

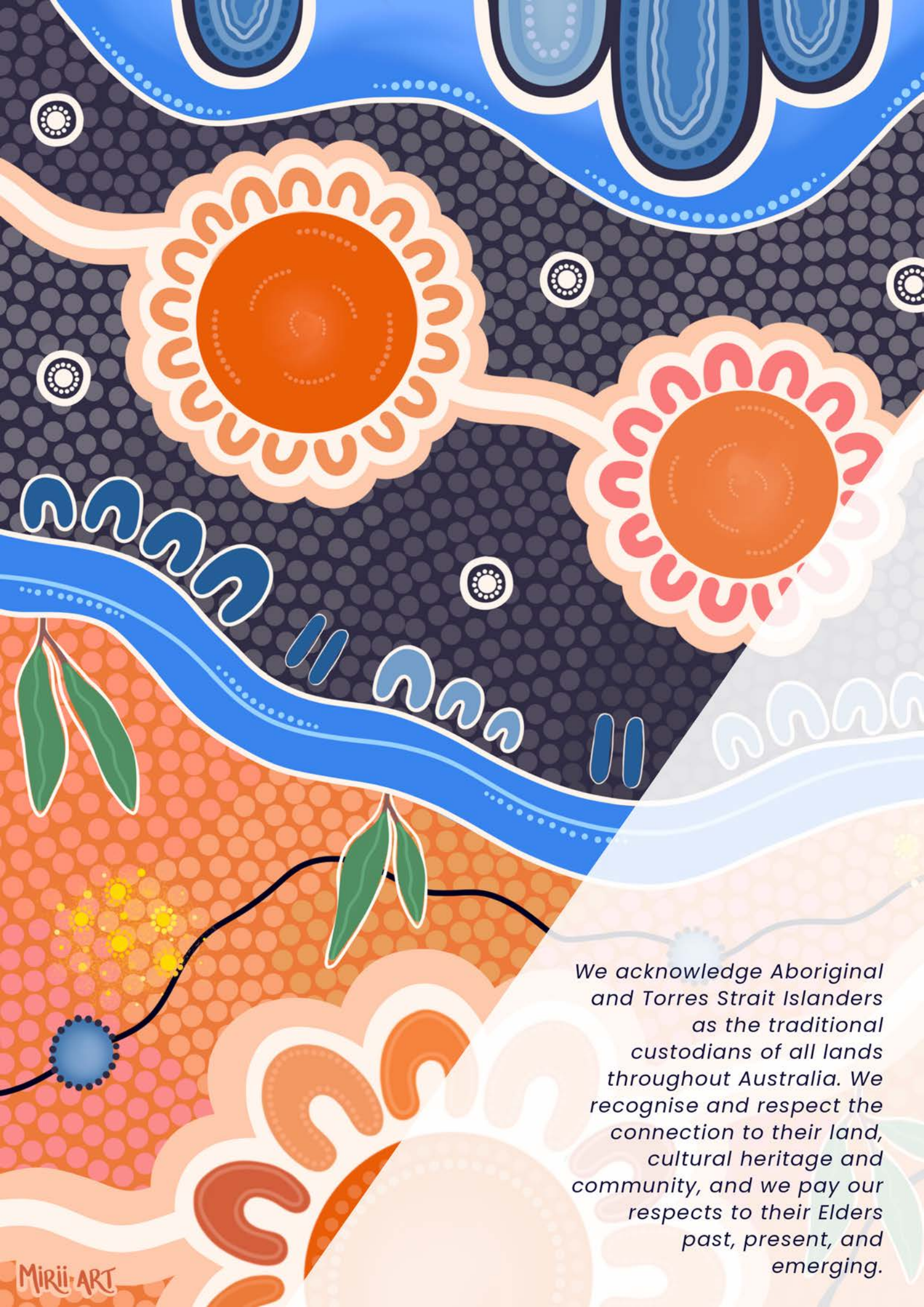


20 ANNUAL REPORT 25



Country
Universities
Centre

DEGREES CLOSER



We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as the traditional custodians of all lands throughout Australia. We recognise and respect the connection to their land, cultural heritage and community, and we pay our respects to their Elders past, present, and emerging.



"Each time we've opened a new study hub, just like this one in Warwick, we've removed educational barriers that can stop people from getting a tertiary qualification."

Assistant Minister for Regional Development and Senator for Queensland, Anthony Chisholm

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Message from The Chair



Dean Lynch

Chair

It is my privilege to present CUC Central's 2025 Annual Report, marking another year of growth and momentum for the Country Universities Centre (CUC).

