



**Country
Universities
Centre**
DEGREES CLOSER

Country Universities Centre
Submission to the Inquiry
into Student Pathways to
In-Demand Industries



Dear Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee,

The [Country Universities Centre \(CUC\)](#) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the *Inquiry into Student Pathways to In-Demand Industries*. Our submission outlines how the CUC as a place-based, community-led education model can strengthen pathways to in-demand industries and contribute directly to solving workforce needs across regional Victoria.

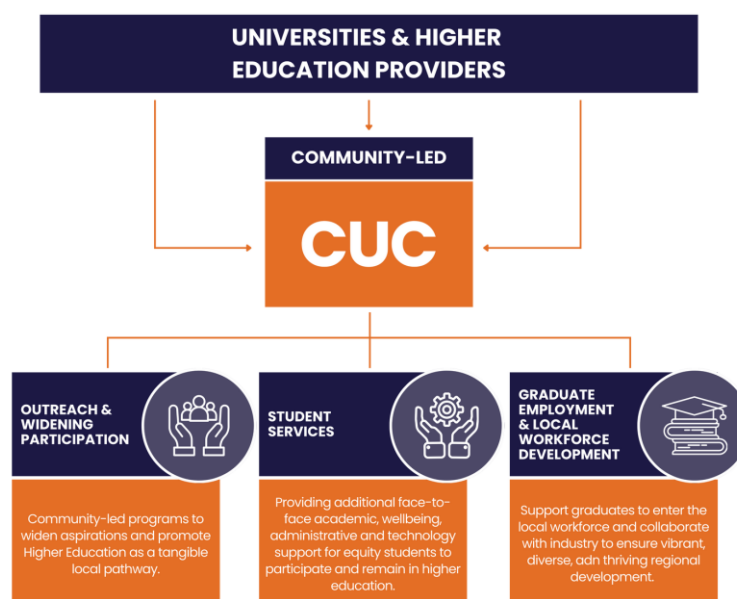
This submission addresses:

- How the CUC model provides a place-based regional pathway into local in-demand industries
- The equity impacts of the CUC for women, low-SES cohorts, mature-aged students, and non-school leavers
- Opportunities to harmonise higher education and vocational pathways through place-based collaboration between CUC and TAFEs
- The value of a coordinated place-based approach to widening participation and local workforce development
- Opportunities for growth through a scalable, state-wide solution aligned with Victorian and national priorities

1. A Place-Based Pathway into Local In-Demand Jobs

The CUC is a national network of 28 community-owned Centres operating across more than 40 regional locations, funded by the NSW, QLD, and the [Australian Government's Regional University Study Hubs \(RUSH\) program](#). In Victoria, there are four CUCs operating across six communities, enabling equitable access to tertiary education without requiring students to leave their community. Students can study any course, from any university or higher education provider, and access free face-to-face academic and wellbeing support from local staff. Facilities include quiet study spaces, breakout rooms, high-speed internet, and a strong local learning community.

Each Centre is governed by a local volunteer board and chooses to affiliate with the broader CUC network. This model encourages local ownership while benefiting from national coordination and shared practice.



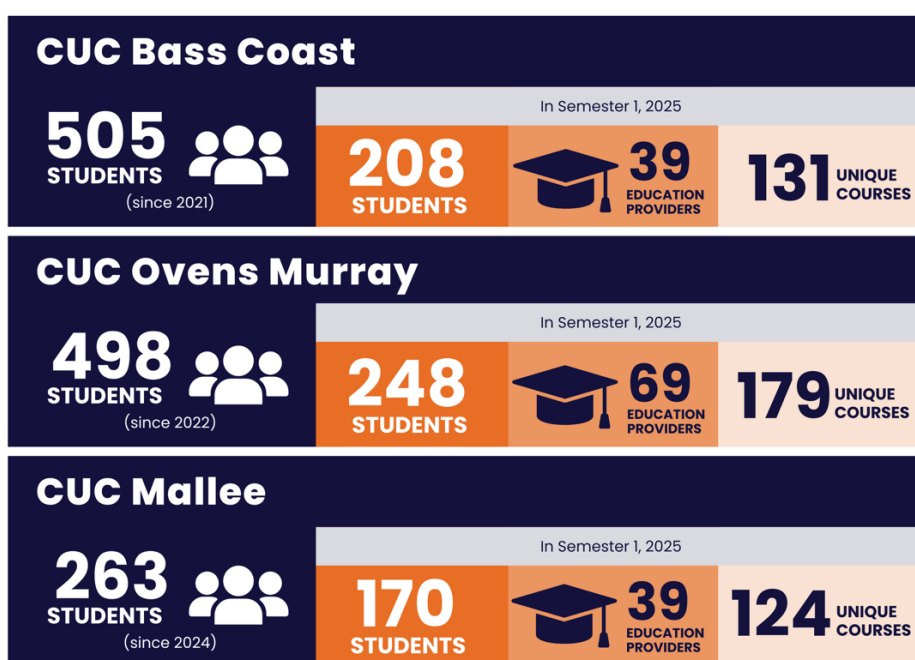


CUCs in Victoria deliver measurable outcomes for local workforces:

- Since 2021, 74% of graduating CUC students in regional Victoria have transitioned into the in-demand fields of health, education, and community services
- In 2025, 48% of commencing regional Victorian CUC students are already working for, or intend to work for, the Victorian Government

These figures reflect a direct link between tertiary education participation at the CUC and strengthened regional workforce pipelines. The CUC model presents a scalable, community-led solution for navigating tertiary education and building local careers in sectors facing critical shortages that can be utilised at a state-wide level. Because the CUC model is open to any student from any institution it not only presents opportunities for in-demand occupations, but a diverse range of careers that are needed in regional Victoria.

