Improving the Online Regional Student Experience: 
Findings from the Country Universities Centre (CUC) Student Evaluation

A recent survey of students who were accessing a Country Universities Centre (CUC) within their local community shows these centres to be highly effective in supporting regional students. The survey respondents overwhelmingly reported improvements not only in their academic progress and results, but also in their motivation, confidence, and likelihood of completing their qualification.

Background

There has been considerable national attention paid over the past decade to improving access and participation in higher education for regional, rural and remote (RRR) students (Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, 2019). The financial and emotional challenges of relocating to major cities for university studies have been identified as major barriers for regional high school students (Patfield et al., 2021), while for most mature-age students, leaving their regional area is not an option due to family responsibilities, work commitments and other ties to their community (Crawford, 2021). Studying online offers a viable alternative, with higher proportions of mature-aged students in regional areas currently enrolled as online students, even though this mode of study is also not without its challenges and has been associated with lower retention and completion rates (Stone, 2019).

The Student Evaluation

This presentation focuses on the findings of a 2021 evaluation conducted by the Country Universities Centre network (CUC, 2022), which forms part of the larger Regional University Centres (RUC) program. Funded since 2018 by the federal government, there are currently 26 RUCs located around Australia providing physical spaces, technology and study support for university students in regional communities (Department of Education, Skills & Employment [DESE], 2022). A total of 375 students who were attending one of the 13 centres within the CUC network participated in a survey about their experiences of using the centre. The response rate was 33%, with 86% of respondents studying fully online.

The survey findings reveal the importance of the CUC in a number of crucial areas. Firstly, it provides them with a quiet, dedicated study space away from the distractions of home and family responsibilities, where there is reliable internet and other necessary technology. Secondly, the majority indicated that they felt part of a learning community at the CUC, through contact with supportive staff and being able to work alongside other students. Perhaps most significantly, the majority of students were experiencing not only an increase in their confidence in and motivation for their studies, but also a real improvement in their academic results with over 90% of students reporting they were more likely to continue with their studies.

Implications

In the context of the historically and persistently higher attrition rates for both regional and online students, the improvements revealed in students’ confidence, motivation, academic results and intentions to persist with study are exciting and noteworthy. The findings indicate that the presence of the CUC and the broader RUC program, has the potential to make a positive
impact on the participation, retention and academic success of students in regional Australia. The Centres appear to be successfully complementing the education content and the professional and administrative services that universities deliver, helping to mitigate some of the key challenges facing students who are geographically distant from a university campus.

Currently, students benefiting are predominantly online mature-age regional students; however, there is potential to encourage a wider cohort of regional students, including younger school-leavers, to consider online study with the support of an RUC, as a viable option (King et al., 2022). Certainly, the impact of COVID-19 has stimulated both the growth and acceptability of online learning. The presence of a local RUC to complement the online learning experience opens the door to new ways of going to university within a student’s local regional community, providing further opportunities to widen HE participation. Providing educational opportunities and supports for people who live and work in the local area have potential ripple effects, influencing family and community attitudes toward education and building a culture in which people do not have to leave their community to gain an education.

**Points for Discussion**

Participants will be encouraged to discuss ways that universities can work more closely with the CUC and the broader RUC program to build on the complementarity between the two, improving the university experience for students living and studying in regional Australia.

**References**


