitchens and bathrooms, and learning and other support to make higher education more accessible and encourage rural and regional students to remain in their local communities. The CUCs are governed locally by Boards made up of community members and adopt strategic plans aligned with local contexts and needs. The NSW Government has most recently allocated an $8 million grant to CUC to establish five new centres in regional locations by 2024. An evaluation of the CUC program is required under the Funding Agreement.

1.1 Purpose of the evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation was to conduct an independent evaluation of the Country Universities Centre program.

The evaluation involved the assessment of all CUCs in NSW (currently ten are in operation, with one more to open in 2024), by gathering evidence from CUC staff, CUC clients (students), local high school staff, and local community stakeholders (including CUC Board members, local elected representatives, and employers).

The evaluation:

- Assessed the outcomes of CUCs and if the aims of the program have been met.
- Identified major learnings, strengths, and areas for improvement.
- Assessed specific KPIs regarding:
    - maintaining successful student engagement
    - establishment of five new centres
    - effective engagement and reputation-building with local community.
- Assessed the CUC business model.
- Offers recommendations for long-term financial sustainability.

UNSW consulted with the NSW Department of Education (DoE) to develop a suitable evaluation framework. The evaluation framework included:

- success indicators;
- method of evaluation;
- qualitative and quantitative data collection; and
- alignment with relevant evaluation models by relevant stakeholders.

The evaluation of the CUC program assessed:

- the benefits of the delivery model;
- the extent to which the objectives are achieved; and
- the business model.

Recommendations have been made on long-term financial sustainability.

The evaluation proceeded in three primary phases: design, consultation, and execution.

The evaluators utilised other reports including CUC Central Annual reports and slide decks, individual CUC Audited Financial Reports, and the Regional University Centre (RUC) evaluation (Widders Hunt et al., 2021).

1.2 Scope of the evaluation

The CUC program is a national program funded by the Commonwealth and State governments. This evaluation has been commissioned by the NSW DoE and is therefore only focused on NSW CUCs.

This evaluation consisted of a process and outcomes evaluation of the CUC program, including focusing on implementation, outcomes (including performance against specific KPIs), and the financial sustainability of operations for the long-term.

The scope of the questions was in line with the aims of the evaluation and was expanded in dialogue with the funder to address research questions.

The scope of the financial sustainability evaluation is aligned with the original evaluation specification in the RFT, which is to assess the CUC business model and offer recommendations for long term financial sustainability. This entails a costs efficiency evaluation, via the analysis of CUC financial operations and comparing funding sources, performance, costs, administrative burden, variations and efficiencies between CUCs. It is not a cost-benefit analysis.

The following ten CUCs and regional towns were engaged with as part of the evaluation:

- Snowy Monaro (Cooma)
- Goulburn (Goulburn)

- Far West (Broken Hill)
- Clarence Valley (Grafton)
- North West (Narrabri and Moree)
- Western Riverina (Griffith and Leeton)
- Parkes (Parkes)
- Macleay Valley (Kempsey)
- Southern Shoalhaven (Ulladulla)
- Cowra (Cowra)

Note: Mudgee was not included as it will not open until later in 2024.

Stakeholders who participated included: CUC Central staff, CUCs staff and Board members, current and former CUC students, elected representatives, local council staff, employers, industry, non-for-profits organisations, schools, and the health sector.

The timeframe for the evaluation was March 2022 until February 2024.

1.3 Scope of the Final Report

The Final Report does not replicate the Interim Report, which was completed about halfway through the evaluation, but includes a summary of findings. It focuses on outcomes and the CUC business model.

Section1 provides a summary and recommendations.

Section 2 outlines the methodology.

Section 3 outlines findings.

Section 4 offers conclusions.

2. Methods

This section briefly summarises:

- the methods used to undertake the evaluation;
- the qualitative and quantitative data sought to address each research question;
- success indicators; and
- any alignment with relevant evaluation models by relevant stakeholders.

It also notes any deviations from the proposed methods and evaluation plan.

2.1 Evaluation design

The evaluation used a mixed methodology approach, with a cost efficiency evaluation component.

2.2 Data

Data was sourced primarily from CUC stakeholders, and secondary data from datasets held by CUC Central and the ten CUCs, as well as external sources like ABS regional demographic data.

2.2.1 Quantitative data

The Department and CUC Central and individual CUC managers provided the research team with quantitative data, including annual reports, audited financial reports, and on CUC registered students from its database (up until October 2023). This latter data was anonymised but contains numbers of registered students by semester, university enrolment and type of course information, and demographic information.

A small survey (n = 11) was undertaken with CUC managers and treasurers that focused on budgets and operations.

A CUC alumni survey was run in 2023, which focused on former students, to see what their trajectories had been since they left the CUC (n = 49).

2.2.2 Qualitative data

The qualitative data includes a combination of interviews and focus groups conducted with key stakeholders:

- CUC managers, and staff;
- CUC board members;
- CUC clients (students);
- Local schools (principals, key teachers, careers advisors);

- Local government (including local councils, local Federal and State MPs);
- Other key stakeholders including representatives from the Department and CUC Central agency;
- Local employers (including health, education, local government, and the industrial sector).

This data was gathered during a series of site visits to ten CUCs over the period of about a year. Two online focus groups with employers from NSW were also held.

2.3 Site visits

The research team gathered data about how CUCs were working at the program and regional levels as well as in the particular location(s) to capture multi-level as well as site-specific information. The team visited ten centres throughout NSW over the course of the evaluation. The longest-operating centres were visited first (in 2022), followed by the more recently established CUCs in late 2022 into 2023.

The site visits took 2–4 days, depending on distance and the amount of travel required by the research team, and whether the CUC has one or two centre locations[1] operating as paired (they were visited in the same trip).

Table 2 Site visit schedule

Site visits (2022)	**Q3 2022**	**Q4 2022**
Snowy-Monaro CUC (est. 2013) in Cooma, and CUC Central office (also in Cooma)	June 15-16	
Goulburn CUC, Goulburn (est. 2018)	June 14-15	
Far West CUC, Broken Hill (est. 2019)	July 6-9	
Clarence Valley CUC, Grafton (est. 2019)		September 13-15
Western Riverina CUC, Griffith and Leeton (est. 2019)		October 18-19
North West CUC, Narrabri and Moree (est.2019)		May 28-June 5
	Q1 2023	**Q2 2023**
Parkes CUC, Parkes (est. 2020)	April 19-20	
Macleay Valley CUC, Kempsey (est. 2021)	March 23-25	
Site visits (2023)	**Q3 2023**	**Q4 2023**
Southern Shoalhaven CUC, Ulladulla (est. 2021)	April 26-28	
Cowra CUC, Cowra (est. 2023)		June 23

*Mudgee CUC was not included as it was not operational.

[1] Western Riverina sites (Leeton and Griffith) and North-Western sites (Narrabri and Moree).

2.4 Study participants

The section below outlines the stakeholder groups that participated and the sample size for each of the key stakeholder groups for the evaluation.

2.4.1 CUC clients (students)

CUC students are the students who are registered users of a CUC. The research team interviewed a range of CUC students including students of different ages, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, CALD, and lower-socio-economic backgrounds, to ensure diversity of students. Interviews explored their motivations and barriers to studying, their views on the support provided by the CUC, their career aspirations, and future plans. Students were offered a voucher for their participation.

2.4.2 CUC staff

CUC staff included Centre managers and Learning Skills Advisors (LSAs). The research team conducted interviews/focus groups which explored aims of the program and outcomes, managing budgets and fundraising, administration and operations, external partnerships, promotion to the community, and how the program was working for different student cohorts in the CUC location (e.g., Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, CALD students).

Further, a survey aimed at Centre managers (and Board Treasurers) explored finances and costs, including cost pressures, and examples of and suggestions for greater efficiencies.

2.4.3 CUC Board members

CUCs operate as a company limited by guarantee that is accountable to a skills-based board which approves the Business Plan and Budget for each CUC on an annual basis. The research team ran focus groups and interviews with Board members at each CUC site. The focus of these was on governance and oversight, skills, strategic planning, community engagement and partnerships, and financial sustainability.

2.4.4 Local school staff

Local high school staff include school leaders and careers advisors from high schools located in CUC catchment areas. The research team interviewed high school leaders at most sites[2]. Interviews with school staff focused on how schools interact with and refer students to their local CUC, teacher shortages, and CUC graduate employment in the education field.

2.4.5 Local elected representatives of government

Given CUCs are important for regional communities, a number of local Councillors and Members of Parliament (Federal and State) were interviewed. Interviews were focussed on regional

[2] In addition to UNSW ethics approval, ethics approval was obtained through the DoE's State Education Research Applications Process (SERAP).

development, the CUC's presence in the community, regional development, and the local labour market including labour and skills shortages.

2.4.6 Other key stakeholders including representatives from the Department and CUC Central agency

A focus group was conducted with CUC Central key staff members which focused on the overall program, trends, challenges, funding sources and sustainability, and relations with external organisations like universities.

2.4.7 Employers

Two focus groups were held with employers to better gauge their perceptions of the program, and the state of local regional economies and skills shortages.

2.5 Sample sizes

2.5.1 Surveys

The table below shows the sample sizes for the survey that formed part of the evaluation data collection.

Table 3 Sample size

Stakeholder groups	No.	% of total cohort
CUC Managers and Treasurers survey	22	90%
CUC Alumni survey	49*	9%**

*Question responses ranged from 35-60 in number..**There have been 560 graduates in the past 4 years, therefore % of total has been calculated using this.

2.5.2 Interviews and focus groups

The table on the next page indicates sample sizes by site and stakeholder group. A total of 143 persons participated.

Table 4 Total sample sizes, interviews and focus groups

	Target samples	Goulburn	Snowy-Monaro (Cooma)	CUC Central	Far West (Broken Hill)	Clarence Valley (Grafton)	Macleay Valley (Kempsey)	Riverina (Griffith and Leeton)	Southern Shoalhaven	North West (Moree and Narrabri)	Parkes	Cowra	Employers (NSW-wide)
CUC students	3	4	3	n/a	5	4	3	5	4	6	3	3	n/a
CUC staff	2	2	3	4	4	2	3	3	3	3	2	1	n/a
CUC board members	2	3	3	n/a	3	5	2	2	4	4	3	2	n/a
Schools staff	4	0	0	n/a	0	1		0	0	1	0	0	n/a
Local levels of govt (councils, MPs)	3	1	0	n/a	1	3	2	0	1	2	0	1	n/a
Other stakeholders (NGOs, DoE Divisional staff)	0-1	1	0	n/a	2	1	2	2	0	1	0	0	n/a
Employers (NSW-wide)													8
Subtotals	*14*	*11*	*9*	*4*	*15*	*16*	*12*	*12*	*11*	*17*	*8*	*6*	*8*
TOTAL – all participants	**143**												

2.5.3 Program and other quantitative data

CUC program - report data

These consisted of:

- CUC bi-annal reports to the NSW Department of Education
- CUC Annual Reports and Audited Financial Reports (CUC Central and individual CUCs)
- Other data on request (CUC Central provided additional tailored data).

ABS and RUC data

Sources of report data include:

- Census 2021 ABS
- RUSH core statistics, which include demographic information for each of the CUC regions
- The Commonwealth's evaluation of the Regional University Centre (RUC) program.

Financial and operational data

Sources of report data include:

- CUC individual Centre budgets (profit and loss statements)
- Other sources including:
    - UNSW (to provide comparisons of income mix)
    - Job advertisements for regional positions (to provide data on relocation incentive payments)

2.6 Data analysis

This section reports on the analytic approach.

2.6.1 CUC program student data

CUC program data on clients (students) was provided in Excel form and the researchers used this to generate descriptive statistics on number of students, courses being studies, universities and other training institutions of enrolment, demographics and annual changes.

2.6.2 Interview and focus group transcript analysis

Interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded (and video recorded if online) and transcribed by a professional transcriber working under a confidentiality agreement with UNSW. The research team used interpretive research methods and a coding frame to answer the research questions. The coding frame closely follows the research questions. Interpretive research methods are used, informed by Realistic Evaluation methods (Pawson and Tilley, 1997). The software used was NVivo12.

2.6.3 Survey analysis

Survey data from stakeholder surveys was analysed using in-built functions of the survey platform (Qualtrics) to generate descriptive statistics.

2.6.4 CUC student data and financial analysis

The program and Centre business model and financial sustainability was analysed using various statistical methods including:

A. Funding mix – as a percentage of budget; over time

B. Expenditures – as a percentage of budget; over time

C. Funding available per capita graduate per CUC

D. Costs of counterfactuals – student studying in a regional centre or city; cost to universities of supporting low SES students

E. Comparisons – with other educational type institutions

The purpose of presenting the data in this form is to enable policymakers to make their own judgements about whether the program represents good value for money and if there are any efficiencies or funding requirements, such as a change in funding mix or levels that could be improved. It also allows for comparison of CUCs with each other, highlighting differences in quanta of funding sources, differences in expenditures, and what quanta of resourcing is available per registered student.

2.6.5 ABS data analysis

ABS local area statistics (SLA3) were used (see Appendix B for datasets and variables).

2.6.6 Data synthesis

Findings from the different components of the evaluation are first analysed separately and then synthesised to address the evaluation aims and effectiveness of the CUC program including its financial sustainability. The Final Report assesses all data to date, recapping findings from the Interim Report and synthesising new data.

2.7 Limitations

CUC's financial accounting, while mainly standardised, did contain variations on how income and expenditure was reported, making financial analysis more laborious than it needed to be (see the recommendation on this).

The CUC Alumni survey contained about 49 responses, however none were from former CUC students who did not complete their course of study. This a data gap, and CUCs also have little to no data on non-completers (see also the recommendation on this).

In addition, the terms of reference were open to interpretation. The term 'financial sustainability' could be interpreted in several ways, however there seemed to be an implicit assumption by the funder that recurrent funding was not ideal. The term 'business model', while used generically in the public service, arguably should not be a term applied to what is in essence a student support service designed to overcome under-representation of rural and regional people in higher education. Further, CUCs are not 'businesses' *per se* as they don't sell services or products.

2.8 Reporting and dissemination

The research team supports disseminating its research and evaluation in forms that are useful for the interested audiences. The research team recommends the Department feed key messages from the evaluation reports back to key stakeholders (Commonwealth and NSW Government stakeholders, including relevant Ministers, MPs, and MLAs), CUC Central and the individual CUCs, and any other relevant stakeholders. Sharing of key messages is part of good research practice, ensuring that stakeholders remain interested and see a benefit to participating in this, and future research and evaluations.

3. Findings

3.1 Are CUCs successfully supporting regional students to meet their higher education goals?

Yes, CUCs are supporting rural and regional students to meet their higher education goals.

Data from Semester 2, 2023 which contains all students to date, indicates that:

- CUCs in NSW have supported over 4678 students (2019-2023)
- A total of 560 people in NSW have graduated with CUC support over the past 5 years (2019-2023).
- 97% of students are rural or remote classification (1253 rural, 175 remote as of October 2023) (CUC, 2023b)
- 51% of students are the first in their family to study (CUC, as of October 2023)
- All CUCs are meeting and exceeding student number targets (CUC, 2023b).
- Nearly all of these graduates stay in the regions - an estimated 89%-91% (CUC Alumni survey; CUC Central).
- The CUC alumni survey found that 86.6% of students of 45 students who responded believe that the credentials they got supported by the CUC helped them get their current job.

Registered student numbers are trending upward overall in NSW CUCs. Students are enrolled in a wide range of institutions, including public universities, private universities, private colleges/academies/institutes, professional associations, other training bodies, admissions boards/colleges, and international universities. Students attribute the CUC's support as key to their study success, as the alumni survey indicates.

3.1.1 CUC registrations

New student registrations typically start quite low in year one of a CUC's operation, then rapidly increase.

- CUC first-time registrations trended upwards and totalled a cumulative 4332 over 2019-2023 Snowy-Monaro Far West and Goulburn experienced a slump during the height of the COVID-19 lockdown period, but numbers recovered in 2023.
- New registered students have been increasing across all NSW CUCs, and for each CUC, exceeding KPIs for the first three years.
- CUCs however do not just support University or tertiary education institution students – they have a number of registered students who are studying at high schools and TAFEs.

The table below indicates numbers of students (new registrations) by the year they first joined the CUC and the cumulative count. Far West had the highest cumulative number at 709, while Cowra as a new centre, as expected had the smallest number at 47.

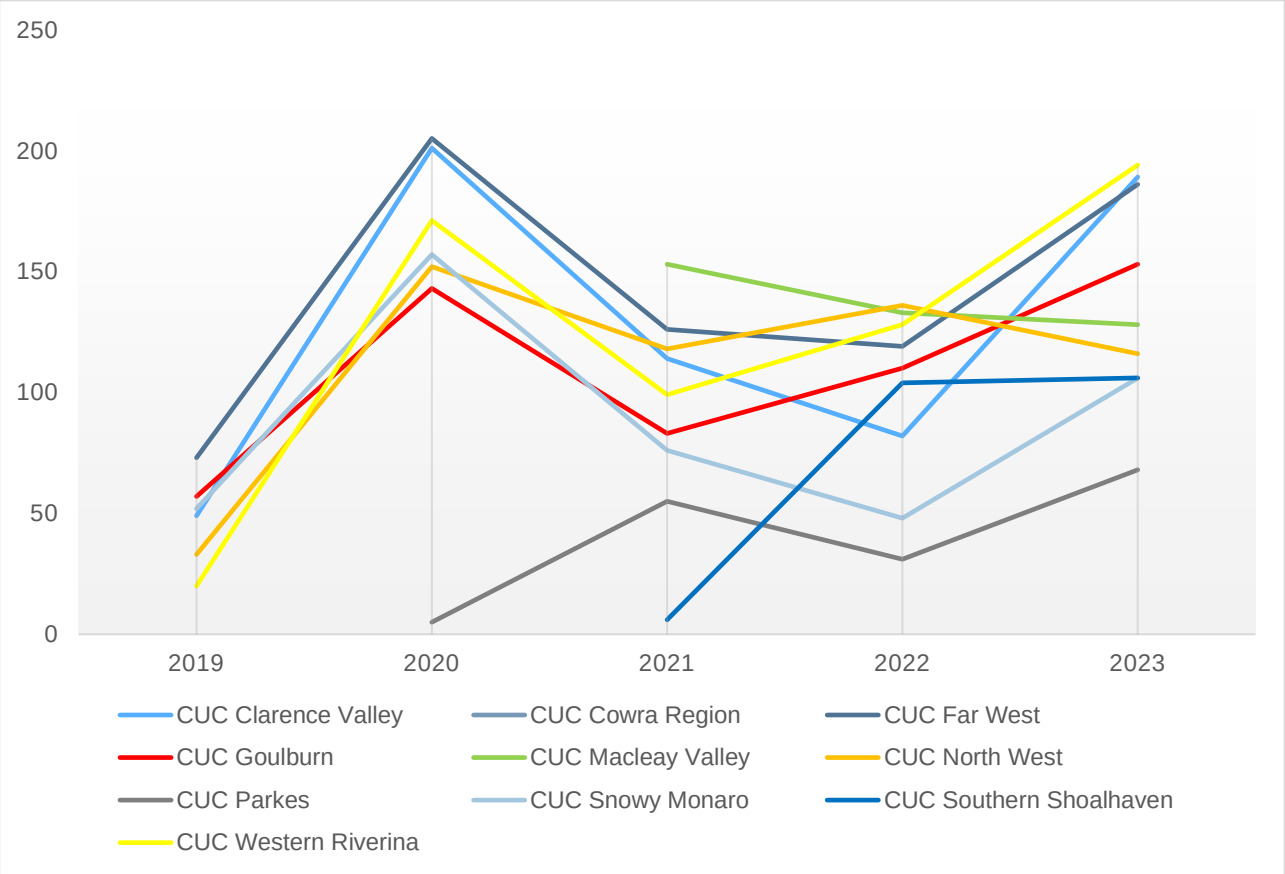
Table 5 CUC new student registrations, per year, per centre (2019-2023)

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Total 2019-2023
CUC Clarence Valley	49	201	114	82	189	635
CUC Cowra Region					47	47
CUC Far West	73	205	126	119	186	709
CUC Goulburn	57	143	83	110	153	546
CUC Macleay Valley			153	133	128	414
CUC North West	33	152	118	136	116	555
CUC Parkes		5	55	31	68	159
CUC Snowy Monaro	52	157	76	48	106	439
CUC Southern Shoalhaven			6	104	106	216
CUC Western Riverina	20	171	99	128	194	612
Total per year	284	1034	830	891	1293	
Total - cumulative						**4332**

Source: CUC student data 2019- 2023

Figure 1 below shows CUC new student registration trends, including the slump related to the pandemic around 2021-2022. It indicates that the more established CUCs (Snowy-Monaro, Far West, Goulburn) student registrations trended down in this period, while newer CUCs like Shoalhaven trended upwards.

Figure 1 CUCs trends – new student registrations 2019-2023



Source: CUC student data 2019- 2023

The table below shows the total number of registrations and percentage of the total for the most recent year, 2023. This includes both new and continuing students who registered to use the CUC for the year. The western NSW CUCs (Western Riverina and Far West) have about a third of NSW's total registrations (14% and 13% respectively). Unsurprisingly, the newer CUCs had a smaller 'share' of the total.

Table 6 CUC number and percentage of total registrations supported in 2023, highest to lowest

CUC	No. registrations 2023	%
Western Riverina	307	14%
Far West	286	13%
Goulburn	280	13%
Clarence Valley	269	13%
Macleay Valley	235	11%
North West	232	11%
Snowy Monaro	165	8%
Southern Shoalhaven	160	8%
Parkes	137	6%
Cowra Region	48	2%
Total registrations	**2119**	**100%**

Source: CUC student data 2019- 2023

Registration target performance

The registration target KPIs are as follows:

- Year 1 of operation: 45
- Year 2 of operation: 60
- Year 3 of operation: 70

Table 7 below indicates performance against registration KPIs for the first three years of CUC operations for all tranches.

To date, by semester 2, 2023, all the centres had met their student registration targets.

Table 7 CUC student registrations targets and performance, first three years of operation

Centre	Year 1 Semester 2	Under/over KPI	Year 2 Semester 2	Under/over KPI	Year 3 Semester 2	Under/over KPI
Tranche 1: Snowy Monaro (opened 2013)	61	16	114	54	116	46
Tranche 1: Goulburn (opened 2018)	93	48	138	78	119	49
Tranche 1: Western Riverina (opened 2019)	53	8	140	80	129	59
Tranche 1: North West (opened 2019)	75	30	122	62	126	56
Tranche 1: Clarence Valley (opened 2019)	111	66	153	93	152	82
Tranche 1: Far West (opened 2019)	103	58	160	100	150	80
Tranche 2: Parkes (opened 2020)	57	12	70	10	76*	6
Tranche 2: Macleay Valley (opened 2021)	132	87	151	91	133*	63
Tranche 2: Southern Shoalhaven (opened 2021)	85	40	114*	54	n/a	n/a
Tranche 2: Cowra* (opened in 2023)	55*	15	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

*As of 31st October 2023. Source: CUC Central data. Note: Does not include Mudgee, which will open in 2024.

