

Improving the Online Regional Student Experience: Findings from the Country Universities Centre (CUC) Student Evaluation. *A Practice Report*

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Abstract

For Australian university students living out of reach of a campus and studying online, the growing presence of Regional University Centres (RUCs) is changing their student experience for the better. People from regional areas of Australia are historically under-represented at university. Those who begin university are at higher risk of not completing their qualifications than students from metropolitan areas. COVID-19 restrictions in the past two years have added to the continued growth in regional students studying their degrees online. A recent survey of students attending a Country Universities Centre (CUC) within their local community shows these centres to be highly effective in supporting regional students. The participants overwhelmingly reported improvements not only in their academic progress and results, but also in their motivation, confidence, and likelihood of completing their qualification.

Keywords: Regional students; online learning; mature-aged students; Regional University Centres.

Introduction

There has been considerable national attention paid over the past decade to improving access and participation in higher education (HE) for people in regional, rural and remote¹ Australia (Halsey, 2018; Regional Education Expert Advisory Group, 2019). Financial and emotional challenges of relocating to major cities for university studies have been identified as barriers (Patfield et al., 2021), with online study increasingly becoming a viable alternative to moving away from home. Traditionally, many regional mature-age students have been choosing to study online, combining university with their family, work and other such non-negotiable responsibilities (Crawford, 2021; Crawford & Emery, 2021; Pollard, 2017). There are, however, well-known challenges associated with online study, including isolation, finding time and space to study effectively, difficulties in course design and communication, and poor access to required technology (Attree, 2021; Ragusa & Crampton, 2018; Stone & Davis, 2020).

The Australian Government began funding the Regional University Centres (RUC) program in 2018 to support regional students in HE by providing physical places and support for students to study in their local regional communities. There are

¹ Within this article, we use the term “regional” more broadly to include all regional, rural and remote students.



currently 26 RUCs located around Australia, with centres in all states and the Northern Territory (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2022). The focus of this article is the Country Universities Centre (CUC) network (Country Universities Centre, 2022) which forms part of the larger RUC program. We report on the findings of a survey of 375 CUC students on their experiences of using their local CUC to support their university studies.

The Research Site: Country Universities Centre (CUC)

What is now called the CUC network (Country Universities Centre, 2022) began in 2013 as a single centre in Cooma, New South Wales (NSW), funded by local government and industry in response to community need (Davis & Taylor, 2019). In more recent years, federal funding as part of the national RUC program, as well as state (NSW) funding, has facilitated its expansion to 13 centres across 18 regional communities under the CUC name and model. Each CUC is aligned with the needs of its community through a local Board of Management, affiliated with the wider CUC network that provides shared practices, knowledges and relationships with universities and other stakeholders. The CUC model is now an expanding network across NSW, Queensland and Victoria.

The key aim of each CUC is to provide a dedicated study space for all HE students within its local community. It aims to enable those in regional areas “to pursue their dreams without the need to relocate” (Country Universities Centre, 2022) and to “connect with likeminded people in similar situations” (Davis & Taylor, 2019, p. 88). Each centre offers access to high-speed internet and technology, face-to-face academic support, interaction with other students, and support from Centre Managers, who are responsible for student wellbeing in general, including assisting students with navigating university systems, applying for scholarships and government allowances, and referring students to support services both at their university and within their local community. Some centres also provide academic skills workshops and one-to-one sessions with an appropriately qualified and experienced Learning Skills Advisor (LSA).

While included within the Australian government HE equity category of “regional and remote”, many CUC students also belong to other designated equity groups² and other “equity-like” groups, such as first-in-family. Table 1 compares CUC equity data with national statistics.

Table 1

Comparison of CUC and National HE Student Data

Student Category	CUC students (%) CUC internal data, 2021	Domestic HE students (%) 2019 national data ³
Regional and remote	98	18.9
Low socioeconomic status (SES)	67	17.6
Indigenous	7.1	2.0
With disability	4.4	7.7
Aged 25 and over	60	36.9
Female	78	55.6
Part-time study load	48	28.3
Fully online study mode	84	15.8
First-in-family	49	51 *

*Note that the national data on first-in-family students is incomplete

The very high proportions of regional (98%) and online (84%) students within the CUC cohort are not surprising given these are the key CUC target groups. However, this table also reveals that disproportionately high numbers of low SES and Indigenous (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) students are attending a CUC; also, those aged 25+, female and/or part-time. This is consistent with other online student demographic data (Stone, 2019) indicating that the CUC is succeeding in attracting its intended demographic.

² The Australian government designated HE equity groups include students: from regional and remote locations; from low socioeconomic status locations; who have a disability; who identify as Indigenous; who are women in non-traditional areas of study; and/or who come from non-English speaking backgrounds (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021).

³ Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021

Aims and Methods

The aim of the project was to evaluate the experience of students, including impact on learning and study persistence, who attended a CUC in Semester 1 2021. The key questions were:

- i) *What is the experience of students who are registered with and use the CUC?*
- ii) *What impact has attendance at and usage of a CUC had on their studies, including their intentions to persist and complete their course of study?*
- iii) *What improvements could be made?*

Data was collected via an anonymous online survey, consisting of questions with Likert-scale responses and several open-ended questions. Curtin University granted ethics approval for this project on 20 July 2021. The target population was the cohort of Australian domestic HE students attending one of the 13 centres within the CUC network during Semester 1. Students were invited to participate via email messages from Centre Managers, through posters in centres and social media posts on each centre's Facebook site. The invitations included a link to the online survey, and the first page sought consent with detailed information including a statement that participation was anonymous, voluntary, and non-participation would have no adverse impact on the student, their CUC attendance or access to CUC services.

The first two questions asked which centre students attended and whether they were enrolled online, on-campus, or in a mixed mode of study. This paper does not report on the first question as this would compromise student and staff anonymity. The other questions centred around four different aspects of the CUC experience: centre facilities; support provided (including academic skills support); impact on students' academic success; and their sense of belonging to a learning community. Students were also asked to rate the extent to which the CUC had made it easier for them to stay, study or work in their community. There were six open-ended questions throughout the survey to elicit qualitative responses from the participants. The first four related directly to each of the four aspects of the CUC as mentioned above and the final two were broader concluding questions which asked them to: *Add any comments around the best aspects of studying with the CUC*; and *What aspects of the CUC most need improvement?*

Between July and August 2021, 375 students fully or partially completed the survey out of a possible 1,145 eligible students across the CUC network - a 33 per cent response rate, providing a representative sample size. The survey data was collated and analysed by the project team through descriptive statistical analysis of the quantitative data and thematic analysis of the qualitative data (from the open-ended questions). The open-ended responses were coded using NVivo 12 software which also allowed for the counting of thematically aligned responses.

Key Findings⁴

Fully online students numbered 321 (86.3%) while 35 (9.4%) were studying in a mixed study mode (mix of online and on-campus) and 16 (4.3%) were enrolled as on-campus students. Three did not provide this information. At least one of the open-ended qualitative questions were answered by 168 (44.8%) students (not including those who simply answered *No*), while the six open-ended questions generated close to 500 responses in total. The findings are presented below in four sections: i) the student views about the centre facilities; ii) support from staff (including LSAs); iii) impact on academic success; and iv) sense of belonging to a learning community. Within each section, we will cover the findings from both the Likert-scale ratings and answers to the open-ended questions.

⁴ The results of the survey have been summarised elsewhere (Country Universities Centre, 2021). However, the survey data was analysed in greater depth by the project team for the purposes of this article.

Centre Facilities

As is evident in Table 2, the vast majority of students rated centre facilities as *Excellent*.

Table 2

Facilities

Please rate the following facilities	Excellent (%)	Good (%)	Fair (%)	Poor (%)
Cleanliness of facilities (n=360)	93	5.8	0.28	0.56
Quality of internet connection (n=360)	86	12.8	1.1	0
Quality of technology in general (n=361)	82	17.5	0.8	0
Quality of study and common areas (n=359)	82.5	15.6	1.9	0

Additionally, 100 per cent of the students responded they felt *Safe* or *Very safe* within the centre. Responses to the open-ended question: *Would you like to see any improvements or changes to any aspects of the facilities or available technology at the CUC?* were also overwhelmingly positive, such as:

No improvements. Excellent amenities, student support and great study environment. Very grateful to have this Centre in town.

I can't think of anything that needs to change. It is a great space to work in and the computers, internet, printer and environment are all really high end. So basically perfect!

I'm so happy this facility (and human-based support) is available in such a rural, isolated area. I can't think of any improvements. 😊

Qualitative analysis of this open-ended question and the final two broader questions revealed a very high appreciation of CUC facilities in general, with 82 references coded to "Facilities" in NVivo analysis. This was the highest number of references for any code, followed by Staff Support at 61 and Academic Achievement at 39. Occasional suggestions for improvements of facilities were often qualified by positive comments, such as:

Lovely space but can get very busy – which is great BUT sometimes a bit noisy.

The technology is great, but the space is small.

Love the dual screens! Would love more tutorial room style spaces, I get too distracted in a room of others.

Along with suggestions for more space, there were requests for extended hours, more computers and/or printers, also the occasional request for a coffee machine, snack dispenser or other kitchen facility, e.g., "It would be good to have some kitchenware (i.e., pot, sandwich maker, etc.) so that we could cook some light meals during study breaks." Many were phrased as maybes rather than must-haves such as, "Maybe a bit more stationery like a permanent marker and a calculator you could borrow"; and "Maybe the entrance corridor could be brightened up. Maybe used by students to display a changing collection of local students artistic work". Such comments seem to indicate that the students felt sufficiently comfortable and familiar within the centres to suggest these types of additions.