In February, seven new Centres were announced, extending the CUCs reach into Tasmania and Norfolk Island for the first time. This expansion reaffirms the strength of the CUC model. We would like to thank the Commonwealth for its continued support and recognition of the positive impact each local CUC Centre has on its community, and the lasting benefits it delivers for students.

The success of Centres is built on the extraordinary contribution of our volunteer Boards, whose local strategic governance remains essential, and the dedication of Centre staff, who bring fresh ideas, deep experience, and vital support for students. I also thank our key partners, particularly the Commonwealth and NSW Governments, and our university partners for their ongoing commitment.

This year, CUC Central established operational priorities to guide our work to 2027. These priorities provide focus while ensuring we remain responsive to the network's evolving needs.

Looking ahead, interest in the CUC model from regional, rural, and remote communities remains strong, underscoring the value of local governance supported by a central framework. With a solid foundation, a growing network, and a shared commitment to educational equity, the CUC is well positioned to remain a leader in enabling higher education to flourish in regional Australia.

Chief Executive Report



Chris Ronan

Chief Executive Officer

Over the past year, CUC Central has focused on working with communities across Australia to create local tertiary education opportunities, widen participation, and reshape tertiary education to better serve regional Australia.

To guide this work through to 2027, we developed six operational priorities. Central to these is the CUC Framework, designed to support consistent, high-quality operations nationwide. The Department of Education has since committed to a national Quality Standards Framework for Regional University Study Hubs, drawing heavily on our structure and content – a strong endorsement of our approach.

We have focused on strengthening communication and collaboration across a network of over 100 staff and 170 directors and volunteers. Highlights include increased face-to-face connections, the launch of the Weekly Round Up, delivering more than 25 professional development sessions, and initial progress on a CUC intranet to support knowledge sharing.

Supporting Centres to lead widening participation remains a key focus. The Eastern Australia Regional University Centre Partnership (EARUCP) received a grant extension, and we continue to expand opportunities for all Centres. In November 2025, we will lead the first National RUSH Widening Participation Forum to further embed community-led outreach through CUC Centres.

The growing network also enhances CUC's influence on policy reform to sustain existing Centres and create opportunities for new communities. With strong partnerships and ongoing staff development, CUC Central is well placed to continue advancing equitable and accessible tertiary education across regional Australia.

"...without CUC my experience would be far more stressful. Our study space is lovely and comfy and friendly and stocked with all needs."



Our Story Degrees Closer

The Country Universities Centre began with the establishment of the Cooma Universities Centre in 2013, created to offer enhanced, supported higher education opportunities in the regional town of Cooma, home to around 7,000 people.

Fast forward to 2025 and there has been exponential growth.

The CUC is now a network of 28 affiliated Centres that operate in over 40 regional, rural and remote communities across the eastern states of Australia and Norfolk Island.

Collectively, CUC Centres support and connect with students in communities representing a combined population of more than 350,000 – the size of Canberra. A testament to the CUCs growing impact and reach.



CUC
Network

2025 Snapshot



48%
are the first in
their family
to study



8%
of students
identify as
Indigenous

4591 STUDENTS



350+
UNIVERSITIES
& NUHEPS

51%
study
full
time



49%
study
part
time

TOP AREAS OF STUDY

29%

Health

18%

Education

13%

Psychology,
social work &
Community
Services

1340⁺
different courses studied

77%
female



23%
male

CUC Central Board



DEAN LYNCH
Chair



PRAVEENA KARUNAHARAN
Non-Executive Director



KIM HOUGHTON
Non-Executive Director



DUNCAN TAYLOR
Non-Executive Director



ALIX GREENHILL
Non-Executive Director



PAUL BROAD
Non-Executive Director

CUC Central Team



CHRIS RONAN
Chief Executive Officer

📍 Bendigo, VIC

Key Roles:

- Government relations
- University relationships and CSP
- Funding, policy advocacy
- Senior stakeholder engagement
- Emerging communities and centre support & establishment
- Central finance



ISABELLE GILLESPIE
Chief Operating Officer

📍 Warren, NSW

Key Roles:

- Central staffing and operations
- Central finances and insurance
- Governance and boards
- Emerging centre support and establishment
- State Government reporting



DAN KEENAN
Director Student Services


📍 Buderim, QLD

Key Roles:

- CUC Student Services model
- Centre success and best practice (student services, LSA, resources, connections, partnerships, systems)
- Key lead—higher education providers and services
- RUSH network
- Higher education research