3.1.2 Student retention

Key points:

- Regional higher education students have higher rates of first year attrition – 14% for regional and 16% for remote-based students, versus 10% for metropolitan students (CUC

Central, 2022, citing DESE 2020[3]). These figures pertain to all students, not just CUC-registered students.

- There is a lack of data on students registered with CUCs who do not complete courses. CUCs do not have vision on student trajectories once they are no longer registered with a CUC. A student may disengage with a CUC due to course dropout, deferral, because they no longer wish to use its services, moved out of the town/region, or they chose on-campus study (travelling or moving for face-to-face classes). This is a data gap (see recommendation on this).

- A rough estimate may be that 5-10% of students discontinue studies before completion, however this is based on anecdotal evidence from CUC Central.

- The evaluators could not successfully gather definitive data on non-completers.

- Future research (out of scope for this evaluation) could examine higher education attainment for CUC areas versus a comparator set of matched non-CUC areas.

CUCs do not manage to gather any data on non-completers, which seems to be an oversight or shortfall in data. CUCs should ideally monitor all registered students including after they stop using the CUC. Persons who did not finish their course may be reluctant to provide information back to the CUC if they were unable to finish their course, got poor marks, or felt negative about their experience. We recognise the difficulty in gathering such data due to these sensitivities.

CUCs do collect unique student identifiers, however this is not done consistently. CUCs will be doing this consistently from 2024 and will supply this data to the Commonwealth which will be able to track students' destinations.

The CUC Alumni survey run by the evaluators attempted to access former CUC students who completed, or did not complete, their course of study, however again it was difficult to ensure the survey got to all the former students including those who did not complete their course through available communication channels.

The CUC Alumni survey was open for a period of a month and obtained circa 45 responses. 100% indicated they had completed their course (no non-completers did the survey).

For later research/evaluations, once unique student identifiers are collected by all CUCs consistently, there may be data linkage opportunities at the state or Commonwealth level that should be explored by CUC and their university partners to monitor student trajectories post-CUC.

3.1.3 Target age group and population

The CUC target age range group is 20-44.

- CUC Central student data for October 2023 data shows that 66% of all CUC students are between the ages of 20-44 (CUC student data, October 2023). 17% were younger than 20,

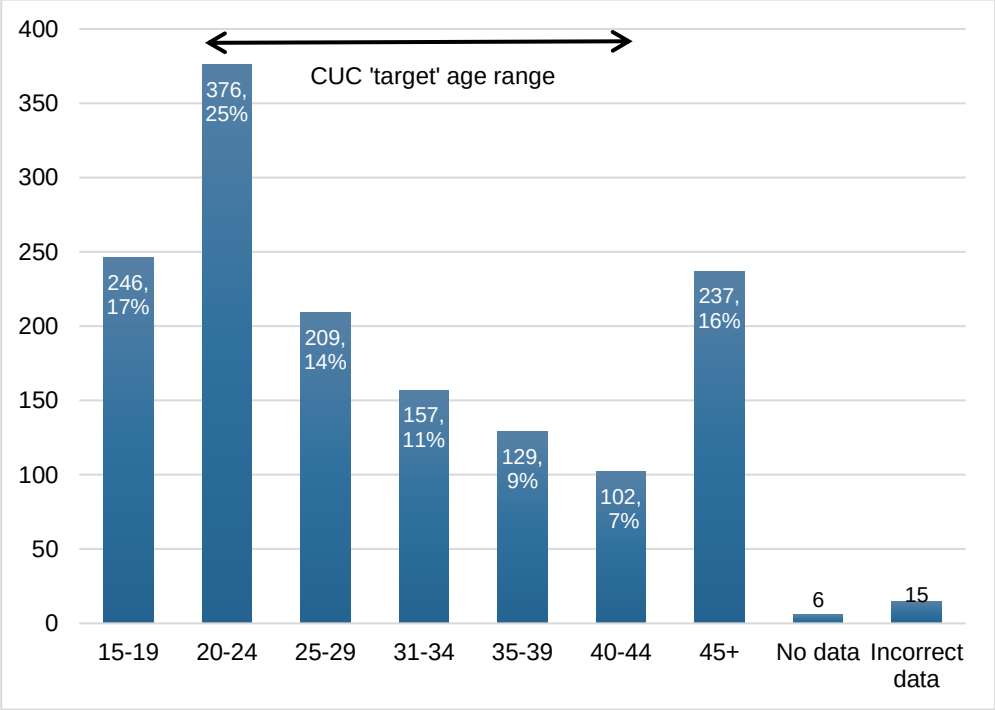
[3] See https://www.dese.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/completion-rates-higher-education-students-cohort-analysis-20052020

and 16% were aged 45 or older (the oldest CUC student was aged 81). There was some missing age data (1%).

- Using 2022 Census data and 2019-2023 CUC data and a proxy ABS age range of 20-44 years, analysis indicated that the CUC population is proportionally far greater than the same age range population in all communities (typically about, or a bit more than, double).

As the chart below indicates, there are a range of age groups that use CUCs, and two-thirds are in the target age ranges of 20-44.

Figure 2 CUCs age ranges, 2019-2023



Source: CUC student data 2019- October 2023

3.1.4 CUC student demographics

For October 2023, CUC student demographic data indicates:

- 78% are female
- 9% identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
- 51% are the first in their family to enrol in higher education
- median student age of 27 and average age of 31.

Source: CUC student data for October 2023.

The preponderance of female versus male students is because more women work part-time and can enrol in university, and men have greater access to more well-paying career paths that do not require a university degree (for example, in trades) (Hare, 2020). Overall, an average of 9% of CUC students identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, (CUC data, October 2023), an increase of 2.1% on the previous year. Some CUCs had a higher proportion of Aboriginal students than the surrounding population, and some, lower (see Table 8, below).

Macleay Valley CUC and Cowra CUC have the highest percentage (16%), also higher than the surrounding populations respectively, perhaps reflecting the younger demographic of First Nations peoples in the area.

Parkes CUC has the lowest percentage (5%), which is also lower than the surrounding population (11%).

Table 8 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander population for area compared to CUC student Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students

	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population for area (ABS SAL3*) – 2021 Census	CUC students who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander % - October 2023
Goulburn	4.7%	(n = 13) 6%
Far West	12%	(n = 17) 8%
Snowy Monaro	3%	(n = 6) 7%
Clarence Valley	8.1%	(n = 13) 9%
Macleay Valley	10.9%	(n = 29) 16%
North West	17.3%	(n = 17) 9%
Parkes	11%	(n = 6) 5%
Southern Shoalhaven	6.5%	(n = 18) 15%
Western Riverina	7%	(n = 12) 6%
Cowra Region	4.9%	(n = 3) 16%
NSW population/CUCs average	3.4%	9%

Sources: ABS, 2021; CUC student data 2019- October 2023

3.1.5 Inclusivity and (cultural) safety

The CUCs support inclusivity and cultural safety by making centres accessible and welcoming to a diverse range of staff, students, and community. This is evidenced by a strong ethos of Aboriginal engagement reflected in the governance, management, staffing, and procurement of CUCs.

- CUCs facilitated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people undertaking higher education (9% of CUC students identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander).

- CUCs facilitated migrants upgrading their education/degrees.

The quantitative and qualitative data reflect the diversity and inclusivity of students in the CUC centres. Students vary by demography and institution. Registrations include a range of ages (16-76 years of age in one centre), genders, socio-economic status, tertiary institutions, areas of study, levels of course, part-time/full-time and year level of study. Additionally, some students are the first/eldest in their family to pursue higher education, some have a disability, and some identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.

CUCs support inclusivity and cultural safety by making centres accessible and welcoming a diverse range of students.

> We're open for anyone. Like, there's no discrimination. If anyone wants to come and learn, you know, and they need a space to be able to do that in a safe environment, a safe learning environment that caters to their every need, then this is the place. So, you know, if we identify that there's a certain group that needs – they've got a type of barrier, then we're all about trying to fill that need for them. The students are number one. That's what we're here for, for them. (Board member 8)

Far West CUC was trying innovative ways of engaging with local communities including Aboriginal people. Working on a Reconciliation Action Plan and including local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander elders (or former Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander CUC students) on the CUC Boards are two ways CUCs could work towards providing better cultural safety and potentially increase registrations. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students could also be effective role models as 'CUC ambassadors', going to school visits and to CUC community events.

The Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students we spoke to were generally positive about their CUC experiences:

> Lots of diversity, mate, really big diversity in age and culture and also LGBTQI and they do it well to cater for all those demographics and they're an inclusive service provider…. They're all inclusive... That's probably the biggest thing, they're all human and they all come across like that. That's the inclusivity that's promoted within the CUC… I really appreciate that sort of forward thinking and productivity towards the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, the Aboriginal communities that are out in the Far West. When we look at communities such as Wilcannia…they're heavily influenced and populated by our First Nations brothers and sisters in that youth demographic and they're slowly building that back up for them to engage. (Student 2)

CUCs had engagement strategies, and some were more developed than others. For example, in Macleay Valley CUC, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are supported in collaboration with the Leader of Community Engagement in Connected Communities at Kempsey High School, as part of the NSW Government's Connected Communities Strategy.

There was no specific data on CALD background students in the CUC student data, so numbers/percentages were not available. This could be included in data collection requirements and the CALD student cohort will become more significant as the RUSH centres start to operate in metropolitan environments. During site visits the evaluators heard how CUCs were supporting migrants seeking to upgrade their degrees:

> I've got a family that has come over from Pakistan, the same thing. Unfortunately, her degree is not recognised here so she's doing a…student support role in a school so she's just doing that course. (Student 11)

3.1.6 Student engagement

The CUCs staff are successfully maintaining student engagement through academic, wellbeing, pastoral, and peer support.

- By offering a supportive and welcoming environment for students, CUCs help students focus on their study.
- Having advice and academic skill support on offer assisted students, especially mature-age students returning to study after a long period.
- The accessible and well-equipped physical learning environment allows students to study when it suits them.

At face value, the CUCs are successfully maintaining student engagement. As mentioned previously, there is no hard data on student disengagement (due to study dropout, for instance), however CUCs are going to redress patch data by consistently collecting unique student identifiers, which will be given to the Commonwealth, allowing for better destination tracking.

By offering a supportive and welcoming environment for students, CUCs help students focus on their study and improve their skills. Having advice and academic skill support on offer (as well as the excellent physical learning environment) allows students to work through doubts and 'meltdowns' and seek advice from the Centre Managers and Learning Skills Advisor.

> We just try to make it so we're welcoming, and they feel like they can come to us, the office door's always open. (Staff 5)

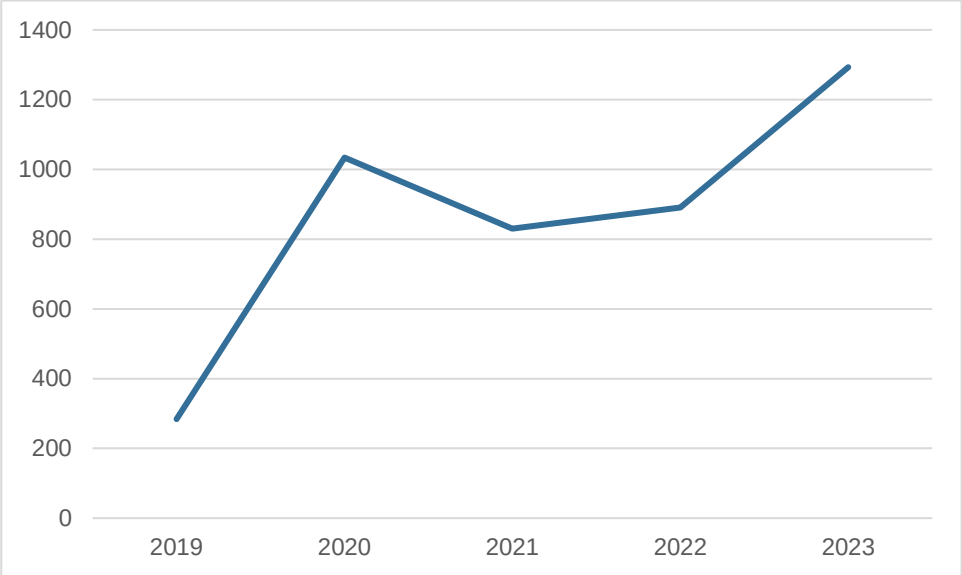
> One of the good things with CUC is that they're really good sounding boards. So apart from the practical help it's having that you know that you can chat to someone and say "Okay this is where I'm at, this is what I'm thinking, this is what's going on. (Student 13)

Managers and Learning Skills Advisors provide wellbeing support to students who may be having 'meltdowns' or struggling with study. It is not unusual for students to defer from a course, then return to study when their life is less hectic.

3.1.7 Student number trends

First-time student registrations have increased overall since 2019. As displayed below in Figure 3, there was a slump in 2020-2021 probably related to the COVID-19 pandemic, but the overall trajectory was upward.

Figure 3 New student registrations, 2019-2023



Source: CUC student data 2019- 2023

3.1.8 Student completion rates

CUC Central has provided data on graduation numbers by centre by year. As Table 9 below indicates, CUCs have collectively supported 560 graduates to December 2023. Snowy-Monaro, having been established earlier than the others in 2013, leads with 212, while out of the post-2018 CUCs Far West leads with 78. The newly-opened Cowra has supported two.

Table 9 Graduate numbers by CUC to October 2023

CUC	Graduates (all)
Snowy Monaro	212
Far West	78
Goulburn	66
North West	66
Western Riverina	57
Southern Shoalhaven	26
Clarence Valley	23
Macleay Valley	20
Parkes	10
Cowra	2
Total	560

Source: CUC Central graduation data, to December 2023.

3.1.9 Range of courses and institutions

Using October 2023 student data as a 'snapshot', the Table below indicates the types of study being undertaken by CUC clients (students). Overall, 80% of students were enrolled in universities including public universities, private universities, private colleges/academies/institutes. However, CUCs (despite their name, 'university' centres') were also supporting 89 high school students (6%) and 100 Vocational Education and Training students (7%).

Table 10 Types of education undertaken (October 2023)

Course level	No.	%
Missing data	5	0%
High school	89	6%
VET	100	7%
Non AQF	18	1%
Sub bachelor	22	1%
Tertiary pathways	52	4%
Undergraduate	877	59%
Postgraduate	314	21%
Total	1477	100%

Source: CUC student data, October 2023.

The following table indicates the entire range of higher education institutions in which CUC clients were enrolled as students as of October 2023 by numbers (largest to smallest). The 'top ten' are in bold.

Table 11 Higher education providers of CUC clients (all) (October 2023) – 'top ten' in bold

Universities/Other	No.
Charles Sturt University	**301**
University of New England	**215**
***Other (various colleges, training institutes, professional associations)**	**140**
University of Wollongong	**118**
TAFEs	**86**
Southern Cross University	**79**
High schools	**65**
University of Canberra	**52**
Macquarie University	**36**
Swinburne University	**34**
Uni of Newcastle	30
Uni of Tasmania	27
Curtin	26
Uni of South Australia	23
Uni of Sydney	20
ACU	19

ANU	15
CQU	15
Deakin	15
Uni of Southern Qld	15
Griffith	14
Torrens	13
Flinders	12
CDU	11
UNSW	11
La Trobe	9
UTS	9
Victoria Uni	8
Monash	7
QUT	6
Uni of Adelaide	4
Uni of Queensland	4
Edith Cowan	3
James Cook	3
Legal admissions board/College of Law	3
Murdoch	3
Bond	2
CIT	2
RMIT	2
Uni of Melbourne	2
Notre Dame	1

Source: CUC Student Data, October 2023. *'Other' includes a variety of private training colleges, professional training associations, theological colleges, etc.

3.1.10 New centre establishment

NSW planned to establish five new CUCs by 2022, but cumulative delays caused by COVID-19 pushed this out to 2024. This schedule is on track, as Parkes CUC opened on 20 November 2020, Macleay Valley CUC opened on 30 April 2021, Southern Shoalhaven CUC opened on 13 December 2021, Cowra CUC opened in February 2023, while an opening date for Mudgee CUC is in 2024.

Mudgee has been established as an incorporated company and has a local skills-based board, however its circumstances of requiring a new build, together with delays relating to the unsuccessful application to the Commonwealth's Regional University Centre Cohort Three Funding Round, means that the Mudgee CUC is not scheduled to open until Semester 1, 2024 (CUC Annual Report to NSW Government, 2022).

3.1.11 Student support

CUC students overwhelmingly expressed feeling supported and were happy with the CUC facilities.

- High-speed and reliable internet, dual screen computers, and human support from centre managers, Learning Skills Advisors, and peers were key sources of support.
- The availability of stationery, printing and binding resources, heating and kitchen facilities added to the usability of the centres.
- Centre staff got to know students individually and could tailor support to them.

In addition to supporting students enrolled in tertiary education courses, CUCs support students who are on work placements, sponsorships, or traineeships in healthcare, aged care, childcare, allied health, education, and industry.

Furthermore, the CUC Alumni survey asked students about satisfaction with the support they received and what was used. Table 12 shows that out of 25 responses, which is a small sample, 25.7% said they were very unsatisfied while a combined 74% were satisfied. Typically, those who undertake surveys voluntarily may want to express disappointment with a service, so as this was a voluntary survey undertaken with a small sample size, it may be skewed towards those who really valued their CUC experiences and those that were not satisfied.

Table 12 Were you satisfied with the level of support available to you at the CUC?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Very unsatisfied	25.71%	9
4	Unsatisfied	0.00%	0
5	Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	0.00%	0
6	Satisfied	14.29%	5
7	Very satisfied	60.00%	21
	Total	100%	35

Source: CUC Alumni survey.

We provided an open text response to provide examples of what the CUCs could have done differently – that is the reasons for the dissatisfaction. Responses included comments that students wanted these further supports:

- “More sessions made available after work hours (e.g. study skills sessions).”
- “More comfy computer chairs”
- “Better landscaped outdoor spaces for brain breaks and fresh air.”
- “A qualified JP to certify copies of paperwork/ certificates etc.”
- “Regular progress checks scale 1-10 to gain insight and offer support to students (regularly would be good).”
- “First Nations tertiary education support program”
- “Crèche in the building would have been the only thing that could have made it any easier for me.”

Others were happy with the support they received; two typical responses were:

- “Extremely well-supported to allow me to finish my studies. A safe space and place to get on with the serious stuff.”
- “Feel so lucky to have had access to CUC. Massive help! Made me study better. Plus got help from learning skills advisor and improved grades from credit to high distinction.”
  The Learning Skills Advisor provides study skills support.

As Table 13 below shows, 77% of students said they did utilise the LSA.

Table 13 Did you seek advice and support from the LSA?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes	77.78%	28
2	No	22.22%	8
	Total	100%	36

Source: CUC Alumni survey.

Of these, a combined 93% said they found the LSA very or moderately helpful, as shown in Table 14 below.

Table 14 Did you find the LSA helpful?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes - very helpful	78.57%	22
2	Yes - moderately helpful	14.29%	4
3	Neither helpful nor unhelpful	7.14%	2
4	No - not helpful	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	28

Source: CUC Alumni survey.

Qualitative data collection indicated many students felt the CUC was critical to them embarking on a higher education path. Currently enrolled students overwhelmingly expressed feeling supported and were happy with the CUC facilities. High-speed and reliable internet, dual screen computers, and human support from centre managers, LSAs, and peers they met there were often mentioned in the interviews undertaken. The availability of stationery, printing and binding resources, heating and kitchen facilities added to the usability of the centres. Resources are freely available and made students feel at home and able to focus on their studies.

> The physical facility is, I’ve touched on this before, the kitchenette, the toilets, what they provide in just those two things, so toilet facilities and the kitchenette is a home

environment. They've really brought that to study which I think is probably the biggest thing when we look at the facility. Then the next level is the access to computers, the resources that they've got down there, computers, printing, internet are all right there at your fingertips. They've created a really nice flow (Student 2)

3.1.12 Post-graduation employment and location

Graduate data indicates that the vast majority stay local and work locally. Most are female and work in education, nursing and allied health.

- In 2021, CUC Central estimated that 91% of graduates were employed locally or in another region. This accorded with the findings from the evaluators' CUC alumni survey, which indicated 89% of graduates had stayed local or were in another rural or regional area.

- Analysis of 2021 graduate data indicated that 55% of 2021 graduates were employed by state or local government entities, while 33% were employed by a private sector or NGO employer. NSW Education, and Health, Communities and Justice, and local government, were the most common employers of CUC graduates in the public sector.

- Students who were interviewed expressed strong connections to their community and most intended to stay and look for local work following graduation.

The alumni survey found that 89% lived in the same area post-graduation while 6.6% had moved interstate, and only 2% moved to Sydney, Newcastle or Wollongong, as seen in Table 15 below.

Table 15 Do you still live in the same area now as when you were accessing the CUC?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes - same area	88.89%	40
2	No - I moved to another part of regional NSW	2.22%	1
3	No - I moved to Sydney, Newcastle or Wollongong	2.22%	1
4	No - I moved interstate	6.67%	3
	Total	100%	45

Source: CUC Alumni survey.

In open text responses to the question 'What influenced your decision to choose where to live?' the most frequent response was 'family'. Others included: 'lifestyle', 'staying in my hometown', and 'cost of living'.

The 45 respondents that answered the question on current occupation indicates most are in essential services like teaching (29%) and nursing (9%), and 11% having their own business, as Table 16 below shows. This reflects chosen professions of the female majority.

Table 16 What is your current main occupation?

#	Answer	%	Count
8	Teaching	28.89%	13
9	Nursing	8.89%	4
10	Allied Health (e.g. Occupational therapy, Podiatry, etc.)	4.44%	2
11	Psychology	2.22%	1
12	Local Council - please indicate what role (e.g. planner, etc):	6.67%	3
13	Social work	0.00%	0
14	Law	2.22%	1
15	Legal (clerk etc)	0.00%	0
16	NSW or Commonwealth Government agencies - please indicate what role (e.g. ranger, child protection officer, etc):	0.00%	0
17	Accountancy	2.22%	1
18	Unemployed/job seeking	2.22%	1
19	Retired/not in labour force	0.00%	0
20	Transport	0.00%	0
21	My own business - please indicate what type of business:	11.11%	5
22	Hospitality	0.00%	0
23	Media	0.00%	0
24	Art and Design	2.22%	1
25	Mining	2.22%	1
26	Childcare	2.22%	1
27	Other - specify here:	24.44%	11
	Total	100%	45

Source: CUC Alumni survey.