The comments about needing more space mostly applied to the smaller centres, some of which have since expanded or are looking to expand to meet the growing need. Where this is occurring, it is clearly appreciated by students, as shown through comments such as, "Love the upgrades planned" and, "There are several updates being planned that sound great". Overall, the types of suggestions for improvements indicated that students were looking for more of the same – that is, longer opening hours, more space (in the smaller centres), more LSA workshops/sessions, more time to socialise with other students and, where needed, improvements to some of the kitchen facilities and equipment. NVivo coding revealed that the most mentioned improvements were the need for more space (32 references), increased access to technology, such as additional computers, printers, extras such as headphones and so on (28 references) and improvements to general facilities such as kitchen equipment (22 references).

Other open-ended responses that related to the CUC facilities indicated the importance to students of having access to a purpose-built study space while combining their home, family and work responsibilities more easily with their studies. Examples include:

Being able to use the space at CUC has allowed me to break away my work, home and study life.
It gives me somewhere to go when I'm struggling to study at home.
It's great to have a space away from home. It motivates you to work harder.

The value of this space for the many female online students juggling their studies with family and caring responsibilities (Stone & O'Shea, 2019) is apparent in comments such as:

It is always ready to go, unlike the desk at home covered in washing and mail. I can drop in and spend a short time there or plan for a study session.
Through using CUC I have a quiet, kid free space to concentrate on my studies.
It really makes a difference being there than at home with noisy children and distractions.

Support from Staff

Of the 353 students who answered the question *How helpful did you find the CUC staff?*, almost all (98.9%) answered *Extremely helpful* (85.6%) or *Very helpful* (13.3%). As is evident in Table 3, students who identified as having needed help settling into their studies (n=295) and/or who had accessed LSA services (workshops or one-to-one sessions) during Semester 1 (n=126) also responded positively.

Table 3

Helpfulness of Staff

Thinking about the CUC staff	Very much (%)	Quite a bit (%)	Some (%)	Very little (%)	Not at all (%)
If you needed it, to what extent did CUC staff help you settle into study? (n=295)	69.8	21.7	6.8	0.68	1
To what extent was the LSA available? (n=122)	69.7	26.2	4	0	0
To what extent was the LSA helpful? (n=126)	81.7	16.4	1.59	0.8	0

As shown in Table 4, all those who had attended LSA sessions reported an increase in both motivation and confidence.

Table 4

Motivation and Confidence as a Result of Working with an LSA

After working with your LSA	A great deal (%)	Quite a lot (%)	To some extent (%)	A little (%)	Not at all (%)
Did you feel more motivated to tackle your studies? (n=126)	74.6	21.4	4	0	0
Did you feel more confident with your studies? (n=125)	76	16.8	5.6	1.6	0

Equally positive were responses to the open-ended question, *Are there any experiences, positive or negative, that you would like to share with us from working with any of the Learning Skills Advisor services this semester?* Comments, amongst many, included:

Because of report writing workshops I was able to feel confident completing assignments.

I felt like giving in with my uni course as I felt overwhelmed. [LSA] helped me break down my assignment and work out what I needed to do... I ended up doing really well in the assignment.

I enjoyed being able to attend some of the online workshops, this was really beneficial for me as studying online is a very lonely experience at times.

Some students requested expansion of the LSA service, with “more workshops at more times, or even recording them for students that can’t attend would be really good” and “more online sessions available at night or on weekends for students who might be working”. The concluding two open-ended questions similarly contained many positive comments about staff, both LSAs and Centre Managers. A total of 61 references were coded in NVivo against “Staff Support”, the next highest number of references after Facilities.

As shown in the examples below, most comments named a specific Centre Manager (CM) and/or an LSA where students had access to them:

We need more [CMs] and [LSAs]. They work so hard to make it a great space for us students.

Without the help from [CM] and [LSA] I don’t think I would even have started - but I finished this semester with 2 Credits which I’m thrilled about.

The CUC could be a chicken pen with old Commodore 64s but I would still use it because [CM] and [LSA] make it such a great space to study.

I think [CM]’s contribution is massive. She really helps create the environment, supports the students and is fun as well.

I feel welcomed and remembered. [CM] always has time to say hello, remembers names, conversations and subjects, always follows up if I’ve discussed issues I’m having with my study and always offers support.

Impact on Academic Success

As shown in Table 5, a very high proportion of respondents indicated improvements in their academic results (90% *Strongly agreed* or *Agreed*) and their focus on their studies (95.6% *Strongly agreed* or *Agreed*). Additionally, 91.5 per cent *Strongly agreed* or *Agreed* that they were more likely to continue with their studies because of the support from their CUC.