ERIN CALLAGHAN
Director Widening Participation


 *Yeppoon, QLD*

Key Roles:

- Program management and delivery of EARUCP
- Embedding widening participation in CUC Practice
- University relationships
- Key lead – widening participation stakeholders and partnerships



SARAH ROLTON
Director, Network Engagement


 *Broken Hill, NSW*

Key Roles:

- Network communication and collaboration opportunities
- Orientation of Centre Managers
- Management of professional development opportunities
- Recruitment support
- Key lead – Centre contact



ERIN MISKELLY
Director, Quality and Compliance


 *Albury, NSW*

Key Roles:

- Policy, compliance and risk management
- Legislative matters
- Privacy matters
- Federal Government Reporting
- Employment matters
- Key lead – Quality standards, CUC Framework



MELISSA WATKIN
Finance Officer


 *Queanbeyan, NSW*

Key Roles:

- Lead and manage Central financial activities
- Prepare reports and audit materials
- Improve controls and financial processes
- Centre support for financials



ANNIE SZE
Systems Coordinator


 *Sydney, NSW*

Key Roles:

- Network and systems management (including Salesforce and websites) maintenance, administration, updates, user access and permissions
- Application and technology support
- Data requests



MADDIE CUMMINS
Design Coordinator


 *Shellharbour, NSW*

Key Roles:

- Maintain the CUC brand
- Design for CUC Central and Network – templates, brand assets and guidelines
- Social media and website




DUNCAN TAYLOR
Founder

 *Cooma, NSW*

Key Roles:

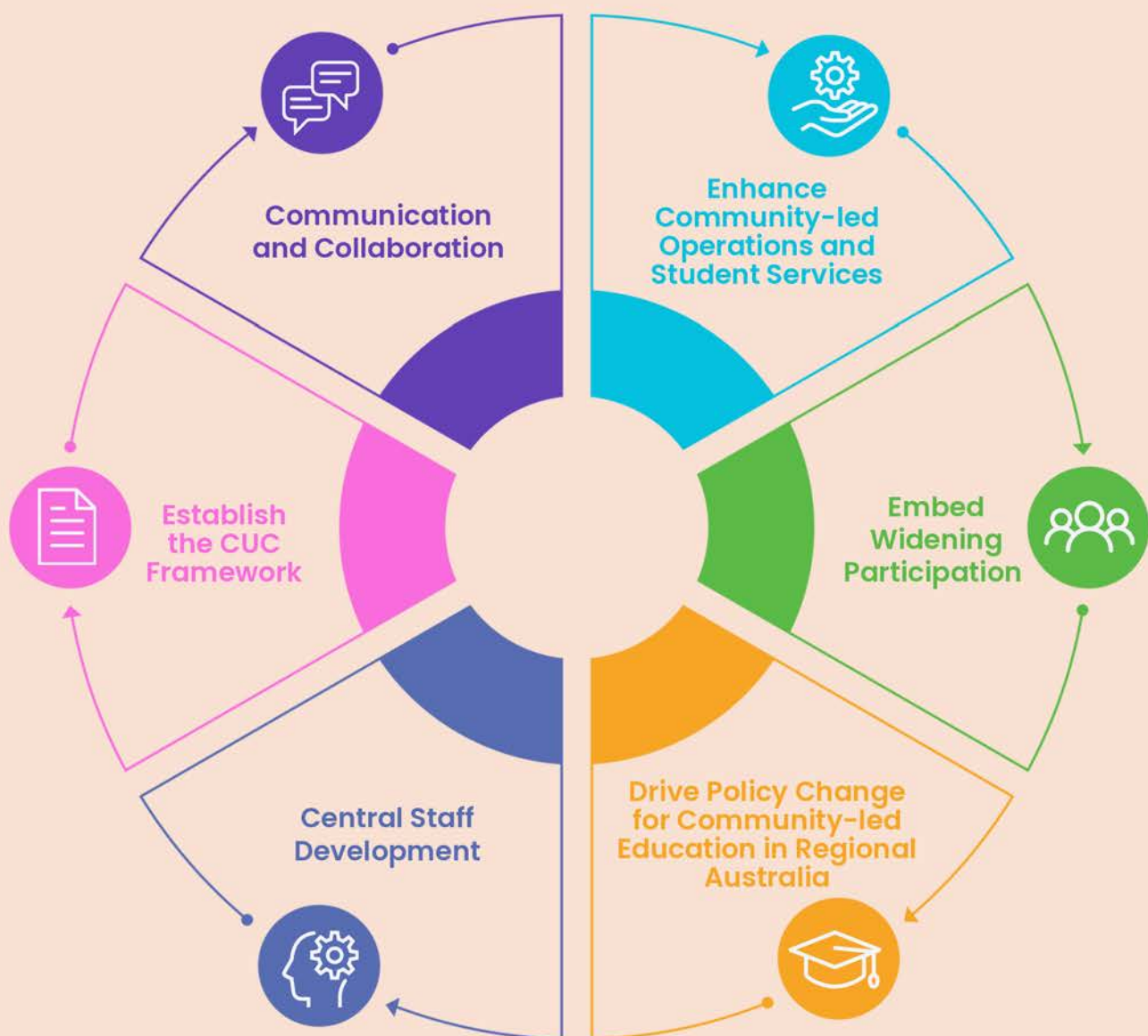
- Emerging communities and centre support and establishment
- Key partnerships
- Centre governance