‘Other’ categories of employment included psychologist, agronomist, midwifery, teachers’ aide, business admin, and the types of businesses people were running themselves included consultancy, event management, coaching, and surveying.

CUC staff and Board members describe high demand from employers across all sectors in the community. Many CUC students work for the State Government in health, education, social work, childcare, community services, and in local government, as well as in private sector healthcare, industries and small businesses.

Employers were consulted via online focus groups.

> I think about the whole regional development narrative of actually providing a pipeline of skilled labour, and I don't like that word labour, but skilled people that are able to engage in the spaces and employment that's necessary for the growth and continued flourishing of our region. (Manager)

The skill shortages, recruitment difficulties, and the benefits of CUCs upskilling local engineers, and labourers, are summarised by one participant:

> So, we find each area relatively different, but it is still very hard and everybody's competing for the same labour pool market...Everybody's just basically changing over staff, you know, so there's obviously other options of bringing labour in, but looking at upskilling kids or providing scholarships and trying to make and look at other mechanisms for talent. (Employer)

3.1.13 Study facilitators and barriers

Students registered with CUCs mentioned various facilitators and barriers while studying.

Facilitators

As of November 2023, facilitators included:

- The CUC spaces, which provided modern and well-equipped study facilities (including high-speed internet access), and a space where students could focus on their studies (away from places of work and family responsibilities).
- Cost and location effectiveness – there is no cost to students, and they do not have to leave their town/region to pursue higher education.
- Support from centre staff including Learning Skills Advisors (LSA).
- A space to meet like-minded peers from the community and to share the studying experience.
- Operational for extended hours and during university holidays.

The CUC Alumni survey asked students if they accessed the Learning Skills Advisor and whether they found them helpful. Of 36 responses to the questions on this, 78% indicated that they accessed the LSA support and of these, 78.5% said they found this very helpful.

The factors that facilitate CUC registrations and course completions relate to costs (both course costs and trade-off with earned income for study time), the facilities and the supports for students. Interviewees often remarked that without the CUCs the students would not be able to complete tertiary study. The key advantage of CUCs is that aspiring students do not have to leave their town/region to pursue higher education (which is often both costly due to higher city housing and other costs, and unfeasible for those tied to local employment and with children).

> I think maybe the barriers of doing university especially straight after school for people is thinking they have to move away because, you know, that's really overwhelming for people. Especially young kids - they're farm kids and… they have to suddenly up and move… how can they afford to move and live in Canberra?... or then the other option is Sydney and that's just as bad really. So, bringing more universities to regional areas makes it more affordable as well. (Student 11)

Cost is a significant factor mitigating against moving away to attend a higher education institution, especially with rising rents in cities. Even driving to a distant campus (for example, from Cooma to the universities in Canberra, or from Grafton to the universities in Armidale, Lismore, or Coffs Harbour) is also more expensive due to rising fuel prices. In any case, students are choosing to enrol in courses in universities far away from their physical location (for example a student in Cooma studying a nursing degree offered by the University of Tasmania).

The Centres provide students with a virtual office where they are removed from the distractions of families and households and are provided with free study spaces and technology. Access to the internet, computers, and printers for seven days a week from approximately 7am to midnight helps students fit study around work and family commitments. Furthermore, students feel they are supported by the administrative assistance from centre managers, the academic support of LSAs and the collegiality of peers.

> University degrees are not cheap, and you are sacrificing earning to study as well. So, to just have somewhere that is actually funded… and those spaces where you just feel encouraged and that you're not alone. It's so important for low socioeconomic [and] marginalised [people]. (Student 10)

Students mentioned the excellent facilities as an enabler, including access to fast internet, printing, and dual screen computers: "like just can't even describe how much of a difference that makes when you're studying… when you're researching and when you're like 'oh that's just the perfect thing'" (Student 11). For students who were coming back to higher education after a long period, the CUC helped them learn how to use new systems and negotiate online learning:

> I could come up here and ask just like the most basic [question] – because how I wrote an essay 30 years ago is different to how an essay gets written today... So, I could come up here and… there is no stupid question. The stupid question is the one that you don't ask. … basically from 'whoa to go' I've sat down with the staff here and they've helped me work out [not just] ... my timetable, but what my progression through the course is. (Student 13)

A student summarised the support the CUC provides as,

> I know that is very relevant to a lot of people here, that it's been that safe haven, that lifejacket in a flood. It has been amazing, and I don't think there's words that I could use to describe my thankfulness, my gratefulness, my gratitude. (Student 17)

Barriers

Barriers to using the CUC were various aspects of an individual's life and the broader social context.

- Personal barriers included juggling work and family responsibilities with studying, health issues, learning barriers (including disabilities, being unaccustomed to university-level learning).

- Social barriers included insufficient places in local childcare and aged care, and the availability of rental properties. There was also isolation and lack of access to technology during the COVID-19 lockdown period.

- Economic barriers included the cost of living such as mortgages, rent, fuel, and HECS.

- Environmental factors were the impact of drought and flooding.

- Many CUC students are parents.

There are factors that prevent commencing a university course or reduce completion of students' university courses. These barriers were found to be personal and family expectations, work demands, family responsibilities, health issues, learning barriers (including disabilities, being unaccustomed to University level learning) and the effects of COVID lockdowns. A key challenge was being the first in family, or a peer group, to undertake higher education.

> I didn't know what I was doing, and I didn't really have any support because none of my family have ever done university before…I wasn't very good at reaching out and asking. (Student)

> Yeah, a lot of them need support, so they're juggling their…career change, they're juggling their family, they're juggling their mortgage repayments, they're juggling their everything and then, they're going, wow, I'm doing online learning, as well. (CUC staff)

The COVID-19 lockdowns were disruptive. Students described a period of feeling isolated, without access to technology and desperate for the Centre to reopen. Students used the Centre's internet from outside:

> I know a couple of the students they didn't even have the internet at their house. So, they would actually come in… the manager at the time, she would leave the internet running so that they could connect from their cars out the front and stuff which was like a godsend for them. (Student)

Childcare may be one unmet need for parents trying to study at a CUC. However, due to flexible opening hours, most parents managed this. Parents with non-school age infants may be under-represented (however there is no data on this). When school is not on, school holiday programs could be considered by other CUCs based on the program running at Snowy-Monaro, if there is enough demand, a partner (like a university) and an external source of funding.

3.2 Are CUCs concentrating on their core business?

3.2.1 Managers focus on core duties

Yes, CUCs are focusing on their core duties. The managers' role is multifaceted, so they need to be highly skilled and versatile.

- CUC centre managers are responsible for organisational management incorporating financial management and reporting to stakeholders, student and community engagement, student registration and support, university liaison, and facilities management.

- The managers are supported in their core business by regular meetings with Central and frequent collaboration with other centres.

A frequently identified barrier to their work, however, is the time pressures associated with the multifaceted nature of the role which also includes financial management, networking in the community, advertising, procurement, fundraising as well as supporting students.

Managers' tasks include centre management, compliance, facilities management, financial management, community outreach, marketing, student support and onboarding, recruitment/job agency/workforce pipeline as well as Board and financial reporting. All of these tasks challenge the CUC staff's time management and provide overall sense that CUC staff are highly skilled and versatile although they find it difficult to perform all of these roles with the current staffing limitations/arrangements.

> With that thin staffing – because centre managers have to be 'jack of all trades'; they have to support students, engage with their communities, manage and run a facility, you know, a whole range of different skill sets; financial management, reporting to stakeholders. (CUC Central Staff)

> It's a huge amount, yeah. Yeah. We both do a lot. We're both doing lots and lots of roles, yeah. (CUC Staff)

3.2.2 Administrative efficiencies

CUC Central performed an important co-ordination role with universities and high levels with government. At the local level, some functions may be more efficiently performed locally, for example some trades and services.

- Every centre has its own needs with different contexts and requirements.

- Centres collaborate, such as where the demographics or needs are similar.

- Procurement and bulk purchase where possible were identified as the primary areas of efficiencies which can be streamlined across centres. For centres with high utility costs, investigation of investment in solar (photovoltaic panel installation) may be considered by Boards.

- It is noted that insurance and human resources support have been centralised.

- However typically insurance, legal, accounting costs are only about 1% each of total CUC budgets.

- Financial accounting, including audited reports could be much more standardised. CUC reporting to NSW and Commonwealth could be harmonised also.

The stakeholders recognise that every centre has its own needs with different contexts and requirements. Nonetheless, CUC Central and the university evaluators believe that there may be some operational efficiencies that can be leveraged across the centres to reduce costs, in particular equipment purchase and utilities.

Procurement and resourcing are identified as the primary areas of efficiencies which can be streamlined across centres. CUC Central oversee some of these issues while there is scope to further streamline administration via Central and across the network. Insurance and HR have become more centralised, but this participant commented:

> There are services essential to every CUC (i.e., insurance, IT, internet, electricity) and it is incredibly inefficient that all the Centres have to negotiate independent contracts with these providers. As part of our affiliation fee, Central should negotiate contracts as a preferred supplier arrangement, still allowing a CUC to remain independent if they wish, but if a Centre chooses to use CUC's preferred supplier, it would not only reduce time spent negotiating these contracts, but it would also reduce the cost of the items because we would be getting bulk discounts from the supplier. (Comment from Managers and Treasurers survey, 2022)

Further centralisation of costs and liabilities is outlined in section 3.5.

Whilst performing financial analysis for this report, the evaluators found discrepancies in financial statements including audited reports, which meant having to retrieve financial details from Managers and treasurers, as audited reports sometimes did not include the same line items, or amalgamated line items, or simply left them out, or created new categories. This made it hard to compare CUCs' incomes and expenditures in the first instance. Further CUCs have to report differently to the Commonwealth and NSW. There are administrative efficiencies that could be made by adoption of standardised financial reporting templates including for auditor use at end of financial year.

3.3 Are the CUCs promoting themselves effectively in the local community, and the broader region, to ensure students know about what the CUC offers, and engage with it?

3.3.1 CUC community promotion

Yes, centres are promoting themselves effectively in the local community, and the broader region, to ensure students know about what the CUC offers, and engage with it. A variety of strategies were used to promote CUCs to their local communities.

- The prominence of the CUC centres in communities varied, but most were well-located in the centre of town.
- Social media, traditional advertising, and community events promoted CUCs to their local communities.
- Word of mouth was a key way community members found out about and entered CUCs.
- Career and education showcases and roadshows, and school visits, promote the centres to local students and families.

A variety of strategies are used to promote CUCs to their local communities. The Board members, staff, and students cast a wide net to spread the word about their presence and purpose in the community. There are ad hoc interactions, such as conversations with staff in the street and community volunteering at the centres. Prominent location on or near a main street invites casual passers-by interest.

Other promotional activities are planned, including invitations to community members; networking breakfasts and dinners; a high school afternoon homework group, and a school holiday programme for children (Uni for Life). The extent of the CUCs' outreach to the community, however, is limited by the pressure on centre staff's availability (and during the time of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions). Centre managers and Board members described a range of activities.

> We had the women's breakfast the other day, it was a great networking opportunity (Board member 8)
>
> [We were] at the local markets on Sunday, going to accost people in the markets and give them coffee cards, see if they answer a survey. (Staff)
>
> And the best way, of course, when it's word of mouth, is through our students, because now, we've got runs on the board, so to speak, and we've got success stories (Board member)

Often CUCs promoted their centres in partnership with district high schools, TAFE NSW, the New South Wales Department of Education, NSW Government (Registered Environmental Assessment Practitioner Scheme), Local Council (Community Connect), and the local Chamber of Commerce. A key government stakeholder noted that DoE and CUCs could partner more consistently so that local high school staff and students know the CUC is there and can factor that in when planning what they want to do post-year 12.

3.3.2 Engagement and reputation-building

CUCs engaged with communities and built reputation through a number of education, industry, Commonwealth, state and local government partnerships.

- CUC managers are active in a number of local forums and have strong links with local government, high schools, communities, and voluntary organisations.
- CUCs are engaged with schools, for example in programs for high school and primary school students, and school holiday programs.
- In 2022, CUC Central and CUC centres were funded to carry out phase 1 community consultations as part of the Commonwealth Department of Education's Regional Partnership Project Pool Program (RPPPP) (CUCs Annual Report to NSW Government, 2022).
- Centres continue to receive substantial financial contributions through university partnerships (CUCs Annual Report to NSW Government, 2023). Snowy Hydro no longer donates to Snowy-Monaro CUC but supported it for many years. New major donors include Santos (North West CUC).

Southern Shoalhaven CUC has a unique offering in The Hive. This is a collaborative work environment on the CUC premises, in which individuals and organisations hire meetings rooms and offices in occasional, short- or long-term arrangements. This space is becoming a connective hub in Ulladulla, building the CUC's productive and professional reputation. It provides a benefit of exposure of students to the businesses that hire them. However, this has entailed over-committing on the building (CUC Shoalhaven has relatively high rent and space excess to requirements compared with other CUCs), and the income from commercial lease activity is not covering the staff resources needed. It is not recommended that other CUCs follow this model. It is recommended that CUCs can offer ad-hoc venue hire where this does not compromise registered students' needs or CUC core functions.

Overall, the CUC reputation is positive and new students come to CUCs via word-of-mouth. Students have high levels of satisfaction with around 91% of students believing that using the CUC helped to improve their academic results (CUC Central, 2022). CUC Student Ambassadors attend community events and speak at the local high schools about their experience studying at the CUCs.

The design 'brand' of the CUC (Figure 4) is visually coherent and appealing using a palette of orange, grey, white, and black elements. The CUC logo incorporates the Southern Cross, and motifs of a book, rising sun, and soaring eagle with the motto 'Degrees Closer'. However, members of the public may not be sure what the function of the CUC is (a private college, a university or something else).

Figure 4 The CUC 'brand' - logo and motto

More could be done visually to convey what the centres actually do to the casual passer-by. For example, a uniform short form of words explaining the Centre's mission and that it is free to access for higher education students could better signal the CUC's mission in communities. For example, Clarence Valley CUC had a short 'blurb' visible on its premises, not just the logo and motto.

CUCs are engaged with local communities. Managers are active in a number of local forums and have strong links with local government, local high schools (with some having Council staff and high school educators on their board) and local voluntary organisations including Rotarians. Some have limited links with local businesses, including legal firms, and Snowy-Monaro has a historical relationship with Snowy Hydro as it was the original funder of the Centre. Clarence Valley has links

with coordinators of health/allied health student placements and indirectly with Grafton and Maclean hospitals through its students.

A student commented of the Far West CUC:

> I think they're definitely growing their footprint and also understanding the service through the work they do through the schools and then also in community for the industries and then their engagement strategies are quite good at the moment because they're stepping it up. (Student 2)

One of the Centre managers summarised the challenge of public misconceptions:

> The next challenge I've identified for us is really expressing what it is we do. People know that we are here, and I think that there's increasing community understanding of what we do, but that I think is the next thing that we'll be focusing on is explaining what we do. (Manager)

3.3.3 Engagement plans

Each of the CUC centres carries out engagement plans, with the involvement of their Boards, staff, and students. In particular, the establishment of centres involved local communities through focus groups, consultation nights, and information sessions.

- Community consultation, advertising, and outreach programs were the core of CUCs' engagement plans. This is primarily through coordinated events (pizza night, dinners) and surveys designed to gather information from young people.
- Events were held at different locations and times to appeal to target audiences.
- Where there are Community Engagement staff, the focus is on social enterprise, student events, and external facing events.

In the next stage of development, some CUCs foresee building connections to the workforce and the potential for student traineeships.

3.3.4 Pathways to the CUC

CUCs have a diversity of students, and a target age group of 20–44-year-olds, for which they used a broad range of recruitment strategies, including:

- Pathways formed through word of mouth (a key pathway), social media advertisements (Facebook, Instagram) and traditional media including advertisements on television, radio, local newspapers, and at the cinema.
- Outreach to high schools.
- Registering young people enrolled in local high schools and TAFEs.
- Registering students working in tandem with local workplace cadetships, traineeships, residencies, and practicums.

- Other students gain entry into universities and CUCs through having vocational qualifications.

Word of mouth and drop-ins are frequently reported by interviewees as making the biggest difference to their reputation and registrations. Additionally, in Cooma a local high school held staff meetings in the CUC for teachers to see the facility and talk about it to their students. Through these avenues, CUC students hear about the program and enrol.

> We constantly find when students say how they've learnt about the CUC - 90 per cent of it is word of mouth (Staff 14)

> I'm working hard…I've blown my media budget this year already, but we've – local paper, radio this year, we have our social media – Facebook, Instagram – getting into the schools, now, talking to those key people in the schools. (Staff 1)

One student related researching the CUC centre before moving to a CUC region:

> I researched, so I work for a company Regional Development Australia, and we had a study hub of our own and that was in South Australia...So while I was there I decided to do a little bit of a scout and study on other CUC centres and just find out what's best practise and what's working for centres and what are some cool things that they're all doing and engaging in…So I actually had researched the CUC Centre before I moved here. (Student)

To improve pathways for young people going to university, centre staff consult with schools and students. They seek to identify "what's stopping young people going to university, and how we can help with some kind of program" (Staff 4). This points the way for stakeholders to create and improve links between high school and the CUC program. CUC student data indicated that at October 2023, 89 high school students were using the centres, along with 86 TAFE students – not to mention a multitude of people studying at non-University institutions including private colleges, professional boards, etc.

3.3.5 Knowledge and promotion of local CUC in high schools

The CUCs are becoming more well known to schools, through the school careers' advisors, teachers, and principals.

- High school students are increasingly registering in CUCs (89 in October 2023) and using CUC spaces or attending workshops and training programs.
- At the centres, high schoolers meet CUC students, tertiary providers, industry partners, NGOs, specialist support services, and receive assistance with applications and any questions they have about future careers.
- Principals and teachers from local high schools are often represented on the CUC Board.
- Schools actively recruited CUC graduates (e.g. graduate teachers).

Teachers and principals have joined CUC Boards and become known to the community through the careers expo, Uni Futures program, afterschool study sessions, and UOW Future Me program.

> Working with the schools has definitely helped because then the kids go home and tell the parents and then, you know, if they take a little information brochure home or whatever. (Board member 10)

> We recognise that recent school leaver is an area of growth for us; it's just that we haven't been able to get into schools as much as we would have liked. (Staff 4)

> I think… there could be more inclusion with high school students and TAFE kids definitely. (Student 12)

One school leader who is also a Board member told us she actively recruited new teachers from CUC alumni:

> So, the ways that it's beneficial for us is I get to see the students who are lining up…They do their practicum, we nurture them a little bit, they become part of our community, we invite them to other professional learning. And then when they graduate...I have a job for them! (Board member 9).

3.3.6 Knowledge and promotion of local CUC in non-government organisations

Local NGOs reportedly know of the CUC program through a number of different avenues.

- NGOs are aware of the CUCs, employ CUC students and are known to sponsor existing staff to study university courses through the CUC program.

NGOs (e.g. Rotary, Salvation Army, Mission Australia) were invited to community consultation events designed to inform them of the CUC centres' role in order to encourage the program promotion to the community.

NGOs that provided financial support to the centres included Snowy Hydro and the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation.

While students on medical and allied health placements were all using the CUC, it is unclear if NGO-placed students (e.g. social work students) are made systematically aware of the CUCs as a resource when they are in regional areas.

In some cases, businesses are close to the CUC premises. In other cases, CUCs engage local businesses, such as ICT technicians, who became familiar with their program. Often, NGO staff are represented on CUC Boards.

Given graduate destinations are often in the health field, CUCs may want to try to attract more NSW Health engagement in future.

3.3.7 Local levels of government knowledge and promotion of local CUC

Local governments often have been involved since the inception of some centres. They have provided premises, acted as CUC Directors, and offered support to CUC Boards.

- Local Councillors and Members of Parliament were aware of the CUCs and supportive of their purpose and contribution to the regional economy and vital services.

- Elected representatives hoped CUCs graduates would fill skill shortages for professionals, including GPs and nursing staff.

- A number of students were studying allied health courses, like occupational therapy, as they knew these skills were in short supply.

Two local Councillors and two Members of Parliament interviewed for this evaluation were very supportive of the CUC's purpose and contribution to the regional economy and vital services. The CUC was seen by one local MP as important because it gave locals the opportunity "to do those extra studies or studies that aren't able to go to a big city or university" (Elected representative). She continued:

> I think one of the challenges for a lot of businesses is actually getting that skill set. I think like anything if you train people in the area there's a possibility that they might stay in the area with those new skills learned... there's an opportunity for Councils to connect with the CUC saying I'm short of planners and all those sorts of things to start looking at having a graduate program with the CUC to keep them here. (Elected representative)

An elected representative made the point that regional areas often 'miss out' on services routinely available in cities so 'growing their own' professionals was vital – especially when regional populations are increasing and changing.

As a local council professional noted, the opportunities for education at the CUC has a critical impact on staying local and filling labour shortages across a wide range of key industries and professions.