Table 5

Impact on Academic Success

As a result of the CUC support & facilities...	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)	N/A (%)
My academic results have improved (n=349)	62	28.7	6	0	0	3.4
I have been able to focus better on my studies (n=348)	71.6	24	3.2	0	0	1.1
I am more likely to continue with my studies (n=348)	67.5	24	5.5	0	0	2.9

NVivo analysis of the qualitative responses to the open-ended question, *Are there any success stories or comments about your academic results that you would like to share with the CUC?* as well as the concluding two open-ended questions, resulted in the third highest number of responses (39) coded to “Academic achievement”, after “Facilities” (82) and “Staff support” (61). Examples of comments included:

I received two HDs this semester where previously I was receiving credits.

My grades went from average, due to studying at home in between work and kids, to HD grades, due to studying at the CUC and being totally focused on my assessments.

I received my first HD in a 3rd year subject thanks to the support from centre staff.

Many students provided quite lengthy, explanatory responses, providing detail about the various aspects of the CUC that have impacted positively on their studies. For example:

CUC has been incredible for my studies this last trimester. Before moving to [country town] I was living with my parents and had a full-time study load and was struggling to pass my units. I was so unenthusiastic about study and on the verge of deferring. Now I am working full time and studying three units, amazingly, my marks have improved. I finish work, go to CUC and do what I need to do. My motivation levels are so much higher having access to a study space that is separate from my day to day living area. During exam times, having access to secure internet and a place that is set up to do exams relieved so much stress and apprehension. I've found myself actually enjoying studying.

Importantly, 94 per cent of respondents (n=343) said that it was *Very much* or *Quite a bit* easier for them to stay, study and work in their community because of the CUC. The vote of confidence in the CUC was close to unanimous, with 93.3 per cent responding *Very likely* to the question about whether they were likely to recommend the centre to others, 6.4 per cent with *Likely*, and one student with *Somewhat likely*.

Sense of Belonging to a Learning Community

Feeling a sense of belonging to a learning community has been repeatedly identified in the literature as being a crucial factor in student engagement, retention and success (Kahu, 2013). It can be much more challenging to build this sense of belonging when students are studying online (Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Stone & Springer, 2019). Particularly encouraging were the responses outlined in Table 6, in which 85 per cent of the students reported *Very much* or *Quite a bit* when asked whether they had experienced a sense of belonging to the CUC. This compares with 52 per cent (in 2019) and 41 per cent (in 2020) of undergraduate students indicating they felt a sense of belonging to their institution, as reported in the national Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) Student Experience Survey (QILT, 2021, p. 59).

Table 6

Sense of Belonging to a Learning Community

To what extent have you	Very much (%)	Quite a bit (%)	Some (%)	Very little (%)	Not at all (%)
experienced a sense of belonging to the CUC? (n=347)	58.5	26.5	11.2	1.7	0.2
been given opportunities to interact with other students? (n=346)	42.5	30.3	21	4	2

Additionally, 76 per cent (n=345) *Agreed* or *Strongly agreed* that having the opportunity to work in proximity to other students made it easier to feel motivated or supported in their studies:

The other students are great to bounce ideas off and make study light-hearted and not so scary, it's nice knowing other people have the same problems as me.

Summary

The survey findings reveal the importance of the CUC to these regional, predominantly online and mature-age students, 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, these 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 per cent indicating they were more likely to continue with their studies.

Suggestions for improvements centred largely around the need for “more” – more space, more computers, more interaction with other students, more kitchen facilities. Comments indicated they regarded their local CUC as their study home which could be expanded and/or improved to make it an even more comfortable space than it clearly was already. These suggestions indicate that the CUC is giving students what they want and need and that they are hungry for more. As well as validating the types of facilities and support that CUC offers, the specific suggestions also provide valuable food for thought for CUC management about ways in which the space, the facilities and the activities can be tailored even more closely to student needs.

Conclusion

In the context of the historically and persistently higher attrition rates for both regional and online students, the findings from this survey evaluation are both exciting and noteworthy. The improvements revealed in students’ confidence, motivation, academic results and intentions to persist with study indicate that the presence of the CUC and, more broadly, the RUC network, has the potential to make a positive impact on the participation, retention and academic success of students in regional Australia. These findings indicate that the CUC model of support through dedicated study centres with technology infrastructure and face-to-face interaction with staff and students can help to mitigate some of the key challenges facing online students and those 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.’s (2022, p. 38) recent study with high school students found that while initially only 6.6 per cent of the students indicated they may be interested in online study, once they were informed about the presence and purpose of RUCs, almost half (49%) indicated they would be more likely to consider online study with the help of an RUC. The authors make the point that “knowing about the support and infrastructure available through a Regional University Centre ... could offer the possibility of university for the many students for whom moving away from home is difficult or impossible” (King et al., 2022, p. 54). 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.

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