"The evidence is that where University Study Hubs are, university participation goes up. That's why we are doubling the number of Hubs across the country."

**Minister for Education
Jason Clare**

CUC Central Priorities 2025–2027



CUC Central Priorities

Establish the CUC Framework

This year, CUC Central began developing a CUC Framework to support consistent, high-quality operations across the national network of CUC-affiliated Centres. The Framework clarifies practice standards and will equip Centres with guidance and resources aligned to best practice.

Work on the Framework included releasing an initial draft of the Framework, which outlined domains of practice, and where supporting materials could be developed. The draft drew on extensive internal experience and Centre feedback.

The Commonwealth Department of Education reviewed the draft and expressed strong interest in the approach. They have since committed to developing a national Quality Standards Framework for Regional University Study Hubs, using much of the CUC's structure, content, and design.

We have worked closely with the Department to ensure the CUC Framework will align with and supports their national standards. In parallel, internal work has continued, including resource mapping and tool development.

Once the Department releases its national Quality Standards Framework, we will move to the next phase. This will involve updating the CUC Framework and sharing for Centre feedback, conducting targeted consultations with staff and boards, and finalising practical implementation tools such as templates, checklists, and a self-assessment guide.

We plan to launch a professional development series to build capacity, alongside a structured rollout process to ensure Centres are confident, capable, and able to align best practice and national expectations to what suits their community and operational context.





CUC Central Priorities

Communication and Collaboration

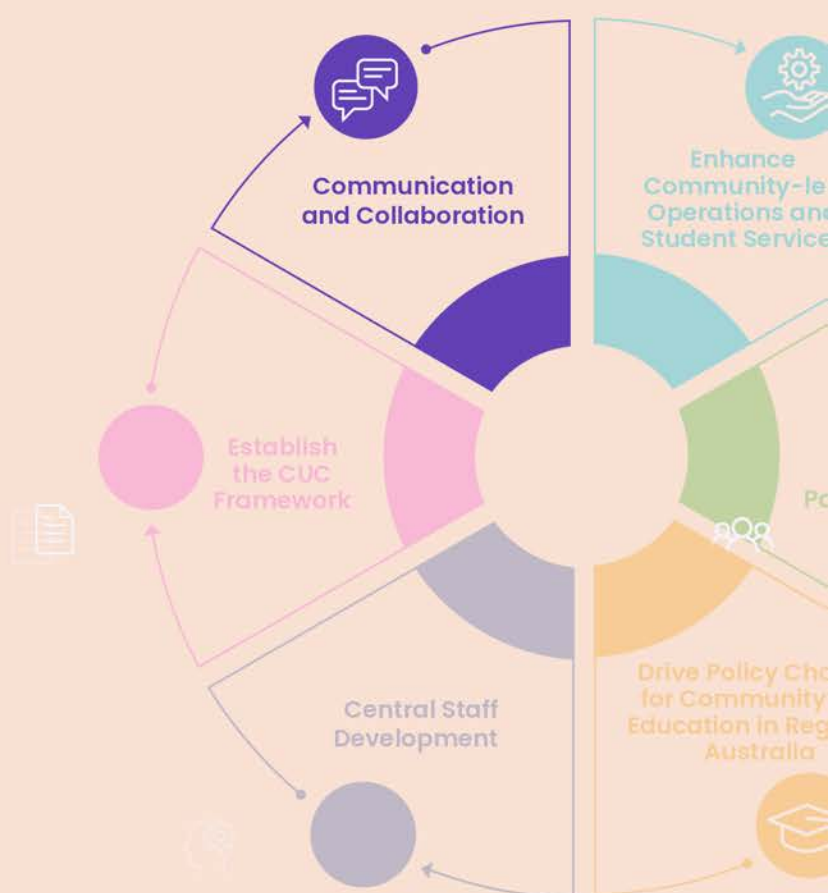
CUC Central continues to prioritise collaboration and knowledge sharing. This year, we committed to delivering regular, open, and streamlined communication to support effective collaboration across our growing network of more than 100 staff and over 170 directors and volunteers.