> One of the strategic priorities is obviously supporting local, tertiary, and vocational institutions to provide a breadth of courses and resources aligned to needs. So that really is about supporting CUC to grow their offering, grow their space. (Council staff)

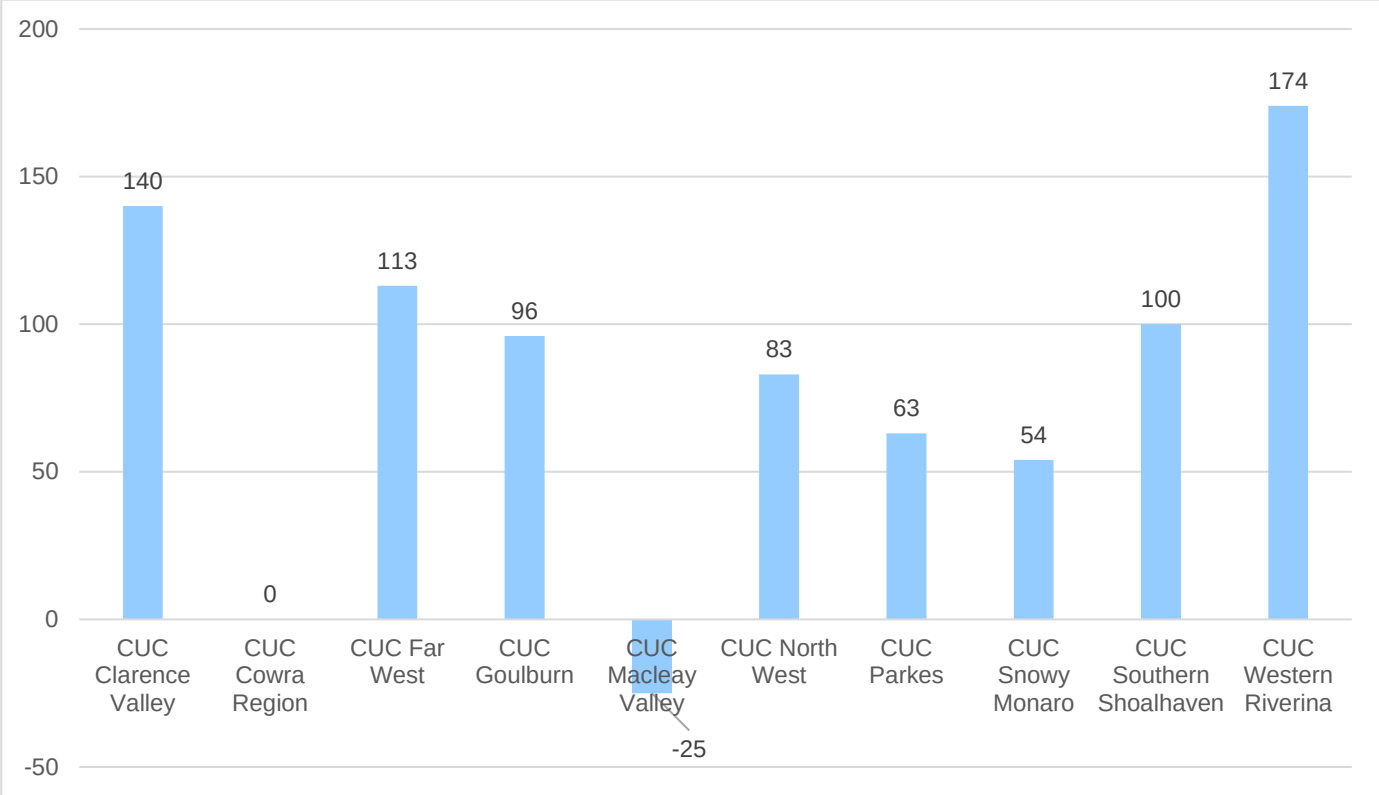
3.3.8 Trends in student numbers and profiles

While CUCs grew strongly, engaging more students since the start of the program, there has been a growth in total numbers, both in terms of new registrations and total number of registrations (students supported).

- Since each CUC opened, engagement strategies have boosted numbers over time as shown in section 3.1.1 (new student registrations) and 3.1.8 (registered student trends).

The Figure below indicates CUC's rate of increase/decrease in new registered students from the first year of operation (varies) to the latest (2023). This indicates an increase in new student registrations for 8 of ten CUCs. Western Riverina and Clarence Valley showed strong increases in new student registrations. Cowra, having just opened in 2023, has no comparison year (so, zero increase/decrease). Macleay Valley had a slight decrease in new student registrations of -25 (153 in 2021 to128 in 2023). The cumulative increase for all CUCs in NSW was 798 new students added from Years 1 of operation to 2023.

Figure 5 CUC new registered students - increase/decrease from 2019 (or first year of operation after 2019) to 2023



Source: CUC Student Data, 2019-2023.

3.3.9 Relationships and shared best practice with the wider Regional University Centre community in NSW and other states and territories

CUCs are maintaining relationships through the following.

- The delivery of Regional Partnership Project Pool Program (RPPPP), Cohort 3 Bootcamp, and is actively advising the Commonwealth on regional education matters.

CUC Central and NSW network have worked with RUC locations including Taree Universities Campus and Gippsland East Higher Education Study Hub. This has both maintained and strengthened relationships with the Regional Study Hub community.

CUC co-facilitated the Cohort 3 Bootcamp alongside Regional University Study Hubs Network lead aimed at new staff, hosted at Bass Coast CUC.

The CUC occupies a permanent position on the Commonwealth's Regional University Centre Advisory Committee.

As part of the 2022 National Conference for Regional Rural and Remote Education, the Commonwealth Department supported a one-day Regional University Centres symposium, drawing all RUCs from across Australia to share ideas and best practice. This put the CUC as

the leading advocate and model for widening participation in regional Australia and supporting regional students to succeed.

3.3.10 Relationships with universities and other educational institutions

CUCs promote studying higher education, through the Federal Regional University Study Hubs program, and share a common aspiration to bolster regional education and retention. They support students undertaking a wide range of courses in universities (domestic and international) and other educational institutions.

- Snowy-Monaro CUC received funding to conduct a portion of phase 1 of the Regional Partnerships Project Pool
- CUCs negotiated an allocation of the Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) with some universities, based on the number of students who utilise the CUC (CUC Financial Strategy, 2021).
- It has been a challenge to raise awareness of the CUCs amongst universities and other institutions and establish agreements with them.

CUC have established a number of formal financial partnerships with universities.

The value of the Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) is paid directly to the university, then the CUC negotiates a service level agreement with the university to extract value from the CSP allocation. The CUC has worked with up to five universities. Note that this does not apply to Cohort 3 and 4 Centres (which includes CUC Mudgee Region and CUC Cowra) - instead, these newer Centres under Commonwealth funding will receive partnership funding directly to the local Board.

The share of places is determined by the number of students who utilise the CUC, as well as the terms of the agreement negotiated with the university (CUC Financial Strategy, 2021).

Since inception, it has been a challenge to raise awareness of the CUCs amongst universities and other institutions and establish agreements with them. There is some tension around institutions pushing for CUCs to market and recruit for their courses, which was said to create an “equity versus exclusivity model” (Staff 12), in direct contrast to the CUC’s core purpose. The CUC managers want universities to work with them to support all students, for example by paying a small per capita amount per student (in lieu of having to support that student on campus/use of the university’s support services). Similarly, CUC staff want to work closely with universities to offer their core services, such as counselling and disability services, to achieve the best possible outcomes. Raising awareness of CUCs and developing effective relationships with universities and other educational institutions is an area for further development. It has been challenging for CUCs to do this.

The CUCs were involved in Phase 1 of the Regional Partnerships Project Pool, securing funding to carry out activities. In phase 2, CUC in partnership with UTS has received over $5 million from the Commonwealth to develop RPPP activities in NSW Government schools.

3.4 What is the CUC business model and is it sustainable over the long term?

3.4.1 Funding mix and sources of funding

This section has been redacted.

3.4.2 Cost of establishing a new CUC centre (refurbishment and a new build)

This section has been redacted.

3.4.3 CUC running costs

This section has been redacted.

3.4.4 Implications of rising student demand on CUC finances and budgets

Rising student demand can put pressure on CUCs.

- CUCs can be crowded at peak times. For example, Far West CUC is ‘bursting at the seams’.
- Government investment is based on funding cycles and primarily the establishment of centres, unrelated to student numbers/utilisation.

While CUC budgets are adequate to run current operations, centre managers indicated in their responses to a survey that their budget was only ‘OK’. In addition, CUCs with expansion plans were unable to achieve them.

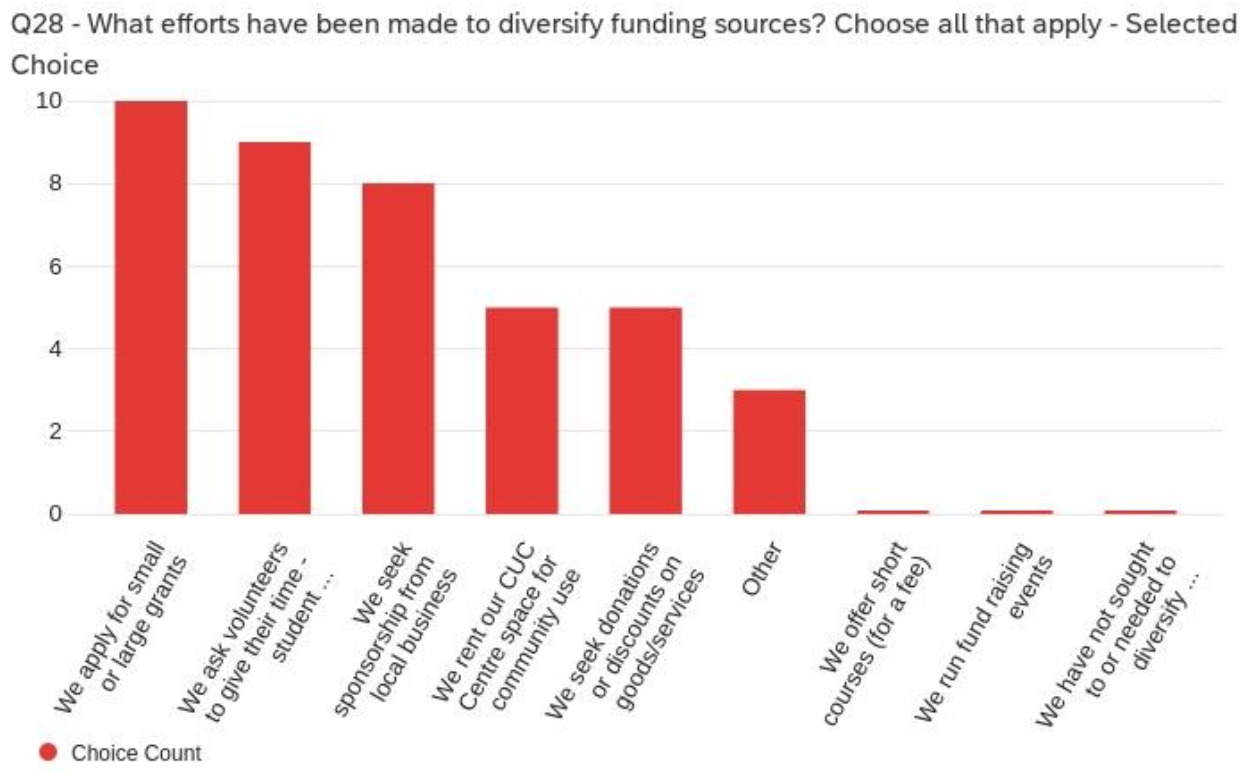
CUCs have been able to hire Learning Skills Advisors (LSAs) on casual and part-time basis. While this is an advantage for the CUC’s finances, it may impose restrictions on the educational development and achievement of students. As student numbers rise, so too could the LSA positions or hours. However, funding of CUCs does not relate to the number of students they support.

Managers described running a ‘tight ship’ in interviews where they tried to create efficiencies. The survey of mangers elicited responses about what they were doing to save money, including “continually reviewing our expenditure, and have reduced it in key areas such as our yearly internet and mobile telephone spend”; “ sharing of resources” with other CUCs; obtaining “in kind support (legal & financial)”; placing “all air conditioning systems on timers”, transforming “the back deck into the Boardroom to provide another room with five more study spaces for students”; and seeking “to be very diligent in our purchases, saving money where we can”.

3.4.5 Diversification of funding sources

We asked Centres about their efforts to diversify funding sources via a survey for Mangers and Treasurers. All were actively doing so, with applying for grants and funding the most common activity.

Figure 6 CUC efforts to diversify funding sources



Source: CUC Manager and Treasurer survey, 2022.

Sources of other income fell into three categories:

1. University partnerships
    - Partnership payments
    - Commonwealth Supported Places payments
2. Corporate donations/in-kind
    - E.g. Santos, Snowy Hydro, Boyce
    - Smaller donations (e.g. local business people/farmers)
3. Fee for service
    - Via tenders - RPPP local community consultations
    - Service - venue hire for events, training, running exams

A Board member commented on universities:

> The other main source of income is from university partnerships where we kind of get a payment that's based on the number of students that are completing degrees at the partner universities. But that's not really a big source of income compared to the other funding sources. (Board member 10)

By 2023, however, some CUCs had expanded their university partnership payments significantly.

3.4.6 Funding constraints impact on services

There were no critical funding constraints reported by any services, but Mangers reported being very budget-conscious.

While many costs are fixed, funding formulas may need to respond to cost of living pressures, especially in high-cost areas like, for example, Ulladulla (Southern Shoalhaven CUC) where commercial rents are higher than some of the inland areas where CUCs are located. While Macleay Valley CUC has a prominent position in a shopping mall in Kempsey, it is paying a relatively high rent. Utility costs are also on the rise and predicted to increase in 2023-2024 and are not an insignificant cost to CUCs.

We asked about cost stressors via a survey, asking managers and treasurers to name the 'top three' for their centre. Rent, wages, computer/internet/IT support and electricity costs were the notable cost stressors, as depicted in Table 29 below.

Table 17 Major CUC cost stressors

Rent	8
Wages	8
Computers/internet/IT support	6
Electricity	5

Source: CUC Manager and Treasurer survey, 2022.

In interviews with stakeholders, a Board member referred to cost of living as a factor for CUCs: "I'd suggest here we need – our funding models need to increase with cost of living and inflation as well." (CUC Board member). A board member in a remote area thought that "categorically more funding is required" but noted they had "built sustainability and [had] succession planning along with that" (CUC Board member). Like the person above, they noted that certainty of funding would allow them to "actually realise the full potential of CUC Far West…. [to] make sure [the community] are aware of these opportunities and start to build the aspirations in their primary schools as well" (CUC Board member). If a CUC is going to close within five years, for example, then it would not be worth their while to work with high school students or primary schools.

3.4.7 Capacity constraints

Some CUCs are experiencing capacity constraints at peak times.

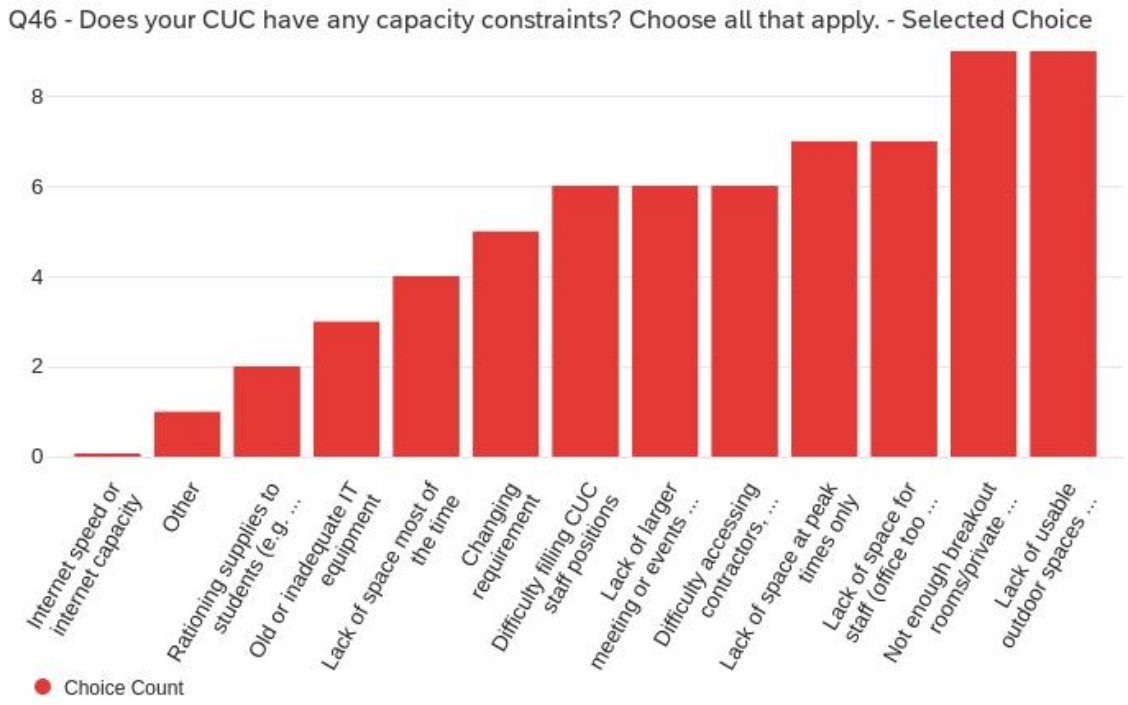
- CUC sites are constrained by the size of their facilities. For example, Parkes is basically one open-plan room.
- Spaces can be overcrowded, especially when university exams are scheduled.

- The smaller and older centres seek larger or newer premises to meet the needs of a greater number of students and facilitate community engagement.
- Some CUCs have large meeting room/s available for venue hire to businesses and the community for workshops and events.

The evaluation investigated whether CUCs suffer from any capacity constraints (i.e., small/cramped spaces, old/inadequate equipment, sub-optimal data and IT systems, high staff turnover/hard to retain quality staff, poor location of centre, rationing of core services or goods due to cost or scarcity, etc).

We asked CUCs to identify any capacity constraints. As the Figure below indicates, these related to the use and availability of space, as well as others. The lack of smaller/breakout rooms, and lack of outdoor spaces were key constraints. Interestingly, some CUC alumni also mentioned lack of outdoor spaces (CUC Alumni survey). CUCs that do have some surplus space at times must maintain a balance between community engagement and student services.

Figure 7 Number of Centres facing capacity constraints, by type



Source: CUC Manager and Treasurer survey, 2022.

In particular, managers reported they did not have enough individual study spaces for exam time (or just generally) and did not have a large space for community workshops and presentations that would enhance the use of the Centre. One CUC had major expansion plans but had been unable to grow their building's footprint for a variety of planning and other reasons.

Feedback from most stakeholders is that the CUC sites are constrained by the size of their facilities, staff retention and in two instances, ageing technology. CUC Central, Boards, and Managers are acutely aware of the demands these constraints place on their finances, staff, operations, and student services. The spaces can be overcrowded, especially when university exams are scheduled. The staff work around these challenges when possible, for example by

conducting exams in the TAFE and using every available CUC space. As such, the smaller and older centres are hopeful for larger, newer premises and more staff to meet the needs of a greater number of students.

> We're looking at possibly getting some new facilities because we're outgrowing this space rather rapidly especially with our exams at the moment. (Staff)
>
> So, the nature of the way students use the centres has changed over time. Some of our new centres are well set up for it, but our older centres are looking for new ways to be flexible around that to meet that student need; to be responsive to that student need. But space is …we have more students than space (Staff)

Overall, an expansion strategy based on registration numbers and utilisation data should be considered, which also has implications for the funding formula, which at the moment does not take into account how many registered students each CUC are supporting/using its facilities.

3.4.8 Need and demand for the CUCs in the local community; available alternatives

Student registration indicates growth of the network year on year, therefore there is both need and demand. Theoretically a CUC could operate out of any office-type space (or as part of a TAFE campus where there is one), but CUCs are mainly in prominent CBD locations and some enjoy low or no rents.

- Urban housing prices, the cost of living, migration to the regions, and work and family commitments influence the growing need for CUCs. This includes out-of-hours access to facilities, study time during school holidays, and vacation care.
- CUCs enable students to remain on Country and stay within their community where they have local work and have families.
- CUCs differ from other local services by delivering academic, technology, administrative, and wellbeing support in one location.
- They provide workforce pathways for graduates into local sectors.

Students are ‘voting with their feet’ by choosing CUC study rather than long commutes to a campus or relocating.

In addition, CUC students, staff, Board members, and local MPs spoke of the need and numerous benefits to local community, their families and themselves. The tyranny of distance, urban housing prices, the cost of living, and work commitments were cited as some of the reasons preventing students from studying in person at university. By bringing CUCs to regional and rural NSW, students are able to remain on country and stay within their community where they have local work and have families.

CUCs differ from other local services, such as public libraries, by delivering academic, technology, administrative and wellbeing support. More specifically, CUC centres are in one location with flexible and out-of-hours access to facilities, study time during school holidays and vacation care

on one site. The CUC is also known to have provided workforce pathways for graduates into local businesses including social work, health, education, and legal professions.

> I think it's great for mature-age students because they do often have families and no matter how hard you can try at home to sort of carve out time, it doesn't always work out that way. So, it's a bit like going into an office, just the toe in the door, which is great. (Student 10)

> But then there's those students who can't move, because they can't afford to, because there's a housing crisis, or other reasons why they can't. Then that's our bread and butter, too. (Staff 4)

The evaluators spoke with employers from large industries, state and local governments, high schools, and local businesses. They expressed the value of employing local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander CUC graduates in rural, regional, and remote areas. Further, focus groups participants explained the critical need for CUC graduates in education, mining, defence, accountancy, and human resource management.

3.4.9 Financial sustainability in the long-term

Without government support it is highly unlikely that CUCs will be able to survive – a common consideration for the entire education and especially higher education sector This applies to each level of education and school, confirming that education is a public good that is unlikely to exist without any form of government financial support.

Analysis of CUC audited accounts shows that new CUCs require all of their income from government sources, but this reduces over time to about two thirds to three-quarters, with new non-government sources being identified.

To assess the return on the investment in a student we considered the median weekly earnings by educational qualification published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)[4].

The most recent data (2022) indicate that the median individual earnings with a bachelor's degree (the most common qualification achieved by CUC graduates) is about $1500/week, or $78,000/per annum. The likely counterfactual for those who enrolled in CUC is a high school qualification, which according to the ABS is median weekly earnings of $934/week or $48,568/per annum. Completing a degree supported by a CUC can therefore enhance individual earnings by about $500/week, or $26,000/per annum. For the 560 CUC graduates produced with the support of NSW CUCs to date, that is an annual earning improvement of $29,432 each (or a collective $16.5 million). This is the benefit directly accruing to CUC graduates for one year of work. But over the course of the remaining working life, such benefit will continue to be received. Using a standard 25 year working life, the benefit of attending CUC and graduating for those 560 individuals is collectively estimated at about $412 million (in today's dollars).

Graduating with the support of a CUC produces benefits for the graduates and to the local and broader economy, as their higher earnings result in higher taxes as well as the creation of skills and competences in the local area, benefiting employers and the community through a larger and

[4] See ABS: https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/labour/earnings-and-working-conditions/employee-earnings/latest-release#weekly-earnings

better trained workforce. We have not estimated such costs (as this was beyond the scope of this evaluation), however the direct benefit of completing a degree through CUC is already well over the cost of establishing and maintaining CUCs even if government were to fund most if not the totality of CUCs' operations. We find those numbers compelling.

Stakeholders mentioned that government funding was justified for 'public goods', for example, society having enough trained professionals to provide professional services. They also drew attention to equity of opportunity for regional communities. As one elected representative stated:

> I think it's fundamental for regional communities to have that access to further education, so I would fully support a longer cycle of funding for an education institution. (Elected representative).

It was not that stakeholders opposed seeking other funding sources. For example, a Board member commented on approaching a certain philanthropist, "I think that would be aligned with their goals in their philanthropic work. Around supporting sort of underprivileged students and, you know, regional students and providing that leg up to those students" (Board member).

