



## Submission to the Commonwealth Government's Inquiry into Regional Development and Decentralisation

### Introduction

The Geraldton Universities Centre (GUC) is an independent, not-for-profit, incorporated body supporting university courses in Geraldton, Western Australia, in partnership with a range of Australian universities.

We note with great interest synergy to the Inquiry's Issues Paper (namely section 1.12 and 1.13) that the GUC is an example of a bottom-up process of regional development, creating community empowerment. We achieve this by focusing on building the capacity of the community through locally supported tertiary education to fulfil the needs of local communities, and their professional workforces and industries, with locally invested residents. Providing opportunity and support for Aboriginal people to pursue higher education has been a key strategic priority.

Building the capacity of a locally invested populous is a key ingredient in maintaining and developing a sustainable regional population (section 1.14). As GUC continues to grow, a focus is now developing around a local research culture centred on the further development of local industries and professions, increasing the long-term viability of a strong and prosperous (bottom-up) regional community.

### GUC Model

The GUC is incorporated under the Geraldton Institute Incorporated (GI), a membership of some 25 representatives from key community, industry and government agencies, all dedicated to the advancement of tertiary education in the Mid West region. The objectives of the Geraldton Institute Inc, as outlined under the constitution, are to facilitate, deliver, promote and provide access to university education including:

- To serve as the primary point of contact for the delivery of university education in the Mid West and other regional areas of WA.
- To collaborate with other parties for the supported delivery of regional university education, in the best interests of regional students.
- To facilitate and promote education and career pathways between schools, vocational education and training providers, universities and industry.
- To coordinate and support research and partnerships, especially those which assist in the sustainable development of the region.
- To advocate in the best interests of regional students.
- To promote and assist lifelong learning and raise community aspirations.
- To collect public donations to support the Association's offerings and learning experiences of students.



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Importantly, GUC is not a university, nor are we a campus of a university. The higher education awards achieved by our students are offered and conferred by our university partners, CQUniversity and the University of Southern Queensland.

GUC's mission is to provide opportunity for all with a range of high quality, supported university programs to build regional capacity.

GUC values community, opportunity, aspiration, equity and excellence. These values are upheld with strong governance, led by a regionally based board elected from the GII membership and committed to meeting the demands of the Mid West community.

In order to meet our commitments to the community and our university partners we operate under three guiding principles:

- To utilise the best possible technology for high quality online experiences, always accompanied by local face-to-face support.
- To ensure that the programs delivered to students at the GUC provide equity in terms of quality, services and value for money.
- And, that the agreements with our university partners be mutually beneficial – we all need to get something out of it if the model is to be sustainable.

## Supported Mixed Mode Higher Education

The GUC model is one of mixed mode delivery and supported distance education. We provide this support administratively, pastorally and academically. It is the support we provide locally, now to around 300 students (and growing) that sets us apart. **Students are enrolled as distance students with our university partners and supported at GUC.**

Our university partners have already invested heavily in quality distance education and online platforms. A partnership with GUC brings them additional students, without significantly adding to their costs, while providing greater support, retention and success for these students. It is GUC that provides:

- Marketing and recruitment of students
- Administrative support
- Access to facilities including study spaces, IT, some library resources and where appropriate, industry based facilities for practical placements
- Tutors providing face to face academic support to students in every course, every week.

This model works because:

1. It is driven by the community and it is what they want – the community demands “real” university where students can meet to form social networks while cementing their learning with face-to-face support.
2. GUC does not have to replicate a full academic staff - GUC employs sessional tutors, appropriately qualified professionals from local industry that are approved by our university partners and willing to provide a couple of hours a week of their time to tutor. It would be almost impossible for GUC to otherwise find and fund full time academics.



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3. Our university partners find our support valuable and will therefore share a percentage of the EFTSL (Equivalent Full Time Student Load) funding they receive from students and the Commonwealth for GUC to provide services locally to students.

Given this share of EFTSL is how GUC funds itself, face-to-face student support is absolutely essential to GUC's financial sustainability. It should be noted that while GUC received seed funding for this model through the WA Government's Royalties for Regions program, it now fully sustains itself from the shared EFTSL funding received for 300 local students.

Through such arrangements, the Commonwealth receives exceptional value for money. The one allocation it makes for a student is shared by the university providing the online curriculum and GUC providing the administrative, academic and pastoral support. We believe this goes a long way to ensuring fairness and equity for regional students.

## Improving support for disadvantaged students

Disadvantaged groups remain under-represented and there remains a need to continue to reduce barriers for regional and remote students to access higher education. Community led, regionally based organisations like GUC play a direct and tangible role in increasing this participation.

Already 8% of GUC's students are Aboriginal and we are aiming for parity with Geraldton's Aboriginal population of 10%. We achieve this, not just by being on country, but through actively reaching out to the community with a student support officer and working with successful school based programs such as Follow the Dream. Once enrolled, Aboriginal students continue to be very strongly supported administratively and pastorally by GUC staff as well as the excellent relationships we have built up with our university partners Aboriginal student support teams. This includes sourcing and supporting additional tutorial assistance funded under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy.

Around half the students studying at GUC enter via a non-traditional method (ie non-ATAR) through TAFE pathways, work experience and CQUniversity's STEPS bridging program supported at the Centre. Despite this, our retention and success rates remain high because of the quality, face-to-face support we provide.