We have increased opportunities for face-to-face connection. Highlights included the Cohort 4 Centre Managers meeting in Cooktown at CUC Cape York in April, and a multi-state gathering in Swan Hill at CUC Mallee in May with ten staff. We remain committed to expanding these opportunities throughout the 25/26 financial year.

Over the year, more than 25 professional development sessions were delivered, drawing on expertise from both Centres and Central, as well as external specialists, to strengthen capability and embed shared knowledge.

We also introduced the Weekly Round Up - an email sent each Friday - to celebrate achievements, share updates and keep Boards and Centre staff informed of developments, resources and opportunities.

Foundational work has commenced on a CUC intranet, which will provide a centralised platform for the entire network and streamline access to resources, templates and professional development materials.





CUC Central Priorities

Enhance Community-led Operations and Student Services

Student services have continued to grow across the network through collaboration, engagement, and targeted professional development sessions.

The expanded Communities of Practice (CoPs) series created structured opportunities for Centre staff to share their operational insights, highlight effective practice, and strengthen the delivery of student-centred services.

Professional development session focused on practical strategies and capacity-building including academic integrity and engaging students across the lifecycle.

As the number of new staff members increased, we continued to deliver foundational training and onboarding.

Partnerships with education providers, government agencies, and sector stakeholders strengthened the CUC

model's profile and the practical support Centres are able to provide day to day for regional, rural and remote students.

A key initiative was a pilot program with Open Universities Australia (OUA). This collaboration included targeted communication to capture a wider range of students and connect them to the services available at their CUC.

Student Experience Survey – 2025

Key findings from across all CUC Centres

98%

of students felt safe and welcomed at their CUC



95%

said the CUC helps improve their academic success



91%

said staff supported them to settle into study



98%

said the presence of a CUC makes it easier for me to stay, study or work in my community



96%

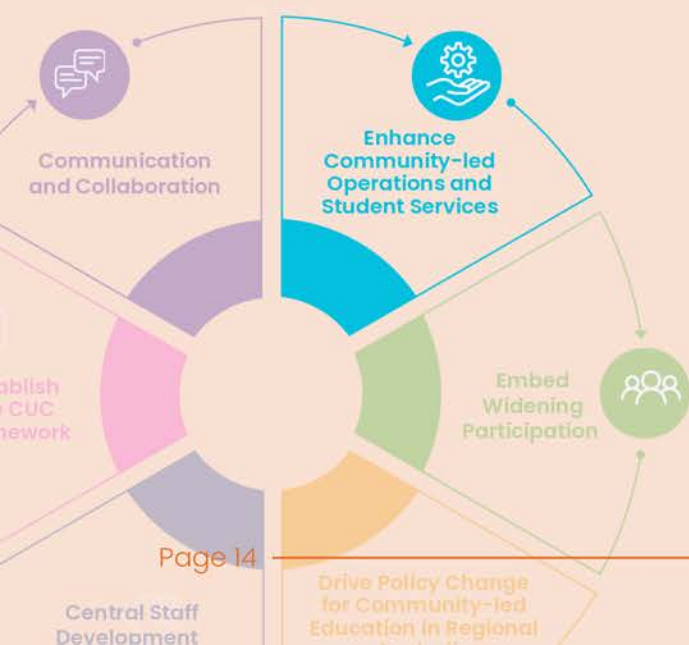
said they felt a sense of belonging to the CUC



“

It has provided me with the inspiration needed and that tertiary studies are achievable. Its a wonderful provision for the rural areas encouraging skilled personnel to remain local.

”





CUC Central Priorities

Embed Widening Participation

The strong growth in community-based outreach and widening participation activities led by Centres across the network has been mirrored by policy-level progress.

The Eastern Australia Regional University Centre Partnership (EARUCP), a place-based, community-led widening participation pilot, funded under the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP), has been an incredible success for Centres and secured a six-month extension to December 2025. This extension reflects the strong delivery of the programs locally and continued advocacy from Centres and the project team.