While there are opportunities for creating better efficiencies by using economies of scale for contracting basic services that all CUCs need, these costs are typically less than 1% of total income – for example accounting, insurance, are relatively minor costs, where centralising procurement may save a few hundred dollars. Some CUCs already utilise the same auditors historically used by Snowy-Monaro CUC (Alpine Accounting). The largest costs per centre are for rent; 'computers - licences and maintenance' and 'Internet/IT' (see section 3.4.3).

3.4.10 A model for understanding the CBA of CUCs for the NSW Government

The goal of the CUCs is to boost tertiary education participation and attainment of degrees for rural and regional people because they are under-represented nationally in attainment of higher education statistics. As Devlin et al. note in a 2022 study on supporting lower-SES students (who are comparable to several rural-based students), "despite a robust and equitable student loan and fee assistance system, which removes the initial tuition fee costs for each subject for domestic students, economic disadvantage and financial strain remain central concerns for many low SES students (Bexley et al., 2013; Devlin & McKay, 2017) and contribute to attrition (Edwards & McMillan, 2015)" (Devlin et. al., 2022: 4). Because CUCs can help support students to stay in their home community to study, by providing support and facilities, this works towards addressing these barriers and attrition factors.

Running a full CBA is not within the scope of this evaluation. However, we make some commentary below.

The key premise for CBA analysis is to determine the dollar-value of the effect of a project. "The basic notion is very simple. If we have to decide whether to do A or not, the rule is: Do A if the benefits exceed those of the next best alternative course of action, and not otherwise" (Layard and Glaister, 1994).

Therefore, the key question for Government is whether investing in physical CUC centres with staff and equipment costs that allow people to study locally and graduate with a credential produces benefits in excess of these costs – or if not that, then what is the next best alternative? Is it to send all students to existing universities (e.g. by giving vouchers)? Do nothing?

There is probably a strong case to say the perceived benefits of CUCs outweigh costs, however a formal CBA would be needed to confirm this. There is clear evidence that without CUCs, some, if not many, of the 560 NSW graduates CUCs have produced since 2013 would not have commenced studying or completed a degree (however the precise number is unknowable). CUCs help address the under-enrolment and graduation from higher education institutions in regional and rural areas because they remove key barriers and facilitate learning in community.

CUCs may well be the best and only feasible way of delivering support locally to students who are not going to attend a university campus. Given students in rural and regional communities need to be able to study somewhere with high-speed internet, and most importantly, support, then there are few other suitable places apart from the CUC centres. It may be that TAFEs and the CUC program can collaborate and share spaces, as they have a similar mission, however TAFEs are active learning spaces while CUCs are, essentially, offices with different size spaces.

If we assume a cost (investment in the operating costs and staff that make up the CUCs) is the investment of X per a year to produce X graduates, how could the monetised (and other) benefits of supporting those graduates for the NSW community be measured in a future CBA?

In a basic sense, the NSW Government benefits by being able to fill vacancies in regional areas of key essential workers in the health and education fields. If a CUC local graduate can move into a vacancy, and the NSW Government does not have to pay an incentive payment and relocation payment to attract persons from outside the area, that is a saving to government. Relocation incentives can be hefty (e.g., between $10,000-$20,000 – see Appendix C for details).

If the CUC can support people to obtain degrees and become professionals who take up positions locally, then there is a community benefit – local people can send their children to a fully-staffed school which means they get a better education and can go to a GP or hospital that is fully staffed, and therefore receive a better quality of care. They can see specialists or allied health professionals locally. This in turn reduces costs for services in major hubs, that may be conducting outreach to smaller communities, and for residents, who do not have to drive to a larger regional centre to see a specialist or professional.

If people stay in the community (or return) and can study, then population is retained in the local area, which has positive spillover effects on local demand for goods and services. Having a CUC in a town may *attract* new residents as part of the whole picture of what the town offers: “it goes towards the liveability of Broken Hill”, noted a CUC Board member.

The CUC itself generates local demand for skills (e.g. centre managers, Learning Skills Advisors, local services to maintain the facilities), raises local consumption (e.g. rent, purchases of equipment and services locally), and raises the average skill level of students who, as workers, are more productive.

CUCs also afford opportunities for networking and social capital creation, as students meet each other and through the CUC encounter local businesses via the work of the managers and board members.

A broader benefit is creating better and more diversified local communities with a mix of education levels and skills, meaning more residents may want to stay if they have education, training and career transition opportunities. With better paid work comes higher incomes that have multiplier effects for a town, including spending on goods and services. Thriving regional communities with diversified economies attract new residents who perceive not only the lower cost of living but the growing vibrancy of the region. Further, retirees looking to relocate value regions with high-quality and accessible medical and allied health services.

The counterfactual is that without CUCs, the high cost of gaining similar education in major cities is a hurdle blocking the aspirations of many local student candidates. These are costs to the individual who must either pay many thousands of dollars in living costs having to relocate to a university town or city, or, if they cannot move to access higher education, stay on a lower income. While it is true students can study online, lack of reliable internet and no support can increase the rate of drop-out (which is what the current data tells us about rural and regional students).

Universities typically put more resources to educating low-SES students. A study by Devlin et al. (2022) used a mixed-methods approach to determine the costs and issues relating to supporting low SES students in higher education. Using a costing methodology relating to several factors including building aspirations, having multiple campuses and supporting students with complex needs, Devlin et al.'s undergraduate analysis suggests the average annual cost of a low SES undergraduate student full-time enrolment was AUD $109,430 compared with the average cost for medium and high SES students at AUD $17,360 (Devlin et al., 2022). This study is predicated on students attending at campuses, while CUC students typically do not move away from home.

The overall value of the investment is to boost lifetime earnings, reduce debt, enhance human capital and support regional populations through creating locally-based professional graduates. Some scholars have attempted to quantify the benefits (see for example Holden and Zhang's (n.d.) report for the Gonski Institute) but their and other assessments do not include broader benefits like multiplier effects.

Another way of looking at costs would be to consider student costs. While all students pay HELP contributions, there are extra costs for students studying on campus if they have to move away from home. For example, if a student from a rural or regional community moves to a regional centre or city for a period of three years, their rental costs are significant (especially for Sydney). As the table below indicates, relocation to a regional centre like Armidale or Wagga would incur rental costs of $48,360 over three years, Sydney $102,960 over three years if they were living on their own, or $51,480 in share housing. The hypothetical student would also have other expenses including utilities, occasional travel back to their home community to visit family, etc. While housing costs of staying in the home community have not been calculated, CUC students are paying rents aligned to smaller country centres like Cooma, Grafton, Narrabri, etc, or mortgages, and younger students may be living with parents rent-free or for a low cost. Costs of staying in the home community are lower overall. Many CUC students reported this was a key factor as to why they were not able to go to a city to study.

If we compare these costs to individuals versus the on average $49,000 resources for each student graduate made available through the CUCs, then CUCs seem to provide good value for money by reducing individuals' costs by keeping them in their home community.

Table 18 Housing costs (rent) if relocating to a regional centre or city for a three-year degree

Location	Dwelling – bedroom no.		Median rent per week ($)
Armidale Regional LGA	2 Bedrooms*		310
Wagga Wagga	2 Bedrooms		340
		median rent	310
		2-bedroom median regional rent, 3 years	48360
Sydney inner middle ring LGAs			
Bayside	1 Bedroom		660
Burwood	1 Bedroom		650
Canada Bay	1 Bedroom		650
Canterbury-Bankstown	1 Bedroom		400
Inner West	1 Bedroom		500
Lane Cove	1 Bedroom		625
Parramatta	1 Bedroom		580
Randwick	1 Bedroom		600
Ryde	1 Bedroom		600
Strathfield	1 Bedroom		540
Sydney	1 Bedroom		630
Waverley	1 Bedroom		700
		Average	660
		1-bedroom Sydney inner and middle ring, 3 years	102960
Share house accomm.**		Average	330
		Share house 3 years rent	51,480

Source: NSW DCJ Rent and Sales Report, June Quarter 2023 using 'total-all dwellings' for no. of bedrooms, and median weekly rents. *Two-bedroom dwellings were chosen for regional centres as there are few one-bedroom options. **The exact amount is not known however this is a third of a three-bedroom median weekly rent in Inner West LGA, which is $995.

While relative costs are one calculation, an important calculation is that CUCs help educate people who would simply **not go to university at all** if the option was not available (due to cost, family and work commitments). Therefore, CUCs are supporting students who would otherwise have not studied if it were not for the existence of the CUC (as many students told us). Without the CUCs, an unknowable proportion of the CUC NSW graduates produced since 2013 **would simply disappear** as those people would never have commenced study. This would be to the detriment of average skills in the local area, employment opportunity, and community resources (via taxation and consumption spending).

CUCs are a cost-effective tool to bring education (hence productivity-enhancing activities) to a disadvantaged population that through its students can aspire to improve its socio-economic status via better quality employment, entrepreneurship, and motivation. There are further inter-generational benefits associated with a better educated population.

3.4.11 Relative value proposition to NSW and Commonwealth Governments of the CUCs

There are a number of ways at looking at the relative value proposition for the NSW and Commonwealth Governments. The NSW Government is a key regional employer and seeks to encourage regional economic development. The Commonwealth also has an interest in regional development and overall economic prosperity based on an educated workforce, as well as reducing disadvantage and expenditures associated with low education levels and poverty.

1. CUCs increase the supply of trained professionals, 55% of whom go on to work for NSW state or local government agencies in some capacity for some portion of their career.

2. CUCs help develop regional NSW, and may contribute to emerging industries (for example, those taking up residence in the new SAPS in Parkes and the north-west).

3. CUCs assist higher education providers by providing support to students who have higher support needs.

3.4.12 Benefits considering the capital investment and operational expenditure; upper and lower benefits

One benefit of CUCs is increased graduate numbers and supply of skilled credentialed people to the local community and region.

- Upper benefits may come from savings to the NSW Government of skilled labour supply closer to shortages (‘growing our own’) rather than having to attract employees to move to regional NSW (and pay them incentives to do so).

- The lower benefits include a relatively high resource allocation per graduate produced.

In the past five years, 560 graduates have been supported by the CUC program in NSW.

Benefits include better employment prospects for students and graduates and the reduced effect of skill shortages in the local area.

> If we look at the wider benefits to the community, it has a huge impact and potential for addressing workforce shortages that we experience throughout regional, rural and remote Australia, particularly as it relates to the medical fraternity and that’s a significant concern with respect to general practitioners, for example, throughout all of the Parkes electorate and, certainly, all across Australia. (Government Officer)

The CUC has demonstrated that its graduates are staying and contributing to the local economy in the health sector, education, and business. The CUC provides a pathway for local people to enter the local workforce. It has brought some professionals back home and attracted migration to the region.

3.4.13 Relative efficiency of CUCs

This section has been redacted.

3.4.14 Variations between CUCs

Variations between CUCs are significant in terms of, on the income side, available funding, and income from other sources.

- CUCs have differing ranges of resources per capita student available to them as displayed in the previous section. Funding is not linked to the number of students supported.
- CUCs have different percentages of funding from government and non-government sources between centres, and over time, with the general trend being a decrease in government funding sources.
- CUCs have different costs, especially for rent, but some same fixed costs, such as salaries.

CUCs had varying levels of external funding but in general it was about 30% by the third year of operation.

They had relatively similar expenditures for wages (which are in effect a fixed cost), however other costs, such as computers/IT/internet and rents are extremely variable reflecting equipment upgrades, using different ISPs, and rent differentials related to the different arrangements across the network with some CUCs paying nothing and some full commercial rents. However, higher rents and larger premises can also mean greater opportunities - for example allowing CUCs to hire out spaces as revenue raising opportunities (for events/workshops to businesses in the local community).

3.4.15 Determination of efficiency

Efficiency is based on the cost incurred to produce a set outcome vis-à-vis a reference indicator. There are various ways in which efficiency can be established.

The most efficient CUCs had

- growing university partnership and CSP incomes[5]
- strong, skills-based boards
- strategic planning

Efficiency was also determined by outside forces such as availability and cost of services in a locale, which is not under the control of a CUC (e.g. lack of tradespeople, higher building costs, etc.)

[5] Note that this does not apply to Cohort 3 and 4 Centres (which includes CUC Mudgee Region and CUC Cowra) - instead, these newer Centres under Commonwealth funding will receive partnership funding directly to the local Board.

If we look at the relative efficiency of a CUC in a macro sense as support mechanism, the study of Devlin et al. (2022) notes that for universities, to train a university graduate from a lower SES required AUD $109,430 compared with the average cost for medium and high SES students at AUD $17,360. Given that CUCs support such students, the cost per student (to support a student through to graduation) should also be expected to be higher than the 'average' student in the city.

3.4.16 Effective practices that can be shared across CUCs

Since the Interim Report, CUC stakeholders have identified the potential for more effective practices in student registrations, reporting, analytics, and data management. A central customer relationship management system (CRM) and Information Technology (IT) support could streamline these processes and practices. Additionally, shared CUC partnerships with the universities was recommended by CUC managers.

Savings from greater efficiencies are marginal although there may be some scope for collective sourcing of infrastructure improvements, e.g. installing solar panels across all CUCs may in the medium-term reduce high electricity and gas bills with bulk-purchase saving on capex (however this may not be possible under terms of lease or feasible at some sites). Other goods and services are better delivered locally (like trades). Some CUCs do already use common auditors, however it is not clear if this has led to a savings via discounted rate or was because CUC Central recommended them.

Those CUCs that have increased their university partnerships can share good practices, however CUC managers already meet regularly across the CUC network.

Corporate sponsorship depends on the presence of industry in a region and the disposition of the business to donate as part of its 'social licence to operate'. Some do so despite not requiring many university graduates - for example, Santos chooses to donate to various community groups and the CUC in Narrabri, while being a small consumer of university graduates as most of its jobs do not require a degree. New businesses starting up in the SAPs are more likely to be higher-tech requiring IT, chemistry and engineering graduates so may require better-trained workforce and be a future source of corporate donations (or levies).

3.4.17 Using affiliate agreements to seek outcomes

CUCs already have KPIs they work to, including registered student numbers in the first three years of operations, but agreements could be further used to drive outcomes.

- Affiliate agreements could specify a wider range of outcomes including external funding targets as a percentage of total income.

Government or CUC Central could link funding to targets or outcomes. CUCs however are wary of performance-based outcomes as CUCs are situated in very different communities, and face difference operating conditions so a 'one size fits all' series of performance targets may not be appropriate as Cooma is very different to, for example, Moree or Narrabri. The size of the surrounding population and local industries vary significantly.

However, CUCs could set aspirational targets such as external funding sources making up a certain percentage of income, 25% by year 3 or 5 of operations, for instance.

3.4.18 NSW's funding model (via CUC Central) compared to the Commonwealth funding model (to individual CUCs)

NSW pays funding to CUC Central which disburses this while the Commonwealth wishes to direct-fund individual CUCs.

- There is an advantage in funding via a co-ordinating body like CUC Central, as the administrative costs occurs once only.

The NSW model of channelling funding through CUC Central is preferred, rather than funding each individual CUC through a series of funding agreements. The Commonwealth is seeking (so far) to fund each centre, however the two levels of government may want to work together to (a) centralise funding via CUC Central; (b) build in any new targets via these agreements; (c) harmonise reporting requirements (especially financial).

3.4.19 Opportunities to centralise costs and liabilities

There are opportunities to centralise some CUC costs, especially for new equipment purchase, and possibly solar panel installation, to reduce energy bills.

- CUCs have two items they could make savings on - computers/internet, electricity and gas.
- Other items are less amenable to cost savings like rents (which are locally determined), and wages (unavoidable). Other expenses like accounting and insurance are small therefore trivial.

The most significant costs for CUCs are computers, licenses and maintenance, and IT/Internet. Some costs could be centralised, such as purchase of equipment (e.g. new computers). There seems to be no centralised monitoring or planning of capital equipment life cycle or replacement at the present time. If this was instituted, CUCs may be able to leverage savings via bulk/discounted purchasing via suppliers.

Rents, the second significant cost, are not possible to centralise or defray, as these are place-based and vary from site to site.

The other large cost is electricity and gas. CUCs that do have roofs that could support solar panels could look at bulk-purchasing these (for example through a company that operates nationally) and installed by local electricians. This could produce significant savings over the medium term. This would however depend on the terms of lease agreement and the owners' assent (or the owner contributing to pay for all or some of the cost as it is a capital improvement).

Accounting and insurance costs are typically less than 1% of the total budget so any cost savings on these items are worth pursuing but really very marginal.

3.4.20 Centre location selection

Centre selection was based on criteria such as population size and distance to the nearest university campus.

- CUCs are located in areas that fit criteria with some communities being deemed too small to host.
- The Commonwealth currently (December 2023) has tenders open for new Regional University Study Hubs.

The Country Universities Centre program's origins are in Cooma, where the first CUC was set up, with the assistance of Snowy Hydro, to address the barriers to potential regional students' participation in higher education. The Cooma centre was the 'prototype', followed by the development of a CUC program. In 2017, CUC sought Government assistance to establish at least five CUCs. The overarching criteria was that locations should be "major NSW regional towns which otherwise lack suitable alternative local higher educational opportunities" (CUC, 2017, p. 4)

According to a history of CUC establishment from the Office of Regional Economic Development (2019), the Site Selection Criteria adopted by CUC when considering a CUC location was as follows:

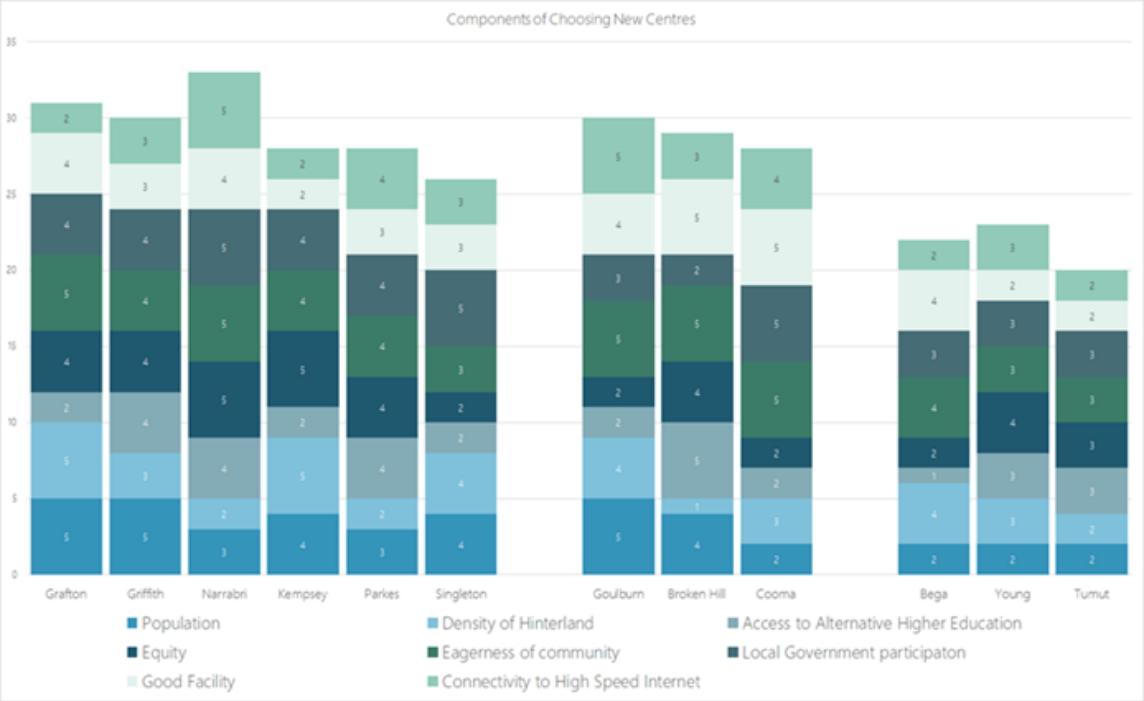
a. Council and community support
b. Location must be a minimum of 50 km from an existing university campus
c. Location unlikely to attract future university campuses due to small populations
d. Cost per student projections[6]:

A table in this section has been redacted.

CUC also scored the following factors related to success on a scale of 1 to 5 across locations.

[6] Country Universities Centre Limited (CUCL) obtained the number of external and mixed modal students in the postcode from the federal Department of Education, then projected likely student numbers based on the ratio of students registered in Cooma to external/mixed modal students in the Cooma postcode over the first five years. CUCL then estimated the cost per student of operating the Centres over the first five years based on operational budgets.

Figure 8 Components of choosing new centres - Office of Regional Economic Development analysis of potential CUC sites, 2017



Source: Office of Regional Economic Development, 2019.

The major NSW regional towns were selected as suitable locations for CUCs based on key considerations:

- (1) distance from the closest university[7]; (2) population size and demographic data indicating educational disadvantage compared with regions/NSW; (3) local support and advocacy including local government and business representatives, and (4) cost per student (Office of Regional Development analysis, above).
- CUCs were established where there were relatively large, disadvantaged populations, lower than average tertiary education attainment, comparatively high unemployment rates (including youth unemployment), substantial Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations, and high median ages which reflects a migration of youth to metropolitan areas.
- CUCs are strategically located where there are current and future skill requirements and where there is a shortfall of labour needed to deliver key services, especially healthcare professionals (RAI, 2022).
- CUC positioning *within* towns, is determined by the availability of sites, available funds, necessary facilities, and optimal community access.

One of the key criteria of CUC establishment is that it be at least 50km from a university. The following table shows current CUC locations and their distance by car to the closest university

[7] In Shoalhaven, the University of Wollongong expressed concerns about the CUC's potential impact on its regional campuses at Nowra and Batemans Bay but agreed to a Memorandum of Understanding.

campuses. Broken Hill (Far West CUC) is the most remote, however several CUCs are about an hours' drive to universities (Southern Shoalhaven, Goulburn, Clarence Valley, Macleay Valley). Despite the possibility of commuting, it is clear students prefer the range of opportunities offered by remote learning and online courses now available across Australia and use the CUC as a study space to access a plethora of courses, rather than opting to commute to the closest university in their regions.