Since opening, the three Victorian CUCs have demonstrated strong and growing demand:



These figures highlight the breadth of student choice and the ability of the CUC model to respond to regional aspirations and workforce needs through locally delivered, institution-neutral support.

2. Supporting Equity and Participation Across Regional Victoria

CUCs are designed to support students who have traditionally been excluded from higher education through flexible localised approaches. The CUC model provides a welcoming and accessible environment for students to study in ways that suit their circumstances, often while juggling work, family, or caring responsibilities. To meet demands of all regional people and their pathways through education and to employment more flexible models of place-based support are required. This accessibility is demonstrated in the demographics of CUC students.

Across the CUC in 2024:

- 40% of CUC students are from Low Socioeconomic backgrounds compared to 17% nationally ([ACSES, 2019](#))



- 77% of CUC students identify as Female
- 52% are the first in their family to study at university
- 7% of CUC students identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander compared to 1.95% nationally ([ACSES, 2019](#))

Each Centre offers long opening hours and personalised academic and wellbeing support that is delivered face-to-face by local staff, which removes a barrier to access, helps students persist in their studies and complete their qualifications as they transition to the local workforce. Pathways to in-demand industries need to be flexible, accessible and reflect local community culture and needs.

Case Study

- *Alicia Follett, CUC Ovens Murray*

Alicia Follett was one of the first people to register with CUC Ovens Murray when it opened in early 2022. At the time, Alicia was studying an Honours of Psychology, online, through Deakin University. She was then accepted into the Masters of Professional Psychology at La Trobe University (online) where she continued to use CUC Ovens Murray to complete her studies, before undertaking her year long internship placement in Wangaratta.

“The CUC provided stability, certainty, and convenience to my studies. Time previously spent traveling between school drop off or work shifts and my out-of-town home was able to be spent studying. This meant that more of my time at home could be spent with family or on my other interests,” commented Alicia.

“Study is a solitary endeavour, but for me the presence of others undertaking their own similar journey was a comfort and frequent support. The CUC allowed me to meet others who were similarly focused on clearing the next hurdle requirement, dissecting rubrics, scouring sources and going cross-eyed over reference formatting. Having access to the CUC, meant that I didn’t have to worry about internet speed and stability, and access to an exam suitable location also alleviated stress. The CUC also provided me with a sense of community.”

Alicia is now nearing the end of a year-long internship during where she has provided psychological support as a provisional Psychologist in the region. This the final leg in her journey and will soon receive her full registration as a psychologist.

3. Aligning Vocational and Higher Education Through Co-Location and Community Collaboration

CUC Ovens Murray (Wangaratta) and CUC Southern Grampians (Hamilton) are co-located with GOTAFE and South West TAFE respectively. These partnerships reduce friction for regional people to transition between vocational and higher education, while broadening the range of available local course options, and strengthening the region’s workforce planning.

Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) identified the need for improved strategic alignment between VET and higher education in regional areas. Its [Opportunity and Productivity: Towards a Tertiary Harmonisation Roadmap](#) advocates for greater coordination between sectors and the [Regional Roadmap Phase 1](#) illuminates the need for better policy and practical collaboration to support regional workforce development. The CUC model operationalises this ambition on the ground. Through co-location, many Centres already support vocational students and act as a natural bridge into higher education and in-demand qualifications, while incorporating greater local governance and ownership of local training and learning opportunities. The CUC also works



closely with Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) where applicable to enable a coordinated local ecosystem for education, training and employment.

In late 2024, [CUC Ovens Murray opened their new co-located facility on the GOTAFE Campus](#) in Wangaratta. CUC Ovens Murray is currently supporting 248 students, studying 179 unique courses from 69 education providers. It is an example of place-based community collaboration that is a practical step to a more harmonised vocational and higher education system in regional Victoria.

TAFE to Higher Education Student Snapshot

- Kelly Hamilton, CUC Bass Coast

Kelly joined CUC Bass Coast in March 2025 while studying a TAFE Diploma of Sport and Recreation. The course's flexibility had seen her dip in and out over the years, but recently she committed to finishing and reached out for support. With our help in areas like academic writing, time management and referencing, her confidence grew.

She graduated last semester and is now enrolled in a Bachelor of Sport and Recreation, the first in her extended family to take this path. She told us she was close to dropping out and returning to full-time cleaning work, but the support at CUC kept her going.

Since then, Kelly has referred two other students from her TAFE and connected with another CUC student in the same course. They now meet regularly to study together. With our help, she also secured RPL credits for her Diploma, something she hadn't known was possible.