Through the EARUCP, sustainable partnerships have formed between 14 RUSHs — including CUC and non-CUC Centres — and 22 universities. Early program data shows that activities are developed in partnership with the local community, build trust levels and lasting relationships, with 93% of respondents respecting their partner/s and 82% planning to continue the relationship.

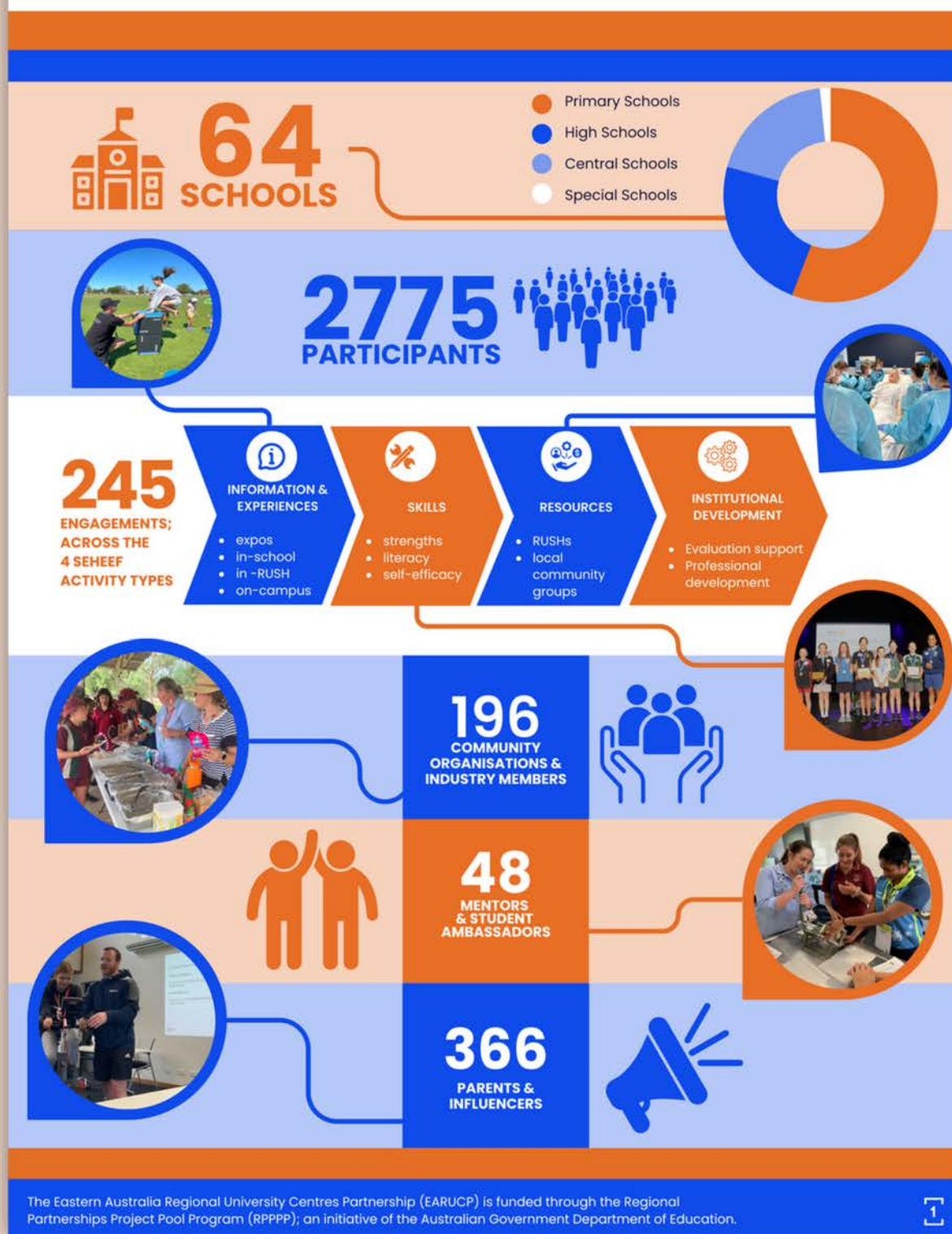
CUC Central is striving to promote a policy environment where all RUSHs across Australia can develop community-led widening participation activities under an expanded EARUCP program.

As part of this ambition, CUC Central will host the first National RUSH Widening Participation Forum in November 2025; bringing together all RUSHs from across Australia and Norfolk Island, university partners and government representatives.