Table 19 CUC distance to nearest university campus

CUC	Nearest Universities	Kilometres	Approximate drive time (closest to longest)
Southern Shoalhaven	University of Wollongong - Nowra and Batemans Bay satellite campuses	64 km (Nowra). 55 km (Batemans Bay	54 mins (Nowra) 46 mins (Batemans Bay)
Goulburn	Australian National University or University of Canberra	89 km	1 hour 2 mins
Clarence Valley	Southern Cross University, Coffs Harbour	89km	1 hour 3 mins
Macleay Valley	Southern Cross University, Coffs Harbour	107kms	1 hour 8 mins
Cowra	Charles Sturt University (Orange Campus)	105km	1 hour 18 mins
Parkes	Charles Sturt University (Dubbo campus)	120km	1 hour 22 mins
Snowy-Monaro	Australian National University or University of Canberra	117 km	1 hour 24 mins
Western Riverina Leeton; Griffith	Charles Sturt University (Wagga Wagga campus)	127km (Leeton-Wagga) 183 km (Griffith-Wagga)	1 hour 28 mins (Leeton-Wagga) 2 hours 8 mins (Griffith-Wagga)
Mudgee	Charles Sturt University (Orange Campus)	185km	2 hours 11 mins
Moree-Narrabri	University of New England or UNSW Armidale	251 km (Moree-Armidale) 259 km (Narrabri-Armidale)	3 hours (Moree-Armidale) 3 hours 8 mins (Narrabri-Armidale)
Broken Hill	La Trobe University (Mildura campus)	296 km	3 hours 4 mins

Source: Google Maps.

On 18 July 2023, in response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report, the Australian Government announced funding to double the number of University Study Hubs, including up to 20 additional Regional University Study Hubs. Applications for Cohort 4 closed on December 15, 2023 for community-owned organisations to apply to establish a Regional University Study Hub in their local area. New CUCs may apply to be established.

3.5 Major learnings, strengths, and areas for improvement

The CUCs are serving their communities well, but there is room for improvement.

3.5.1 Use of grant funding (responsible, effective, and efficient)

The evaluators do not have any evidence that there is wastage or inappropriately inefficient use of funds.

- CUCs managers and treasurers claim to run a ‘tight ship’
- Costs of services, while showing variance, are not excessive for common business services.
- There are major variations in costs of ‘big ticket’ items like computers/internet, rent and electricity and gas.

More could be done to manage life cycle capital item replacement and try to leverage savings through, for example bulk purchase/discount deals with suppliers. CUC Central has a role to play in helping to plan efficiencies across the CUC network.

Longer-term, installation of PV (solar) may create a positive return on investment to defray electricity and gas costs. CUCs could bulk-purchase PV systems and have them locally installed and electrify all appliances (however it depends on the building owner and terms of lease).

3.5.2 Financial partnerships with industry, government, corporations, philanthropists, and universities

CUCs continue to build partnerships.

- The CUCs have partnered with a range of universities and attracted income from industry and one philanthropic donor.
- CUCs typically receive about 30% of their income from non-government sources.

CUCs have a range of partners and donors including a range of universities, and (until recently) Snowy Hydro, and companies such as Santos. They have obtained funding from philanthropies like the VFFF, leveraged in-kind assistance and discounted rents from local councils, and with local business champions that now sponsor the CUC. They have also received occasional smaller donations from local businesses and farmers.

3.5.3 Long term financial sustainability

CUCs have an equity mission, so will continue to require government funding.

- Governments recognise that to boost the involvement of lower socio-economic background rural and regional people in higher education, support is required to overcome the disadvantages they face.

- Financial sustainability should be seen in a broader sense as having more regional graduates in regional NSW helps the NSW Government, the communities as well as the individuals who graduate.

CUCs contribute to essential services and regional development. In our estimation, government should be the main funder as it directly employs about 55% of CUC graduates through its agencies (especially NSW Health and the NSW DoE). While CUCs can fundraise and create other revenue streams (and do), this cannot be relied on as the major income source and nor will it be regular enough to create funding certainty in the long-term. If government wished to secure ongoing and regular funding from the private sector then it would need to mandate this via developer contributions on, for example, new business parks such as the SAPs, or as a levy on businesses that require a tertiary-educated workforce.

3.5.4 Additional outcomes (positive or negative) beyond the program KPIs; contribution to regional education development and communities

The additional outcomes of the program include community development, stabilising the population, giving back to the region and to country, and becoming a source of recruitment for employers and employees requiring tertiary-educated people.

- CUCs value-add to towns by better providing for community needs by educating locals for professions.
- A range of non-university students use CUCs (including city-based students on placements, high school students and TAFE students) so they act more like ‘education hubs’ than ‘university centres’.
- CUCs can be seen as part of the ‘regional renaissance’ in Australia, driven by more remote working and cost of living in cities.

Students expressed a strong sense of belonging, connection, and peer support in the CUC communities.

An unanticipated outcome is the use of CUCs by a range of people studying including high school students, TAFE students and metropolitan students (medical/allied health, social work) on placement in regional areas.

The program has seen a cumulative 3598 students register in NSW CUCs since 2013 (CUC Central, pers. comm., 2023), which has created opportunities for residents to remain in their communities and be successful. The presence of the CUCs have supported increased university enrolments and prevented youth from moving away to go to university. It has also provided opportunities for professionals, partners, and families to relocate to the area, thereby sustaining regional centres and improving their liveability. As a local government staff member said, “That’s why we as a Council wanted to support the establishment of it. Because it’s just another string in the bow that adds to the liveability of the place” (Board member). Moreover, the centres have become a pipeline for jobs in crucial fields such as education, health, and local government.

Additional outcomes are filling local job vacancies in a period of labour shortages. We asked students about getting employment and perceived skills shortages in the CUC alumni survey.

As Table 34 indicates, 31% said it was easy to get their current job, which would indicate labour shortages – however, most (63%) said ‘neither easy or hard’. However, only 4% said it was ‘hard’ to get a job in their occupation.

Table 20 Was it easy or hard to get your current job?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Easy - there are a lot of job vacancies and a lack of qualified applicants for my occupation	31.82%	14
2	Neither easy or hard	63.64%	28
3	Hard - there is a lot of applicants and competition for positions for my occupation	4.55%	2
	Total	100%	44

Source: CUC Alumni survey.

As Table 35 below shows, about three-quarters (74%) said they were aware of labour shortages in their area. Only 4.6 % said they were not aware of labour shortages.

Table 21 Are you aware of labour shortages in your current location?

	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes - for the following occupations:	74.42%	32
2	Not sure	20.93%	9
3	No	4.65%	2
	Total	100%	43

Source: CUC Alumni survey.

When asked to name what occupations were experiencing staff shortages, many said ‘teaching’, followed by a variety of health occupations – nurses, specialists nurses, GPs, psychiatrists, psychologists, mental health support workers, health management. Others simply said ‘all’ or just about everything’.

As shown elsewhere, and evident in CUC statistics, many students study for occupations that are essential and public service-oriented like teaching or nursing. The CUC alumni were asked about how they saw their chosen occupation in a series of Likert scale questions, shown in the table below. On a scale of 1-100, there were high scores for feeling like an essential service worker (71 points), helping others (88.7 points) and being valued by the community (75 points), as well as feelings of community service. There was also high agreement that their work benefited the public sector 76.9 points) and the private sector too (71 points).

Table 22 Your occupation: to what extent do you agree with the following statements?

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	I am an essential service worker	0.00	100.00	71.28	34.35	1179.95	40
2	I help others through my work	0.00	100.00	88.73	21.21	449.95	41
3	My work is valued by my community	0.00	100.00	75.49	29.97	898.49	41
4	There are labour shortages in my profession	0.00	100.00	81.44	27.26	742.96	39
5	I feel I am giving back to my community through my work	0.00	100.00	83.54	23.45	549.91	41
6	My work benefits the government or public sector	0.00	100.00	76.95	30.99	960.56	39
7	My work benefits the business or private sector	0.00	100.00	71.74	31.71	1005.56	38

Source: CUC Alumni survey.

Students feel strongly about the value of local employment, boosting the knowledge economy and giving back to the community. As above, they felt like they are performing essential work and contributing to communities.

> I mean in health we say prevention is the best cure, so preventing that from happening is pretty important. And upskilling people is very important because I can't be a child and family health nurse without doing a postgrad… the more skills that we can have, the better that's going to support our community.... (Student)

> 63 per cent of our students… are studying disciplines that are going to go and work with or maybe alongside but predominantly with the state government. (Staff)

4. Conclusion

CUCs help educate people who would likely struggle to engage in and complete university study without some form of support. CUCs, therefore, are likely supporting the graduation of students who would otherwise have not studied if it were not for the existence of the CUC. While the proportion who would have undertaken study in the absence of these centres is unknowable, a consistent message from the students to whom we spoke was that without the CUC's support, they would not have been able to do it.

CUCs allow for community-based, low cost-of-living for students. As noted in the report, when a student moves to a regional centre or city for a period of three years or more, their rental costs are significant, and they may not return to their point of origin. This is assuming that students can or want to move; many of the students we spoke to were committed to living in their hometown/area because of family, caring, work, or other personal reasons.

Moreover, CUCs are incredibly important for equity. This has been acknowledged in the awarding of funding by the federal government following the Universities Accord Interim Report 2023. CUCs, like other RUSHs, offer opportunities for community outreach that universities, and to a lesser extent VET colleges, cannot achieve. Being able to access facilities that are proximal, familiar, and communal is helping students who have primarily chosen distance modes of study, to access the kinds of services and supports that would otherwise be inaccessible because of distance, thus helping to retain enrolled students.

Many of the students that CUCs support have intersecting educational disadvantage that create acute challenges for engaging with higher education. In addition to living in regional, rural, or remote NSW, other factors include:

- Gender: a high proportion of CUC students are women (79%), some mature-aged who have returned to education. Many of these women have caring responsibilities that meaningfully impact on their capacity to concentrate at home and make relocation impossible.

- First Nations heritage: a significant proportion of CUC students are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders (9%), who experience some of the most profound educational disadvantage in Australia. In most CUCs, the registration proportion of First Nations students are equal to or in excess of the proportion in the surrounding population, indicating that they are attracting Indigenous people into higher education and allowing them to stay on Country.

- Low income: In addition to being able to speak to knowledgeable CUC staff who can act as education brokers and advocates, being able to access a centrally-located facility that has free super-fast Wi-Fi, printing facilities, and food and drink removes financial barriers to participating in university education.

- Many students fall into more than one of the groups listed.

CUCs also respond to many of the intersecting educational challenges that students in country NSW face, such as remoteness, poor connectivity, a lack of informed support and advocacy,

by providing quiet and safe spaces seven days per week from morning to night, free food and drink, dedicated support staff, and facilitating a network of students within a local community. CUCs help students to make the most of remote learning by creating a study space, a hub for aspirant and currently enrolled students, celebration of academic success, and a campus-like atmosphere.

CUCs are supporting more than just university students. CUC student data indicated that at October 2023, 89 high school students were using the centres, along with 86 TAFE students – not to mention a multitude of people studying at non-University institutions including private colleges, professional boards, etc.

While this evaluation has not undertaken a cost-benefit analysis as this was out of scope, CUCs are important for regional economies and for development.

- CUCs are fundamental to realising a 'grow your own' ambition in regional areas, especially in public service areas such as health, education, and social work.
- Supporting people to stay local: CUCs offer an invaluable opportunity for students who want to stay local (to support family, to work or support family businesses, to avoid the costs of relocation), and who want to serve their local community as a future professional or public servant.
- Role modelling: The support of CUCs has opened access and ambition between members of the community; in fact, there are several examples in these Centres of family members inspiring other family members to return to education.
- Contribute to the 'regional renaissance': allow for upskilling of local populations, higher salaries, and attract new residents in if services and facilities are improving.
- Have synergies with the development of new Special Activation Precincts.

CUCs need certainty of government funding. Other sources of funding from corporates, and CUCs own activities, also bring in income, as do partnerships with universities and CSP payments and some corporates donate (notably, Snowy Hydro and Santos). However, the opportunities vary from CUC to CUC. CUCs are, however, in the main (about 60%) reliant on government funding. Given the benefits to the local regional economies, and the NSW Government itself, the issues of 'financial sustainability' needs to be reconceptualised to account for the benefits the CUCs beyond necessarily being financially self-sustaining when this is not realistic. CUCs are not profit-making entities. Their purpose is to support education in rural and regional Australia. Governments can, however, continue to use funding agreements to encourage CUCs to continue to seek external funding/revenue and pursue a range of efficiencies around key line item costs **without compromising their core mission.**

CUCs are important to the NSW Government as an employer (in particular the NSW DoE and NSW Health benefit from CUC graduates), and to communities that need essential services. CUCs seek to maintain their focus and receive government funds with more certainty as well as continuing to seek other funding sources. If government wants to maximise other funding sources

from business, then the current ad hoc approach needs to be recognised as imperfect and irregular. Government could seek to levy businesses that benefit from a ready source of local graduates via seeking a mandated contribution as part of, for example, seeking development consent for new business parks or SAPs, or through some other general levy mechanism. Not all regional industries require university graduates so a university levy on 'business' may not be appropriate for some sectors that are likely benefit less than others. CUCs running costs exhibit variations (e.g. computers/ITS, electricity/gas), and CUCs could pursue a range of efficiencies and re-examine suppliers where costs are higher than the average across the CUC network.

CUCs are offering development opportunities to country people allowing them to re-imagine what is possible for them and their families.

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Appendix A Evaluation questions - data sources

Table 23 Evaluation questions and data sources

Questions	Sources of data
1. Are CUCs successfully supporting country students to meet their higher education goals? a. How many students are enrolled per CUC? i. Has each centre met or exceeded its yearly enrolment (**registration)** targets? ii. How many students have deferred or dropped out of their studies while attending a CUC? b. What percentage of the catchment area target age group (18-45) are CUC students? c. What are the demographic characteristics of CUC students? i. Does this reflect the profile of young people in the area or are some groups not engaging? d. How do CUCs ensure inclusivity and (cultural) safety? e. Are the CUCs maintaining successful student engagement? f. What are the trends over time in terms of total CUC client (student) numbers, and how do these compare with the community? g. What are the student completion rates for students enrolled (registered) in CUCs? h. What types of higher education qualifications are achieved (i.e.., BA, MA, PhD, TAFE certificates, diplomas) and what are the numbers/percentage for each type? i. Are students supported to study a range of courses at a variety of institutions? i. Have five new centres been established by 2023? If not, why not?	Quantitative (for each financial year, or part thereof) CUCs data: • student numbers and demographics • type and extent of engagement with CUCs • educational enrolments and achievements (number for each type of tertiary education enrolment, number and percentage that completed • CUC regional demographic data • number and demographic profile for 18–25-year-olds in catchment area Qualitative Focus groups/interviews: • DoE regional divisional staff • CUC staff • CUC board members • CUC clients (registered students) • local school staff (Careers Advisors, etc) • local levels of government (local council, State and Federal MPs)

j. Do the CUC clients (students) feel supported and resourced? What resources are available to them (and what is missing), and how engaged in the Centre do they feel? k. Following graduation, do CUC students remain and pursue a career in their local community? l. What are the facilitators and barriers for CUC clients (students) to staying enrolled and completing a degree or certificate?	
2. Are CUCs concentrating on their core business, or is unnecessary time and energy being taken up with non-core activities such as the administrative burden attached to reporting, or fundraising? a. Do CUC managers and staff feel they are able to focus on core duties? b. Are there any efficiencies that could be introduced to cut down on administrative burden, in regard to: i. Daily operations including the CUC building, equipment, basic administration, payroll, HR and OH&S, etc. ii. Systems including data and student data management systems, forms/paperwork/documentation, financial expenditures, etc. iii. Governance (the CUC Board, the CUC directorate) iv. CUC/government reporting requirements? v. The relationship between and support provided by CUC Central to each centre. c. Do CUC clients (students) think they are able to focus on their core reasons for being there or is there an ongoing administrative burden? d. Are there any efficiencies that could be introduced to cut down on administrative burden on CUC students with regard to:	Qualitative Focus groups/interviews: • CUC managers • CUC staff • CUC Board members • CUC clients (registered students)

i. registration/becoming a CUC centre student ii. forms/paperwork iii. systems (ITS, software, security/access)?	
3. Are the CUCs promoting themselves effectively in the local community, and in all parts of the broader region, to ensure students know about what the CUC offers, and engage with it? a. Are CUCs doing effective engagement and reputation building with the local community? b. Has CUC built a strong brand and reputation for quality in regional communities? c. Do CUCs have engagement plans, and were these carried out? d. How do CUC students hear about the CUCs (pathways to the CUC)? e. Do local high schools (e.g., school leadership, career advisors, head teachers - welfare) know about their local CUC and promote it to their students? f. Do local NGOs know about the CUC and promote it to students in the local community? g. Do local levels of government (the local council and local State and Federal MPs) know about their local CUC and promote it to students in the local community? h. What are the trends in terms of numbers and profile of CUC clients (students) since each CUC opened, and have engagement strategies boosted numbers over time? i. Have CUCs maintained relationships and shared best practice with the wider Regional University Centre community in NSW and other states and territories? j. Have CUCs developed and maintained effective relationships with universities and other educational institutions?	Qualitative Focus groups/interviews: • DoE regional divisional staff • CUC staff • CUC board members • CUC clients (registered students) • local school staff (Careers Advisors, etc) • local levels of government (local council, State and Federal MPs)

4. What is the CUC business model and is it sustainable over the long-term? For each CUC, and as part of the CUC model: a. What is the funding mix (sources of funding)? b. How much does it cost to establish a CUC (comparing the two models of refurbishment and a new build)? c. How much does it cost to run a CUC each year (excluding establishment costs)? d. What are the implications for a centre's finances and budgets as student demand at the centre increases over time? e. What efforts have been made to diversify funding sources? f. Are funding constraints limiting services that are being offered and/or total CUC places (are young people missing out)? g. Are there capacity constraints? (i.e., small/cramped spaces, old/inadequate equipment, sub-optimal data and IT systems, high staff turnover/hard to retain quality staff, poor location of centre, rationing of core services or goods due to cost or scarcity, etc). h. Is there a genuine need and demand for the centre in the local community? Are the services provided by the local centre available elsewhere in the community? i. Is the current situation financially sustainable in the long-term? j. What is a model for understanding CBA for CUCs for the NSW Govt (in light of Commonwealth and NSW funding commitments?) k. What is the relative value proposition to NSW and Commonwealth Governments of the CUCs? l. What benefit does the program realise considering the capital investment and operational expenditure? And what are the upper and lower benefits?	Quantitative • reports to CUC directorate, government, audited financial reports • funding sources, mix (state/federal/other) • centre budgets and expenditure • operational costs data • physical infrastructure (office rents, running costs), staffing levels, other costs (travel allowances, equipment, etc) • aggregate cost of program and costs per centre • cost per CUC student (staff to student ratios) • examples of efficient use of resources, refinements to business model Mixed • Survey of Managers and Treasurers in finances and operating costs Qualitative Focus groups/interviews with: • CUC centre managers • CUC Board members

m. Are some centres operating more efficiently than others? If so, why? Can lessons from centres with strong financial performance be applied to others which are not performing as well? n. What are the variations centre to centre? o. How is efficiency determined? (i.e. compared to what?) p. What lessons of 'effective practice' can Centres share with Central and other centres? q. How can Central use affiliate agreements to influence and hold the centres and Central to account (e.g., CUC Central needs to manage the network and seek certain outcomes)? r. Is the current affiliation model (with individual centres entering into affiliate agreements with CUC Central) a good business model for achieving program goals and outcomes? s. Is the department's funding model (one funding agreement with CUC Central, who disburses funds to individual centres) an effective mechanism to fund the program (compared to the Commonwealth model which provides funding direct to individual centres)? t. What further opportunities exist to centralise costs and liabilities? u. Have the centre locations been appropriately selected, including factors of equity, access, community, and regional development?	
5. What are the major learnings, strengths, and areas for improvement? a. Has CUC used the grant funding responsibly, effectively, and efficiently? b. Has CUC established financial partnerships with industry, government, corporations and philanthropists? Has CUC established financial or in-kind partnerships with universities? c. What can CUC do to achieve long term financial sustainability?	Quantitative • Triangulation of all quantitative data sources Qualitative Focus groups/interviews: • DoE regional divisional staff • CUC staff • CUC board members • CUC clients (students) • local school staff (Careers Advisors, etc)

d. Have any additional outcomes (positive or negative) been produced (beyond the program KPIs)? Has the program contributed to regional education, regional development and regional communities?	• local levels of government (local council, State and Federal MPs)

Appendix B Datasets

Table 24 Datasets and variables

Dataset	Data	Variables
RUC core statistics	Population	Detailed population statistics for each CUC area (NSW)
CUC centre data	CUC student characteristics Bi-annual reports	• Country Universities Centre Name • Date the student joined CUC • Permanent Residence Post Code • Gender • Age • Metro, Regional or Rural? • Does the student identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander? • Is the student the First in family? • Does the Student have a Low Socio-Economic Status? • Does the student have a disability? • Name of the institution/s attended by the student • State the institution/s located in? • Level of Course (i.e., Bachelor, Masters, Diploma etc.) • Name of the course • Full-Time or Part-Time Study? • Internal, External, Mixed-Mode study? • International or domestic • General progress • Progress against KPIs • Media news stories • Student case studies • Student satisfaction survey results
CUC annual reports, other financial data	Financial reports, other	• Annual reports including financial audit statements • Balance sheets • Profit and loss statements • FY21-22 budgets • Financial and growth strategy • Funding source mix (state/federal/other)

		• Aggregate cost of the program and costs per centre • Physical infrastructure (office rents, running costs), staffing levels, other costs (travel allowances, equipment, etc) • Cost per CUC student (staff to student ratios) • Administrative or other drags (inefficient systems or costs causing suboptimal use of resources) • Potential savings sources (via efficiencies)

Appendix C Employment categories and incentives offered for relocation to regional and rural areas

Published 11/8/23 “The NSW Government is doubling the incentives offered **to healthcare workers** to relocate to remote and rural areas, from **$10,000 to $20,000** as part of its commitment to attract and retain more skilled staff in hard to fill and critical roles in regional and rural areas…Incentive packages include a range of additional benefits including salary boost, sign-on bonuses and retention payments of up to $20,000 per annum, relocation assistance and housing, additional leave, and access to training and education.” (Health NSW, 2023).

The Workforce Incentive Program (WIP) is another reference to financial incentives directly to **doctors** to work in rural and regional areas. It recognises services delivered between 1 Jan 2023 to 31 Dec 2025 (Department of Health, n.d.). Payment of **up to $60,000/year** are for vocationally registered doctors and non-vocationally registered doctors on an approved training pathway (Department of Health, n.d.).

Published 29/6/23 The DoE offer a Rural Teacher incentive between **$20,000-$30,000** gross/annum to attract and retain permanent and temporary **teachers** in a list of eligible rural and remote schools including Broken Hill, Moree, Snowy Mountains, Narrabri, Parkes (NSW Department of Education, n.d.).