4.

Local Career Advice and nurturing aspirations: The value of a coordinated place-based approach to widening participation and local workforce development

Regional Victorians do not have adequate access to high-quality career advice, or programs that support their education and employment aspirations. This advice and support are key to aiding the pathways and transitions of people to in-demand local jobs and developing thriving regional communities.

The Regional Education Commissioner, The Hon. Fiona Nash, identified the need for careers advice and supporting young people's ambitions as a key theme for transformative change. She observed that:

...helping regional students and prospective students understand their options for future pathways by improving careers advice and building aspiration as early as primary school will help them to realise their potential, support their ambition, and create great futures for themselves. [\(p.6, 2023 Annual Report\)](#)

CUCs develop and curate community-led widening participation programs that nurture the aspirations of people in their community to transition through education and into local employment. These activities and advice have been developed in collaboration with local schools, universities, TAFE to address specific local needs and facilitate transitions through different education pathways that meet individual needs.



Example CUC Bass Coast

CUC Bass Coast recently lead the delivery of the Future Bound program to Year 9 students at Foster Secondary College, an initiative designed to help students explore the many pathways from school to local careers.

Co-designed with Swinburne University and Australian Catholic University and delivered in partnership with South Gippsland Bass Coast Local Learning and Employment Network (SGBCLLEN) the program gave students a hands-on experience of what tertiary study can look like in a regional context. It encouraged them to think broadly about their futures and see education as a meaningful step toward local opportunities. Careers Leader at Foster Secondary College, Wendy Vitols said “FutureBound is a great way for students to trial different workshops and learn more about the kinds of courses on offer at university and TAFE. I’ve found that the earlier we can get young people to think about their options the better. The program starts important conversations about their future” she said. Wendy continued “we have had some great feedback with parents making contact saying they had never had their child come home from school excited about a university option or the possibility of even going to university, and this program has sparked an interest for their child”.

More than 700 students across the region have now participated. The program connects young people to practical skills, new possibilities, along with CUC Bass Coast Student Ambassadors who act as local role models meeting them where they are and supporting where they want to go.

CUC Ovens Murray initiated and led the Mansfield careers expo

<https://www.cucovensmurray.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2025/02/Mansfield-Courier-Article-18092024.pdf>

The event was the first of its kind for the Mansfield community and brought together local businesses, local and state government services and higher education providers and provided the opportunity for students and parents to engage with a range of employers and providers of higher education.

CUC Ovens Murray delivered an Education Seminar in Wangaratta

<https://www.cucovensmurray.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2025/07/CUC-OM-Education-Seminar-Wangaratta-Flyer.pdf>

The event brought together local education providers from TAFE and University, as well as school principals and Early Childhood leaders. The event provided attendees with information about the pathways and opportunities available locally in education and have their questions answered directly from course providers and educational leaders.

CUCs are also well positioned to facilitate careers transitions and pathways in collaboration with other local entities. Centres across Victoria are already undertaking this work and there is an opportunity for the Victorian Government to leverage the community-focused work through a network of CUCs for state-wide impact.



The network of CUC Centres can be better utilised by the Victorian Government to support localised careers advice, opportunities and support the transitions of regional people through education and training, and into employment.

5. A scalable, state-wide solution aligned with Victorian and national priorities

In 2018, the NSW Government partnered with CUC Central to support the establishment of new Centres across regional NSW. Through two funding rounds, 11 communities launched Centres and subsequently secured ongoing Commonwealth funding via the Regional University Study Hub (RUSH) program.

An [independent evaluation commissioned by the NSW Government](#) in 2023 found that CUCs are strengthening the regional workforce by producing graduates in critical fields like Nursing, Education, and Social Work. Since 2019, 1466 students in NSW have graduated with the support of a CUC, with 89% staying in their local communities to work in essential sectors such as NSW Health and the Department of Education.

The report recommends continued government funding, noting that 55% of CUC graduates are employed by NSW Government agencies. The CUC model is proving successful in retaining talent within regional areas, creating a pipeline of local graduates who contribute to regional development.

The report concludes that the NSW Government's investment in CUCs not only enhances the local workforce but also boosts lifetime earnings, reduces debt, and supports regional populations by producing locally based professional graduates. The CUC Network is playing a crucial role in making regional NSW a vibrant and viable place to live, offering the same opportunities as metropolitan areas.

Victoria is well placed to build on this model. CUCs already operate in six communities across the state, and demand from other regional communities is growing. Victorian Government engagement with CUC Central would support coordinated growth across the state, consistent with the [Government's own submission to the Universities Accord Interim Report](#):

"The Victorian Government urges careful planning and coordination across federal, state and local government agencies to identify locations for new hubs that are currently under-serviced that could benefit from additional investment." (p.5)

The CUC is actively working with nine Victorian communities interested in launching Centres. In the Australian Government's Cohort 5 RUSH funding round several Victorian communities missed out on the opportunity to establish a Centre. The CUC welcomes the opportunity to work with the Victorian Government to support this expansion and engage further by appearing before the committee in person.

Kind Regards,

Chris Ronan
CEO
Country Universities Centre