Beyond EARUCP, CUC Central continues to support Centres expanding outreach and widening participation activities, working with local community groups, industries, schools, and TAFE.



SNAPSHOT OF PROGRESS REPORT 4



The above Snapshot shows the impact and reach of EARUCP programs at time of Progress Reporting in March 2025

CUC Central Priorities

Drive Policy Change for Community-led Education in Regional Australia

CUC Central has drawn on the collective impact of the growing network to influence national policy, embed community-led tertiary education, and support the long-term sustainability of Centres.

This year, the higher education policy landscape has been reshaped by the Australian Universities Accord which emphasises a stronger focus on participation from underrepresented cohorts and the sector's need for greater long-term planning and sustainability.

Since the release of the Accord, community-led education has been central to the Commonwealth's reforms and its ambitious target for 80% of Australians to access tertiary training by 2050.

As the Accord is implemented, CUC Central has contributed to national bodies and panels addressing the establishment of the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC), needs-based funding reforms, equity and outreach funding models, and structural reforms to widening participation.

As Centres succeed and the network expands, so does our capacity to help shape a tertiary education system that

sustains existing Centres and creates opportunities for new communities.

This work makes tertiary education more accessible and sustainable across regional, rural and remote Australia, bringing our vision of all individuals having access to the support and facilities to engage in higher education from their community closer to reality.





CUC Central Priorities

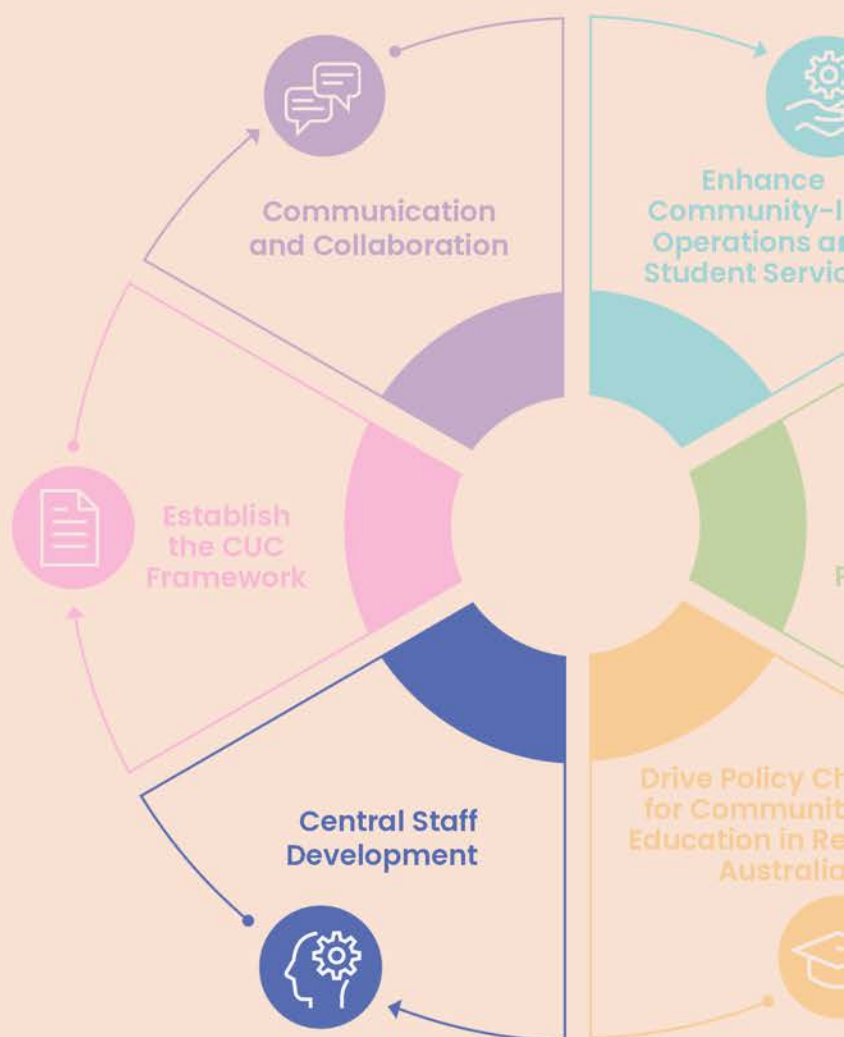
Central Staff Development

As the CUC continues to evolve, so does the role of CUC Central. Investing in staff is essential to ensure there is as much expertise and capacity to support Centres, advocate for the network, and respond confidently to a changing policy landscape.

