The Country Universities Centre Equity and Inclusion Framework

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Abstract

The Regional University Study Hubs (RUSH) program, an Australian Government initiative, aims to enhance tertiary education access for underserved groups in regional, rural, and remote areas. The Country Universities Centre (CUC), funded under RUSH, operates in twenty-three communities across Eastern Australia. The CUC has developed an equity and inclusion framework that enables community-led, place-based engagement, allowing each CUC to design programs that meet local needs. This framework not only improves educational outcomes but also contributes to broader social change by empowering communities. Its adaptability promotes sustainable practices, creating lasting social impact across diverse socio-cultural and demographic communities.

Proposal

Rationale

The Regional University Study Hubs (RUSH) program, an Australian Government initiative, aims to broaden access to tertiary education for traditionally underserved groups from regional, rural, and remote (RRR) areas (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023). The program addresses the compounded and cumulative equity barriers these communities face (MacFarlane, 2019), with the goal of improving educational outcomes.

The Country Universities Centre (CUC), a network of Centres funded under the RUSH program, operates within twenty-three diverse communities across Eastern Australia. Each CUC is a unique, community-led organisation that devolves resources and decision-making to individual communities, thereby facilitating the integration of services for people in those communities (Geatches et al., 2023). The CUC's widening participation objective operates through a social justice lens, recognising that communities are best placed to lead initiatives.

Approach

The CUC developed a comprehensive equity and inclusion framework to navigate the complexities of operating across diverse populations. This framework enables place-based, community-led engagement, empowering each CUC to design programs that address student needs at various intervention points throughout the student life cycle.

The framework's adaptability allows for its application across a wide range of socio-cultural and demographic communities. It promotes sustainable practices that go beyond mere programmatic outcomes, fostering lasting social impact. This suggests that the framework not

only addresses immediate educational needs but also contributes to broader social change by empowering communities to devise their own solutions for enhancing higher education outcomes.

This presentation will explore the structure of the framework, encompassing three core tenets - outcomes, principles, and enablers. Through case study examples, we highlight how the framework incorporates transition activities within a learner life cycle model and assists the implementation of longitudinal transition activities that are mainstreamed and inclusive.

The principles of the framework intertwine theories of self-determination, student engagement, and transition pedagogy. The enablers, which activate resource allocation and serve as a mechanism for continuous quality improvement, are intrinsically linked to the CUC's place-based and community-led ethos. The adaptability of the framework fosters sustainable practices and increases the likelihood of intervention activities being meaningful and beneficial to all students (MacFarlane, 2019).

The expected impact of this framework is multifaceted. It facilitates the creation of best practice student services, customised to the specific needs of each community. This, in turn, enhances the educational outcomes for students across the CUC network. Furthermore, we suggest that this framework serves as a blueprint for other Regional University Study Hubs. This is due to its synergy with the program's place-based and community-led approach, which underscores the idea that communities are in the best position to initiate initiatives that increase access and participation in higher education.

Question for the audience:

1. Is a framework-based approach the most effective strategy for ensuring translatability and relevance in diverse contexts within the RUSH program? If not, what alternatives could better serve these objectives?

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