Published 2023 The Aust. Government is offering one-off payments up to $16,500 for to **aged-care** employees to permanently relocate to rural and remote areas and an annual retention bonus for 2 years following relocation and permanent employment up to **$6,000** https://rurallap.com.au/aged-care/relocation-incentives/

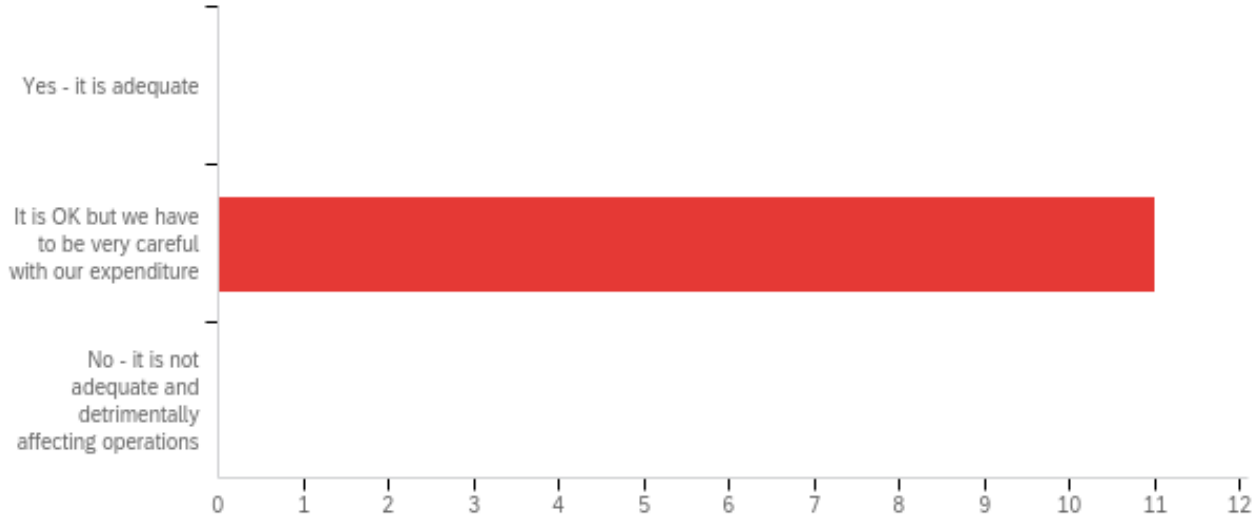
Regional Development Australia offered reimbursements of up to **$10,000** to approved **businesses** to assist with relocation costs incurred by eligible skilled workers for furniture removal, travel for immediate family to relocate, temporary accommodation for up to 3 months, and furniture storage for up to 3 months. The NSW Government committed $10 million from 2019-2023 providing 250 grants/year in agriculture, forestry, manufacturing, mining and tourism. https://rdafarwestnsw.org.au/nsw-regional-skills-relocation-grant/

Source: Job advertisements, August 2023

Appendix D CUC Managers' and Treasurers' Survey

Default Report
CUCs Managers and Treasurers finances survey
October 30th, 2022, 11:54 pm MDT

Is your current budget adequate to run the CUC?

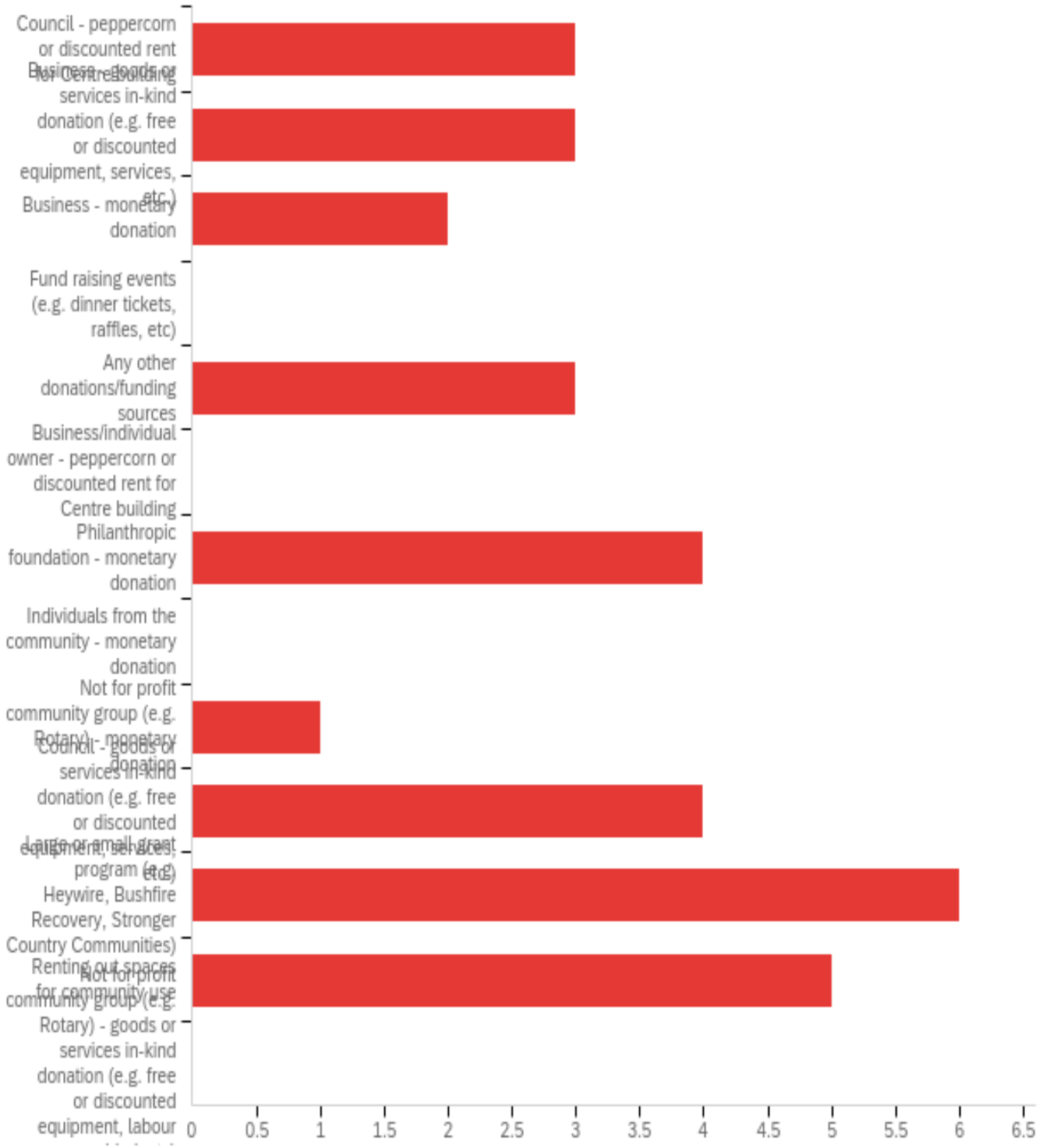


Thinking about your Centre's costs, which ones are going up the most? Specify three line items where costs have significantly increased. (e.g., costs associated with Accounting & Auditing, Advertising, Bank Charges, Cleaning, Electricity, Insurance - General, Insurance - Workers Compensation, Legals, Licences & Permits, Maintenance - Computer & Equipment, Office expenses, Printing, Postage & Stationery, Promotional Events, Promotional Materials, R&M - Building, Recruitment expenses, Rent Expenses, Security Software/Internet/Connectivity & Computer support, Staff & Student Amenities, Staff expenses (training & development), Subscriptions, Telephone Expenses, Teaching Resources, Travel expenses, Uniform expenses, Wages/Salaries - Centre Manager/Tutors, Wages/Salaries - On costs (Superannuation, LSL etc), Waste Collection, Website Development, Other)

1.	2.	3.
staff wages	computers and equipment	building maintenance
Wages	Rent	IT
Rent when we move to new premises	Occupancy costs have increased and will further with new premises	Wages and on costs
Rent increases (for a new site)	Staffing expenses (to increase capacity to work in outreach, careers and industry engagement)	Internet costs, due to connectivity at our current site. 4. All other expenses are increasing with inflation and

		anticipated to increase with a larger site
Security Software/internet/Connectivity & Computer support	Electricity	Wages/Salaries - Centre Manager/Tutors
Electricity	Rent	Wages/Salaries - Centre Manager/Tutors
Operational including electricity and building maintenance and repairs	Computer and IT Support	Rent expenses
Staff and student amenities	Advertising / Promotional materials	Printing
Salaries and wages to support project activities	Electricity	Information Technology
Electricity	Rent	Affiliation Fees
Rent	Wages and Staff entitlements	costs associated with the facility - physical fit out, furniture etc

Most CUCs currently receive finding from the Commonwealth and NSW Governments. Please indicate which other sources of funding you have. This may include in-kind, donations and monetary (choose all that apply). Note: if you pay full market rate for a good or service, do not include.

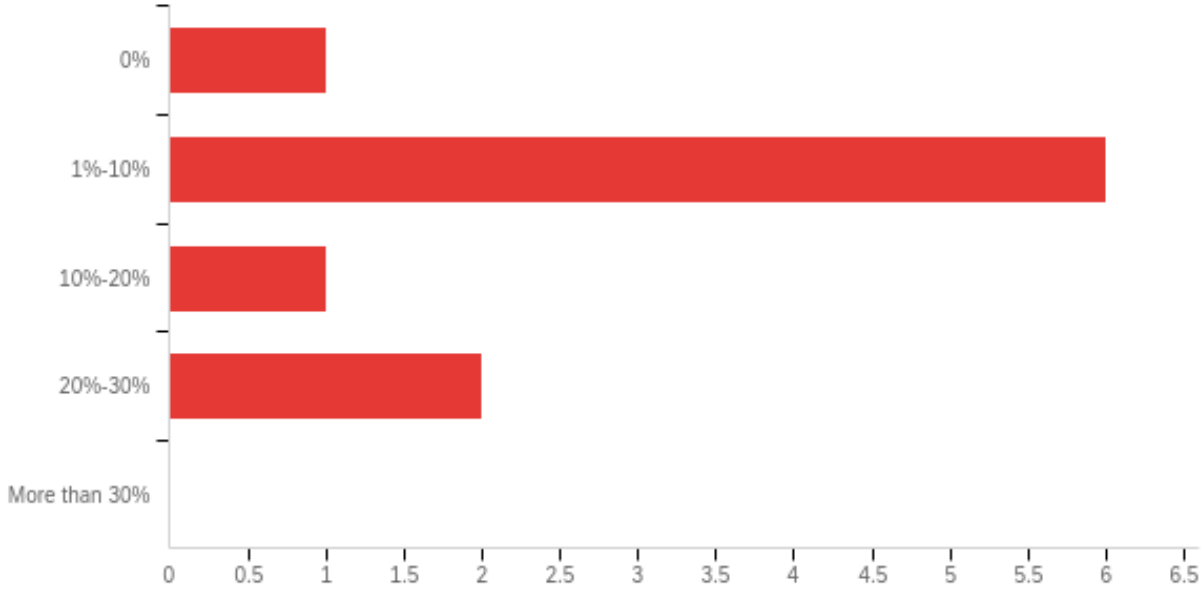


Q26_7_TEXT - Any other donations/funding sources

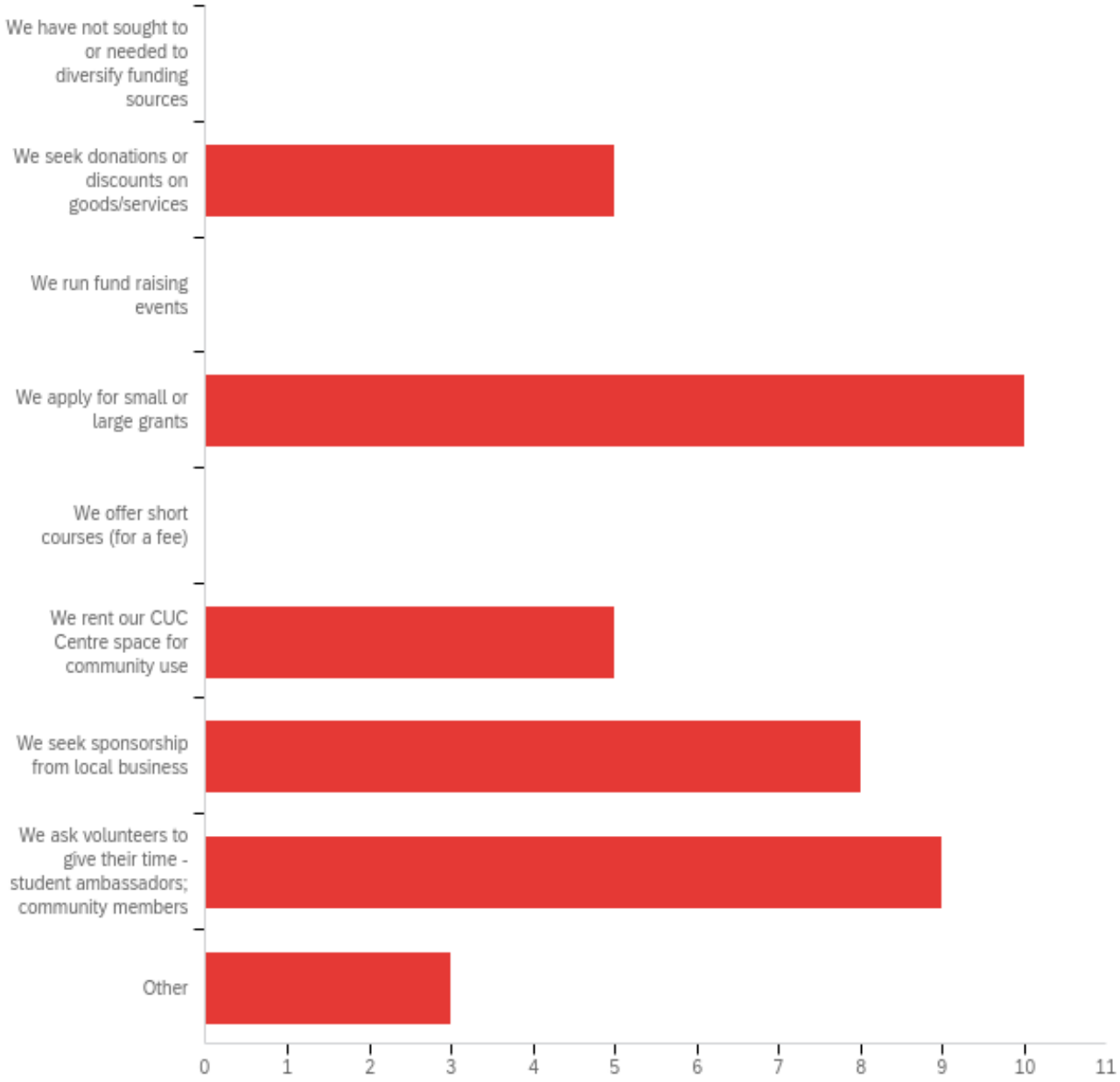
Any other donations/funding sources - Text
Commonwealth Supported Places funding, revenue from space hire and invigilation services for examinations, RPPPP funding to partially fund outreach,
Directors in kind support - legal/financial

VFFF funding for LSA program / Affiliated university funding

What percent of your overall funding would you estimate comes from non-government sources?



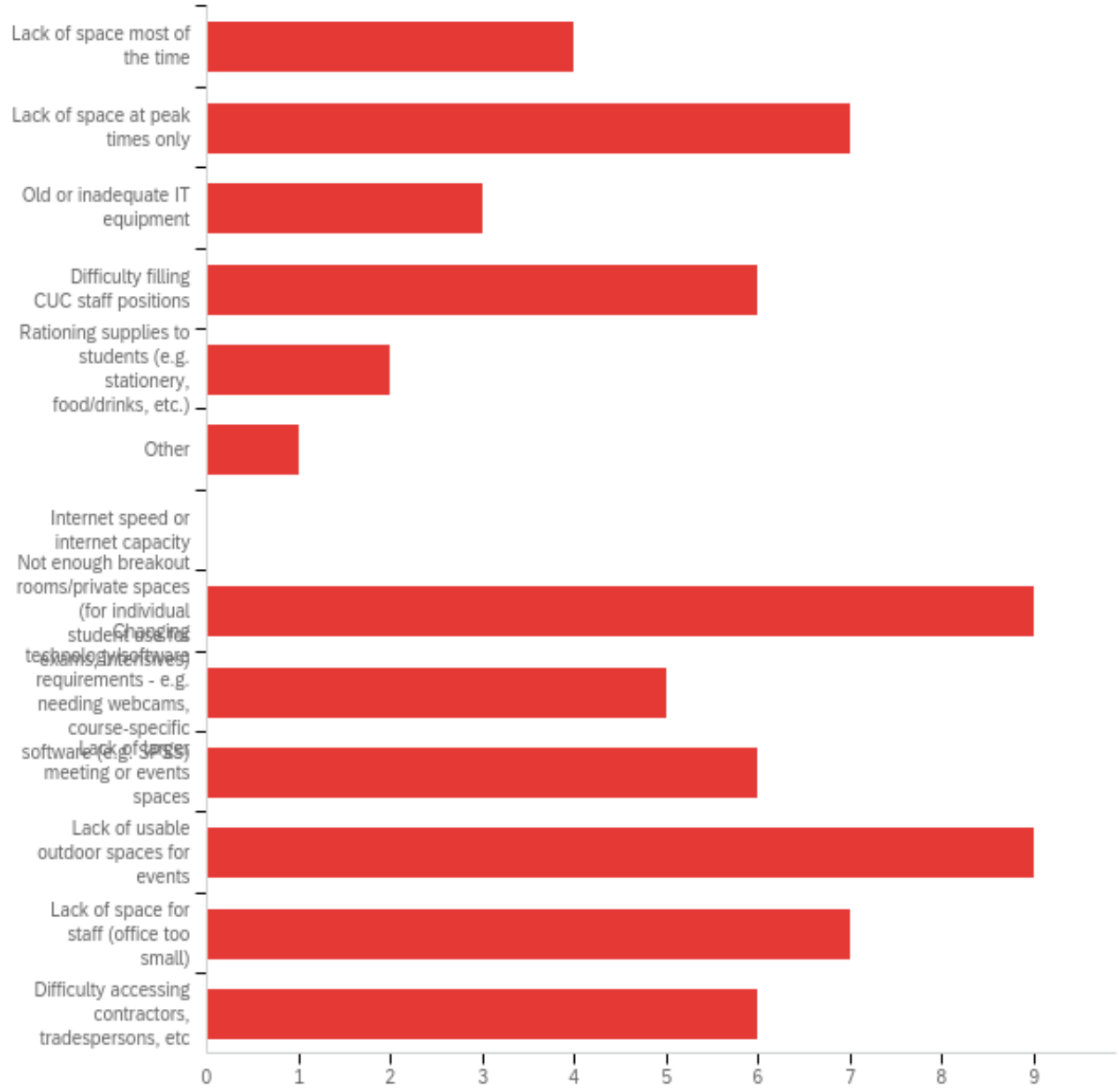
What efforts have been made to diversify funding sources? Choose all that apply



Q28_10_TEXT - Other

Other - Text
exam revenue
As part of our strategic plan (2023-2026) and a plan to move sites to a more appropriate space and location, we aim to identify and seek grants and sponsorships, as well as seek council input
Community Partnerships Project in motion

Does your CUC have any capacity constraints? Choose all that apply.



Q46_10_TEXT - Other

Other - Text

Internet costs are very expensive at our current site.

What is an example of an efficiency that would save your centre money? (or give an example of something you have done to maximise efficient use of your resources)

What is an example of an efficiency that would save your centre money? (or give an example of something you have done to maximise efficient use of your resources)
outsourcing bookkeeping to free up the Centre Manager's time
Our Centre Manager fills a lot of roles in and out of hours to ensure efficiency. This isn't sustainable.
negotiate supplier contracts - i.e., IT
We are continually reviewing our expenditure and have reduced it in key areas such as our yearly internet and mobile telephone spend. Being part of a network, we also regularly benefit from collaboration with other Centres, and sharing of resources. We anticipate that a move to a new, more central site would improve our visibility, and reduce our internet costs.
Directors - in kind support (legal & financial)
Nil
We have placed all air conditioning systems on timers.
We have transformed our back deck into the Boardroom to provide another room with five more study spaces for students.
There are services essential to every CUC (i.e., insurance, IT, internet, electricity) and it is incredibly inefficient that all the Centres have to negotiate independent contracts with these providers. As part of our affiliation fee, Central should negotiate contracts as a preferred supplier arrangement, still allowing a CUC to remain independent if they wish, but if a Centre chooses to use CUC's preferred supplier, it would not only reduce time spent negotiating these contracts, but it would also reduce the cost of the items because we would be getting bulk discounts from the supplier.
we seek to be very diligent in our purchases, saving money where we can.

What is an example of an inefficiency affecting your centre? What would you change, if you could?