This year, training aligned with the CUC's strategic pillars and Central's operational goals. Recruitment also played a key role in building internal expertise with a new Finance Officer, bringing a dedicated focus to financial management.

In line with the recommendations from the UNSW Evaluation, we progressed work on our Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP), submitting CUC Central's Reflect RAP to Reconciliation Australia. This foundational stage focuses on building awareness and understanding of First Nations cultures and perspectives.

Our focus on staff development is reciprocal. We value the depth of expertise within Centres and are committed to creating opportunities for Centre-led knowledge sharing to strengthen the network and support long-term success for all within the CUC.



"I access the CUC as a workplace upskiller. I am completing workplace training to maintain and upgrade my role. CUC offers a space that I can achieve this with ease, and supported my understanding. My training provider is basically non-existent and I am left to work through modules on my own. The fact that my community is able to support my ongoing workplace learning and upskilling is nothing short of amazing!"

- CUC Student



The success of the CUC is built on the support of our partners at all levels from the Commonwealth and NSW Governments to our university, local government, and community partners. We are deeply grateful for the financial and in-kind contributions that sustain and strengthen the network.

The Australian Government

Since 2018, the Commonwealth has invested more than \$150 million into the Regional University Study Hub program, providing core operational funding for all CUC Centres. This support is reflected in the Priority Actions of the Australian Universities Accord.

NSW Government

The NSW Government has invested in Centres at various stages of their development. Through the NSW Higher Education Strategy 2025–29, the Government continues to support the CUC model by strengthening partnerships between universities, TAFE NSW, and schools, addressing priority skills needs, and expanding education and career options.

Foundation for Regional Rural and Renewal (FRRR)

The FRRR is supporting the CUC through its not-for-profit fundraising account.

Partnerships: Government & Community

We have formal partnerships with the following universities:

University of Technology Sydney (UTS)

A strong relationship built on shared widening participation and equity goals, with collaboration central to the EARUCP program.

University of New England (UNE)

Ongoing collaboration to support regional, rural, and remote students in their higher education journeys, building on UNE's long history as a leader in distance and online education.

Federation University

A committed partner working alongside Centres to deliver outstanding services for students in their communities.

La Trobe University

Collaborating under a five-year Regional Growth and Innovation Strategy to increase the number of regional students studying on campus, in hybrid mode, and online.

Open Universities Australia (OUA)

Sharing a commitment to supporting online students in regional, rural, and remote areas, formalised through an MOU. OUA has invested in staff training and development to help students identify the best pathways for their future learning

Partnerships: Universities

August 24:

CUC Central lead the Regional University Study Hub (RUSH) Symposium and the National Conference for Regional Rural and Remote Education in Coffs Harbour. Dedicated staff and board members from across the CUC, broader RUSH Network, universities, VET and school sectors came together to explore the conference theme: "Growth Through Equity".

October 24:

CUC Mount Isa officially opens to supporting students in Queensland's iconic outback region with a plethora of local key leaders and stakeholders.

November 24:

CUC Goulburn re-opens in a new central location with the Minister for Regional Development, Territories and Local Government, The Hon Kristy McBain.

December 24:

CUC Ovens Murray opens its redesigned and refurbished facility in Wangaratta.

CUC RAPAD CWQ opens its first site in Longreach with Treasurer, The Hon Jim Chalmers and Assistant Minister for Education and Regional Development, Senator Anthony Chisholm.

February 25:

7 of the ten new Regional University Study Hubs announced as part of Cohort 5 are CUCs – CUC Eastern Tasmania, CUC Isaac, CUC Norfolk Island, CUC Hughenden, CUC Hay, CUC Snowy Valleys, CUC Southern Grampians.



March 25:

Confirmation on extension to the EARUCP project to continue for the rest of the calendar year.

April 25:

Cohort 4 Centre Managers visit CUC Cape York and Cassowary Coast University Centre for onboarding.


May 25:

CUC staff come together to share experiences of student and community engagement at CUC Mallee.

June 25:

CUC Central staff got together for the first time as a team in more than eight months to connect and plan for 2025 and beyond.

Yearly Highlights



"CUC is an invaluable resource in a local town enabling study. Internet can be a huge barrier here... Parents and low SES especially often lack a quiet dedicated study space to allow any decent engagement with topic. Exams would be truly difficult to do without CUC. They provide additional sense of community during online study which can help mitigate stress and attrition. Having personal access to support staff for navigating uni can be a huge help for many. Costs of things like printing make a HUGE difference to students... "

- CUC Student



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