Importantly, close to 20% of students studying at GUC, come to us after having attempted to relocate for university or tried by themselves purely by online distance education. GUC represents a second chance for these students. Such students would otherwise be lost to the system, failing to achieve the benefits that a tertiary education brings, not only for them personally, but for their community.

The success of GUC, on very limited funds, shows that community based organisations can deliver excellent value for money and grass roots outcomes, especially for those groups the Government intends to target through participation programs. Should definitions for such programs be less rigid, it may also assist other innovative grass roots models of tertiary education support to emerge in regions to further participation.



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Investments in regional community based tertiary education support centres and programs (building on the \$15million included in the Commonwealth's Higher Education Reform Package) would deliver far greater outcomes for participation from regional and remote students. The GUC itself is working with the Pilbara community in WA's north to establish a Pilbara Universities Centre and has completed a feasibility study as well as creating a local advisory group to pursue the project.

## Benefits to Mid West

Having a thriving university presence in Geraldton through GUC makes a significant contribution to the social, cultural and economic fabric of the community by:

- Providing a link to higher education and the support required to succeed, especially for those who are first in family to attend university (the majority of GUC students), are from a low socio economic group that otherwise cannot afford to relocate a student or are Aboriginal and do not want to leave country. External studies in isolation are not supportive enough for such groups to succeed
- Providing opportunity to all to experience the personal benefits a higher education can bring
- Building the capacity of our region, producing professionals to work in the community and stay in the community
- Stopping the brain drain of regional talent to Perth
- Retaining and attracting people to Geraldton, especially families, because GUC completes the education story with quality offerings in the community from kindergarten right through to tertiary education.

GUC's contribution to the local economy is also substantial. It conservatively costs \$20,000 a year to relocate and keep a university student in Perth. If the 300 students studying at GUC this year had to relocate to Perth, **it would directly draw \$6million out of the local economy**. And that's before any multiplier effects or realities such as whole families up and leaving town to go with their student.

Further, GUC is providing opportunity for local people to up-skill and build the capacity of the region with students undertaking programs in:

- Teaching (Early Childhood and Primary)
- Nursing
- Accounting
- Business (Management and HR)
- Psychology
- Social Work
- Engineering
- Environmental Science
- And a bridging program for people to achieve university entrance



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The majority of GUC graduates, of which there was 28 this year and will swell to more than 50 next year, go on to work in Geraldton or regional WA. GUC is supplying Geraldton its own teachers, nurses, social workers and so on, performing the essential services a community needs. Engineering officers, accountants and environmental scientists will help make local industry and business stronger and more competitive.

## Opportunities for Research

GUC is now part of a regional steering group working to apply a similar bottom-up, locally centred approach to research, building on existing strengths, capabilities and facilities in the region. As described in *The Pathway for Enhanced Research and Development in the Mid West* report, the model would have four critical components:

- A governance structure based upon the existing networks and major groupings of research, development and deployment already in the region
- Leadership and dedicated expert resources to support, coordinate and grow the region's R&D programs, capabilities, its reputation for excellence and a supporting culture of innovation.
- A system of strategically selected local facilities designated as 'hubs' for each major area of R&D in the region – accommodating researchers, industry, business, government, institutes, students and community; inter-connected through a supporting mix of digital, formal and informal mechanisms.
- An ongoing program of education, events and activities to extend and grow a culture of innovation across all stakeholder groups, to support the attraction and retention of research professionals, to showcase successes, to engage State, national and international parties and governments with regional R&D, and to build a strongly recognised brand for research and innovation in the Mid West.

The opportunities to leverage local expertise (and goodwill to collaborate together) and facilities to generate greater research, relevant to the region's needs and directed to regional industry growth and innovation, are significant. The case for aggressive development of this research capability, linked to local industry and business, is compelling. The *Australian Innovation System Report 2016*, shows businesses that are actively innovative deliver 1.4 times higher profitability, twice the productivity, 3 times the number of jobs and level of structured training, five times the export market performance and five times the social contributions, compared to non-innovation active businesses.

Funding to assist GUC and the community to develop this research model will be required.

## Conclusion

The Geraldton Universities Centre is an excellent example of a bottom-up process of regional development that has created community empowerment and opportunity as well as tangible economic and social benefits. The model of mixed mode or supported education delivery has drawn interest and acknowledgement from both government and regional communities alike.





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While GUC and our model is operating sustainably and delivering positive outcomes for tertiary education participation in our region, it does so only in the existing policy framework.

Retaining uncapped university places and sufficient funding for these places is vital for the GUC model and indeed any similar models to survive and thrive. Most importantly, there is a great opportunity for Government to enhance the system and promote innovation and tertiary education participation in regional Australia, within its current policy agenda, by examining and applying more open, flexible definitions for eligibility of funding in the university space to include not for profits like GUC and other community owned tertiary education centres.

Acknowledgement of the worth of Centres like GUC, and the desire to assist the formation of similar regional hubs in the Governments Higher Education Reform Package, is an excellent start. Going further to extend access to support programs like the Higher Education Participation Program or innovation and research funding to development opportunities that are directly linked to regional capacity, could produce even more tangible, on the ground benefits.

GUC is always open to discussions with Government around any aspects of this submission.