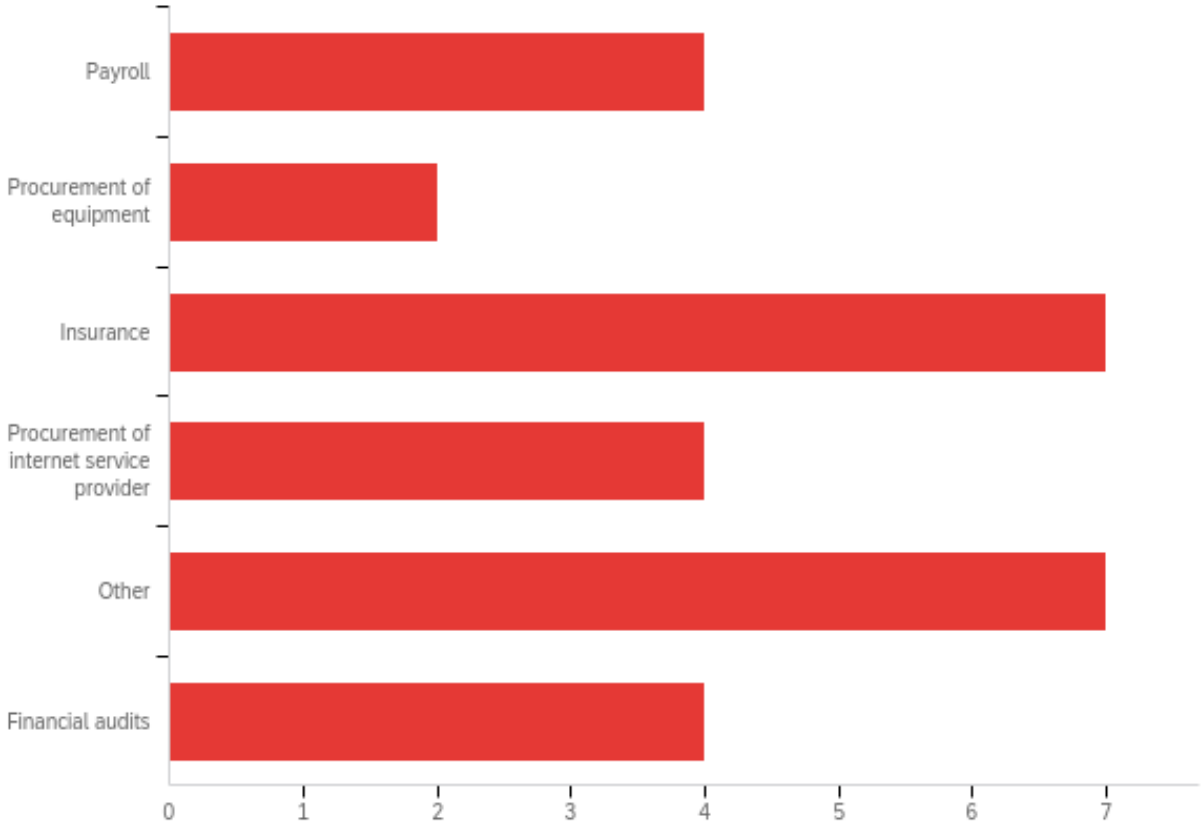
What is an example of an inefficiency affecting your centre? What would you change, if you could?
electricity- investing in alternate energy solutions
Casualization of staff.
Space restrictions require renting of additional room
While we meet all the conditions and KPIs for our funding and grants, we have found that our space will impact our ability to grow over time and to run community or group activities and attract some students who require private spaces. As a result, we have to work harder to retain some of our students and maintain our sense of community in our current space. Our current office space is also too small, which limits our capacity to work in teams of three or more in the same office space.
IT support/and procurement of IT equipment
Nil
Due to limited administration hours, tutors often need to do admin which is an inefficient use of their time

We don't have enough individual study spaces for exam time and we don't have a large space for community workshops and presentations that would enhance the use of our Centre.,
We could diversify our income sources better by offering the use of our training facilities (meeting rooms, training room) to the greater community if we had more space. We are often at capacity with our current student load but have no room to expand in our building. Moving to another building is not an option as we have no money to undertake another fit out.

What could the Central CUC do support centres and create efficiencies across centre that would help your Centre financially?

What could the Central CUC do support centres and create efficiencies across centre that would help your Centre financially?
centralise general social media, newsletters, website maintenance
Permanent staff that work across Centre's in marketing, finance, and other areas. This way they retain expertise and fill in gaps that aren't needed full time but need specialized skills.
Centralisation of negotiation of contracts and provision of services/capital requirements
Reduce duplication of the creation of resources, negotiate grants at a network level, professional development (all of which they are doing, above and beyond their current capacity)
Better set up of staff employment contracts/policies & procedures. All need to be consistent across the CUC network.
CUC is constrained by its own budget
More realistic deadlines for CUC network projects. Marketing strategies such as regular weekly scheduled social media, google ad word campaigns and radio/print advertising across the CUC network
Helping with marketing and advertising our brand to universities for connection to their students. There are so many students that are not advised, form their universities that we are here to support them when studying remotely.
Create partnerships with businesses that offer the high-cost items, such as electricity, telephone, internet. While I appreciate the offer, centralising things like merchandise orders and bookkeeping don't save us money, it often creates extra work. Having Central do my bookwork for me doesn't actually save us money because we pay a higher hourly rate to have Central do the bookwork than I get paid per hour, so it makes sense for me to continue doing it. What would help us to have our essential services provided at a cheaper rate.
economies of scale for some common costs - electricity, internet, phones - seeking group discount/s

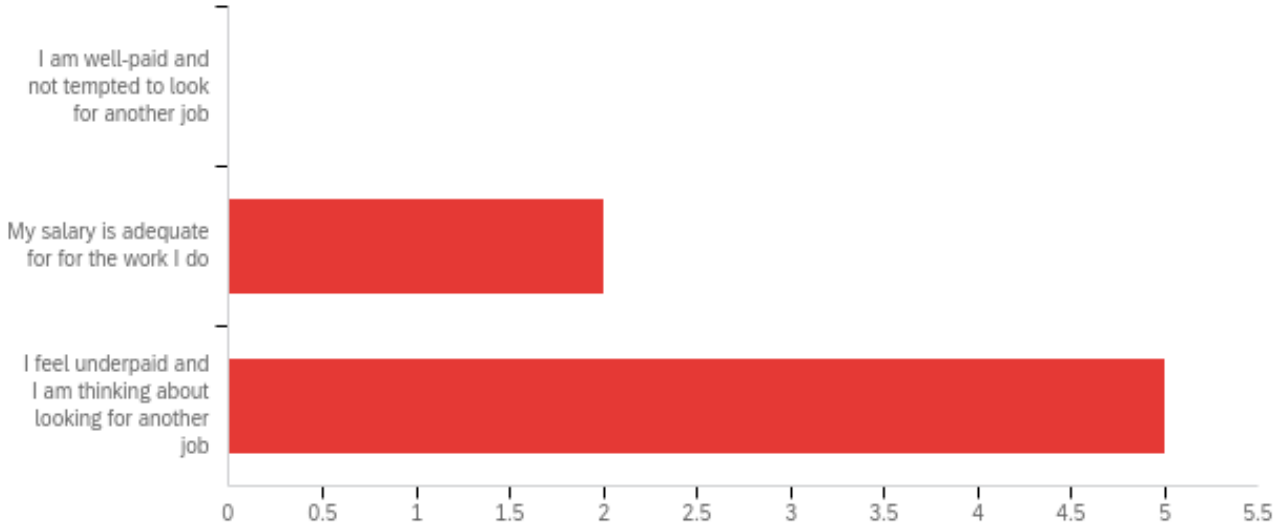
Are there any functions that would be better centralised across all CUCs? (Note - it may be more efficient to do things locally). Choose all that apply.



Q31_5_TEXT - Other

Other - Text
media and publicity
Fed Govt reporting
Note - insurance already centralised across CUC's
Human Resources (such as PDs etc) [we note – now centralised across CUCs]
Website blogs etc.
Electricity
most of these are best done locally to develop local relationships with providers.

If you are the CUC Manager, what do think about your salary? (Treasurers need not answer)



If you are the CUC Manager, do you have any comments about your level of remuneration and your cost of living expenses? (Treasurers need not answer)

If you are the CUC Manager, do you have any comments about your level of remuneration and your cost of living expenses? (Treasurers need not answer)
My pay has not increased since starting here 3.5 years ago. I am currently seeking a pay rise.
I feel underpaid for the work I have done but feel like I cannot ask for more as I am a Centre Manager and not a CEO, although I am technically a CEO. I applied for a wage increase and it got approved however just after this inflation increased quite a lot which has changed my circumstances.
n/a
I feel underpaid, I took a pay cut to take on this job, but I am not actively looking for another job. I am concerned about the level of burnout from inadequate staffing levels with our Centre and across our network.
I would answer the above question to say that I do feel underpaid for the regular and consistent amount of overtime that I do, unpaid, however I'm not thinking about looking for another job. I love my job but my hours of work and the amount I get paid is not adequate. I did ask for a pay increase recently and my pay is now matched with the budgeted amount.
While I am not looking to leave the CUC at the moment, the Centre Managers wage is quite low when you consider other professionals in similar positions. In terms of cost of living, my wage is not increasing enough to cover the significant jump in cost of living expenses.
While I am satisfied with my remuneration, I know I could earn more money if I chose to relocate to a metro region. This job is more about the way I can support my community by remaining here to both be involved here and to assist others within my community to further their education and pursue their aspirations.

Is there anything that should be a line item in your budget, which no funds are allocated to, but should be?

Is there anything that should be a line item in your budget, which no funds are allocated to, but should be?
no
More staff.
No
Outreach projects
We have added any budget items that are needed.
No
Community resource packages / large community events
Depreciation - replacement costs for IT equipment that are now getting very old.
furniture, board costs, and events

Do you have any other comments about the CUC funding and use of resources?

Do you have any other comments about the CUC funding and use of resources?
Funding more than a Centre Manager position initially would allow more community buy in and increase the credibility of the organization. The expectation and the resources for a Centre Manager in the initial phases for some would be unreasonable.
No
When I speak to university partners about the costs involved in the work that they do with regional students, I am continually impressed by what our network is achieving with so much less. We have a remarkable model, and it is providing many people in our regional communities with opportunities they couldn't access previously. The CUC network needs sustained funding to continue, consolidate and improve upon that work - as a guarantee for the critical work we are planning with our students, schools, local industries, and communities.
Would be great to have funding commitment that spans 5 years plus which would provide greater long-term planning for the CUC Centres
The Centre does amazing things within a tightly constrained budget, but regional support of higher education will always be thinly resources so this is a reality. The Centre services are very high value for the resourcing provided.
There is an inequity of human resources when comparing Centres that are smaller geographically and population wise, having similar sized teams to larger areas/populations. When considering this, looking at student numbers in a case load scenario would be beneficial.
The potential of our Centre is phenomenal, if we had more funding to employ more staff to manage more community focused programs. We do the best we can with the funding we have been allocated, and we are hugely grateful for the funding provided to us. This Centre is pivotal for positive growth in our community but some of the local influencers are not aware of the potential and positive influence we could provide if more supported by our local politicians and council.

Our growth exceeded expectations which has left us in a position of desperately needing more space. There are so many projects and activities that we would love to initiate, but we can't due to lack of space. We have no money to move to a bigger premises, and often find that we are ineligible for larger infrastructure grants as we don't meet the criteria. It would be helpful to have access to someone in this space to help us find appropriate grants and apply for them.

there is quite a bit of pressure to pursue external funding which can prove distracting from our mission of service provision to our students as an equity cohort both at a governance and practical level.

Appendix E CUC Student Alumni Survey

CUC alumni survey FINAL
November 13th 2023, 9:57 pm MST

How do you describe your gender?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Man/male	22.50%	9
2	Woman/female	75.00%	30
3	Non-binary	0.00%	0
4	I use a different term	0.00%	0
5	Prefer not to answer	2.50%	1
	Total	100%	40

What is your current NET (after tax) income per week? (if you get paid fortnightly, divide this amount in half). If you are casual or self-employed and your income fluctuates, estimate average weekly income. Do not include any other household members' income.

#	Answer	%	Count
1	0-$500	10.00%	4
2	$1501-$2000	22.50%	9
3	$2001-$2500	0.00%	0
4	$1001-$1500	32.50%	13
5	$2500+	7.50%	3
6	$501-$1000	12.50%	5
7	Prefer not to say	15.00%	6
	Total	100%	40

Do you identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	No	85.00%	34
2	Yes, Aboriginal	12.50%	5
3	Yes, Torres Strait Islander	0.00%	0
4	Yes, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	0.00%	0
5	Prefer not to say	2.50%	1
	Total	100%	40

Country of birth

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Australia	100.00%	35
	Total	100%	35

What course were you enrolled in? (e.g. Bachelor of Social Work, Cert. III in Aged Care, MA in Engineering, etc.)

CERT 111
Bachelor of Education primary
Bachelor of Education (K-6 Teaching)
Bachelor of Education
Bachelor of Education
Bachelor of Physiotherapy
Bachelor of Music
Graduate certificate in diabetes education
Bachelor of Equine Science
Post graduate certificate primary mathematics
PHD
Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood Teaching)
Bachelor of Education

Masters degree in forensic mental health
Bachelor of Education primary
Bachelor of Creative Arts: Graphic Design
Graduate Certificate Diabetes Education
MBA
Bachelor of Arts (Digital Experience and Interaction Design) (Professional Writing and Publishing) AND Graduate Certificate in Digital Marketing
Bachelor of Rural Science
Grad Cert in International Baccalaureate Education, Grad Cert in Secondary STEM Education, Grad Cert in Education (Indigenous Education)
Bachelor of Psychological Sciences (Honours)
Bachelor of psychological science
Bachelor of Arts
Bachelor of Criminology
Honours Degree in research and Bachelor health science
Bachelor of Education (K-6 Teaching)
Bachelor of Engineering (Honours)
Bachelor of Midwifery
Bachelor of Business Marketing
Graduate diploma of psychological science Advanced
Bachelor of Arts (community development) and Grad Cert Health Promotion
Grad dip building surveying
Graduate Certificate Tertiary Education; Master of Education
Bachelor of Laws
Bachelor of Arts
Master of Teaching
Bachelor of Education
Bachelor 0f Psychological Science
Post graduate diploma Nursing (anaesthetics and recovery nursing)
Bachelor Nursing
Graduate Certificate Applied Business
Bachelor in Psychological science
Bachelor of Accounting

Q30 - What was the name of the education provider you were enrolled with? (e.g. UNSW, Uni of Sydney, Grafton TAFE, etc.)

CUC GRIFFITH NSW
University of New England
University of New England
Southern Cross University
Southern Cross University
CSU
UNE
Deakin University
Charles Sturt University
Western Sydney University
University of Sydney
ANU
University of New England
UNE
UNSW
University of New England
UOW
Deakin university
Deakin Uni
Curtin University (for both courses)
UNE
Notre Dame Australia Uni, Western Sydney Uni, Charles Sturt Uni
Australian College of Applied Professions
Swinburne online
Macquarie University
University of New England
Charles Sturt University
University of New England
UOW
University of South Australia

Torrens University
Monash
Murdoch and Flinders universities
Western Sydney university
UniSQ & SCU
University of New England (UNE)
UOW
UNE
Southern Cross University
Swinburne online
UTAS
UC
Charles Sturt University
Swinburne online
UNSW

A Learning Skills Advisor is a specialist staff member at the CUC that runs academic skills sessions and offers one-on-one support to students with how to approach assignments, etc. Was there a Learning Skills Advisor (LSA) available at the CUC?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes	92.31%	36
2	No	7.69%	3
	Total	100%	39

Did you seek advice and support from the LSA?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes	77.78%	28
2	No	22.22%	8
	Total	100%	36

Did you find the LSA helpful?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes - very helpful	78.57%	22
2	Yes - moderately helpful	14.29%	4
3	Neither helpful nor unhelpful	7.14%	2
4	No - not helpful	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	28

Did you complete your studies?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes	100.00%	49
2	No	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	49

NOTE: there were zero study non-completers in the survey so no data on this branch of the survey is included

Which CUC services did you use? Choose all that were applicable.

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Large meeting rooms	11.94%	16
2	Computer labs	20.15%	27
3	Small rooms	20.90%	28
4	Academic skills sessions by the Learning Support Advisor	11.19%	15
5	One-on-one advice from a Learning Support Advisor	16.42%	22
6	Social events or study groups facilitated by the CUC	11.94%	16
7	School holiday activity programs for my children	1.49%	2
8	Business networking events organised by the CUC	3.73%	5
9	Other - describe here: [free text entry]	2.24%	3
	Total	100%	134

Q45_9_TEXT - Other - describe here: [free text entry]

Student events
Far West CUC - Student Ambassadors program. Used invitations to events and forums to advocate for CUC.
Kitchen and lounge amenities

Were you satisfied with the level of support available to you at the CUC?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Very unsatisfied	25.71%	9
4	Unsatisfied	0.00%	0
5	Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied	0.00%	0
6	Satisfied	14.29%	5
7	Very satisfied	60.00%	21
	Total	100%	35

What could CUC have done differently, (if anything), to better support you in your studies? [free text response]

Sessions made available after work hours
Nothing, they were amazing
Can’t think
I just loved that, although limited, there were "out of hours" sessions!
I studied through COVID, the staff were so helpful that they even came in to the centre when it was closed to help me.
Sessions planned after work hours
Offering more opportunities to network with local employers and offering career guidance. More comfy computer chairs would have also been nice (especially for ~6 hour study sessions).
Better landscaped outdoor spaces for brain breaks and fresh air. A qualified JP to certify copies of paperwork/ certificates etc.
Regular progress checks scale 1-10 to gain insight and offer support to students, a specific checkin regularly would be good
Nothing! The level of support CUC staff gave me was phenomenal and I could not be more grateful!
First Nations tertiary education support program
Nothing they were amazing, I miss them
School holidays activities aligned with my study recesses (time off provided by the University to study for upcoming exams). The environment was too noisy and busy to utilise the centre during these times
Crèche in the building would have been the only thing that could have made it any easier for me. CUC we’re amazing
Extremely well supported to allow me to finish my studies. A safe space and place to get on with the serious stuff.

I was very happy with the support provided by the CUC
Yes, very happy
Feel so lucky to have had access to CUC. Massive help! Made me study better. Plus got help from learning skills advisor and improved grades from credit to high distinction. Plus got support from the CUC community, friendship and people to talk with about struggles with remote learning. CUC is the best resource, really grateful to them for their help and all the hard work they put in, especially Nadine. She is an asset to the centre.
It was amazing, I would not have been able to complete without the facilities and services
Yes, more one on one study support or peer support, study space good. A good social network and activities outside study would be good to initiate. Plus lots of foundational study skills classes could be added.
Yes, absolutely wonderful

Do you still live in the same area now as when you were accessing the CUC?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes - same area	88.89%	40
2	No - I moved to another part of regional NSW	2.22%	1
3	No - I moved to Sydney, Newcastle or Wollongong	2.22%	1
4	No - I moved interstate	6.67%	3
	Total	100%	45

Q40 - What influenced your decision to choose where to live?

FAMILY
Staying close to family and pursuing opportunities that present due to studying in my hometown
Lifestyle
Lifestyle
Close to family and love being able to help people who were there for me growing up/give back to the community
Have been living here for some time time.. It’s cheaper to live
Job opportunities
It is my home town, I have completed university and am remaining at home to complete further study and save some money to move into the industry in the area I want.
Family
Family
Similar to where I grew up.
Parental illness / closer to them
work
Family

I fell in love with the coastal lifestyle and there weren’t many job opportunities for my field in my hometown.
Combination of connection to local community and travel limitations.
Family Farming Property
Nice community with a good variety of easy to reach facilities.
Living in my hometown, have not wanted to move elsewhere
Cost of living, family
employment, new living circumstances (a house extension) and my permanent physical disability
Born here. Lived here all my life
Wife children work and community
Opportunities and connections were formed during my study
The job
Family, and place of work
Work
It’s my hometown and my base.
Lifestyle, cost of living
Work opportunities
Family
Cost of living.
Lifestyle
Cost and family
I am currently travelling vua caravan
Tree change/snow
Cost, close to family,
Family ties

What is your current main occupation? (if working more than one job, choose the one with the most hours)

#	Answer	%	Count
8	Teaching	28.89%	13
9	Nursing	8.89%	4
10	Allied Health (e.g. Occupational therapy, Podiatry, etc.)	4.44%	2
11	Psychology	2.22%	1

12	Local Council - please indicate what role (e.g. planner, etc):	6.67%	3
13	Social work	0.00%	0
14	Law	2.22%	1
15	Legal (clerk etc)	0.00%	0
16	NSW or Commonwealth Government agencies - please indicate what role (e.g. ranger, child protection officer, etc):	0.00%	0
17	Accountancy	2.22%	1
18	Unemployed/job seeking	2.22%	1
19	Retired/not in labour force	0.00%	0
20	Transport	0.00%	0
21	My own business - please indicate what type of business:	11.11%	5
22	Hospitality	0.00%	0
23	Media	0.00%	0
24	Art and Design	2.22%	1
25	Mining	2.22%	1
26	Childcare	2.22%	1
27	Other - specify here:	24.44%	11
	Total	100%	45

Q32_12_TEXT - Local Council - please indicate what role (e.g. planner, etc):

Local Council - please indicate what role (e.g. planner, etc): - Text
TEACHER'S AID
Psychologist and senior executive
Building Surveyor

Q32_21_TEXT - My own business - please indicate what type of business:

Consultancy
Event Management
Coaching business
Jack Atkinson Surveying

Land surveying

Q32_27_TEXT - Other - specify here:

SLSO at a primary school
I run two industry associations.
Transition period (recent resignation)
Agronomist
NSW Health - mental health clinician
business administration
Health service management
Midwifery
Healthcare non profit
Higher education sector
Business Executive

Did the degree/course you studied while at the CUC help you get this job?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes	86.67%	39
2	No	13.33%	6
	Total	100%	45

Was it easy or hard to get your current job?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Easy - there are a lot of job vacancies and a lack of qualified applicants for my occupation	31.82%	14
2	Neither easy or hard	63.64%	28
3	Hard - there is a lot of applicants and competition for positions for my occupation	4.55%	2
	Total	100%	44

Are you aware of labour shortages in your current location?

	Answer	%	Count

1	Yes - for the following occupations:	74.42%	32
2	Not sure	20.93%	9
3	No	4.65%	2
	Total	100%	43

Q35_1_TEXT - Yes - for the following occupations:

Teachers
Teaching
Teaching
Allied health
All healthcare
Teachers, service industry (bar, food, catering etc.)
Teachers and nurses and hsopitality staff
Practically everything! Teaching, hospitality, etc
Teaching
Nursing
Most trade industries
Agriculture
Teaching
psychiatry, psychology, management, mental health support workers, GP's, nurses, specialists
Education
Health disciplines, social services, mining and construction, trades
Teachers
Midwives and nurses
Hospitality
Health staff including psychologists
Various
Teaching
Teaching
Teachers, nurses, midwives, surveyors
Nursing

Nursing
All
Surveyors, midwives, professional services
Nursing, Teaching, Professional Service staff

Did your completion of higher education help you get into a better job than you would have been in otherwise?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes, definitely	67.39%	31
2	To some extent	21.74%	10
3	It didn't make much difference	6.52%	3
4	Not applicable - I'm not working at the moment	4.35%	2
	Total	100%	46

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

#	Field	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation	Variance	Count
1	I am an essential service worker	0.00	100.00	71.28	34.35	1179.95	40
2	I help others through my work	0.00	100.00	88.73	21.21	449.95	41
3	My work is valued by my community	0.00	100.00	75.49	29.97	898.49	41
4	There are labour shortages in my profession	0.00	100.00	81.44	27.26	742.96	39
5	I feel I am giving back to my community through my work	0.00	100.00	83.54	23.45	549.91	41
6	My work benefits the government or public sector	0.00	100.00	76.95	30.99	960.56	39
7	My work benefits the business or private sector	0.00	100.00	71.74	31.71	1005.56	38

How old are you?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	18-25	16.67%	7
2	26-34	30.95%	13
3	35-44	21.43%	9

4	45-64	30.95%	13
5	65+	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	42

Q31 - What language do you speak at home?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	English	100.00%	40
2	Other: specify	0.00%	0
4	Prefer not to say	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	40

Do you identify as a person with a disability?

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Yes	7.50%	3
2	No	92.50%	37
4	Prefer not to say	0.00%	0
	Total	100%	40