



Growing our own: Connecting Schools, Employers, Careers and Study Pathways in Regional South Australia

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Abstract

Uni Hub Spencer Gulf's *Career Partnership* initiative addresses persistently low levels of aspiration and engagement with tertiary education in North and Western South Australia. Research, census data, and consultations with schools and employers revealed that this issue is negatively impacting workforce capacity and community development, with challenges expected to escalate in coming years.

Key barriers include a lack of locally relevant career advice, limited awareness of available careers in the region, and increasingly complex pathways between school, vocational education, university, and work. Outreach efforts by city-based universities were often irrelevant and uncoordinated, further compounding the problem.

In response, Uni Hub developed the 'Grow our Own' Partnerships Plan to deliver targeted initiatives addressing these barriers. Annual career expos in regional centres will showcase career opportunities and study pathways, with a focus on workforce shortages and locally available careers. Outreach programs to small communities will promote university study and available support through Regional University Centres. Industry immersion and taster programs will provide hands-on experience in professional and technical careers, particularly in heavy industry and the health care sectors.

Collaboration with secondary schools, employers, regional agencies, industry associations, and tertiary providers is central to the plan's success. By leveraging partnerships and resources, Uni Hub aims to address the region's workforce needs and build local capacity through the common goal of 'growing our own' skilled workforce.

Keywords: *aspiration, partnerships, engagement, community-led, pathways, rural regional and remote*

Background

Known for its stunning beaches, rugged coastlines and amazing scenery, the Eyre Peninsula is located on the west coast of South Australia, bordered by Spencer Gulf and the Southern Ocean (see Figure 1). Despite covering 23% of the state's land area, (Regional Development Australia, 2024) it is home to only 3.6% of the state's total population. With a significant investment pipeline and new jobs, regional and remote communities in South Australia's Eyre Peninsula and Spencer Gulf are set for significant growth (Commonwealth of Australia, 2024; Regional Development Australia Eyre Peninsula, 2022). However, a lack of a suitably skilled local workforce is a major

challenge (Australian Rural Health Alliance, 2023; Regional Development South Australia, 2021). Low qualification attainment levels, poor access to, and limited engagement with tertiary education opportunities further compounds the regions workforce challenges (King et al., 2022).

Figure 1: Eyre Peninsula Coastline



Looking at solutions to benefit industry and the local community, the Uni Hub Spencer Gulf took up the challenge. The Uni Hub Spencer Gulf (Uni Hub) is a community-led organisation with a focus on supporting regional and remote residents to access tertiary education without leaving their communities. A critical component of Uni Hub's strategy is ensuring that education opportunities align with local industry workforce gaps. Uni Hub partners with universities, local employers, industry, and schools to deliver locally relevant career expos, industry immersion programs, and community outreach activities. These separate yet interconnected activities aim to increase awareness and support engagement in education and employment pathways meeting local workforce needs.

A Local Solution

Uni Hub operates study hubs in five regional South Australian locations. Since its inception in 2019, it has been responsive to local industry and community needs. Thus, initiatives implemented or supported by this hub reflect both a strategic regional and a local community need. In 2019 and 2022 Uni Hub undertook stakeholder surveys to better understand industry needs and community perceptions and expectations about local education and employment pathways. In 2023, it facilitated a heavy industry workforce summit to determine the scope of needs and support required to address skilled workforce shortages. More than 200 schools, small and large businesses, and community organisations participated in the surveys or summit. The community highlighted barriers to education and meeting industry workforce gaps, including low awareness of career options, career advice in schools that was not locally specific, irrelevant information from city-based universities, and overly complex pathways between school, further education, and employment. The information gathered through stakeholder engagement has

informed Uni Hub's overarching strategy: To facilitate better coordination of study and career pathway information, improve awareness of hidden career options, and Increase knowledge of local tertiary study options supported by Uni Hub. Actions in each regional centre vary depending on need.

Uni Hub secured federal government funding through the Regional University Study Hubs Partnership Program to implement the partnership-based initiative to facilitate activities responding to community needs. Uni Hub partnered with local schools, Regional Development Australia, Local Health Networks, Local Jobs Program, and local businesses. In 2024, inaugural annual career expos were held. They enabled school students and the wider community to be exposed to the range of local careers and study options available. *Explore*, an industry immersion program for school students was a central part of this partnerships initiative. With the assistance of local industry, training providers and the tertiary education sector, programs were developed to provide intensive exposure to careers that currently exist and ones that will grow into the future. The final piece to the puzzle was to deliver school and community outreach across the wider region, increasing awareness across small communities of the service and support available to them via the local Uni Hub. The aim is then to encourage residents that it is possible to study higher education in a highly supported manner and pursue their career goals from within their local community.

Key Components to Growing our own

Annual Career Expos

Uni Hub hosted a series of career 'roadshow' expos throughout 2024, facilitating valuable connections between employers, school leavers, job seekers and career changers. The events highlighted regional careers, higher education, training and employment opportunities. Knowledge of pathways and careers can influence aspirations and choices (Fray et al., 2020). Additionally, many careers are often overlooked due to a lack of visible, relatable role models (Gonzalez-Perez et al., 2020). By including a diverse range of exhibitors who provided immersive and interactive experiences, the career expo provided residents with information, choice, and direct access to employers. For example, a Bachelor of Nursing Student registered with the Uni Hub Port Lincoln connected with a local health provider at the event and was successful in gaining employment with that provider whilst they study. This highlights the reciprocal benefits of the expo. Participation in the expo provided local businesses an opportunity to connect with potential employees, fill their workforce gaps, and promote professions within their industry that may not often be a career of choice.

Within the career expo, career and study breakout sessions provided attendees with detailed information on study options, including traineeship and apprenticeship pathways. Each session also offered opportunity for questions, facilitated by a panel of experts including health care professionals, university representatives, traineeship providers, and employers. Care was taken to ensure panel members were relatable and local. For example, one panel member began their career as an apprentice and is now a business owner employing the next generation of apprentices. School and community members attending the career expo provided feedback that the expo was valuable for the region. A local parent shared via a feedback form: "As a Port Lincoln local with a teenage daughter, I never knew we had such a range of opportunities. Awesome event and very well organised". The principal of the remote Leigh Creek Area School noted in their feedback form:

The only problem I have now is that you have opened a can of worms! I had students who were set in their ways, that are now looking in different directions because of the availability of different sectors. Some students didn't even realise that there were certain jobs. Despite the worms, it is a very good space to be in.

The inaugural expos will become a fixture on school, industry and community calendars to ensure their continued success and strong support.

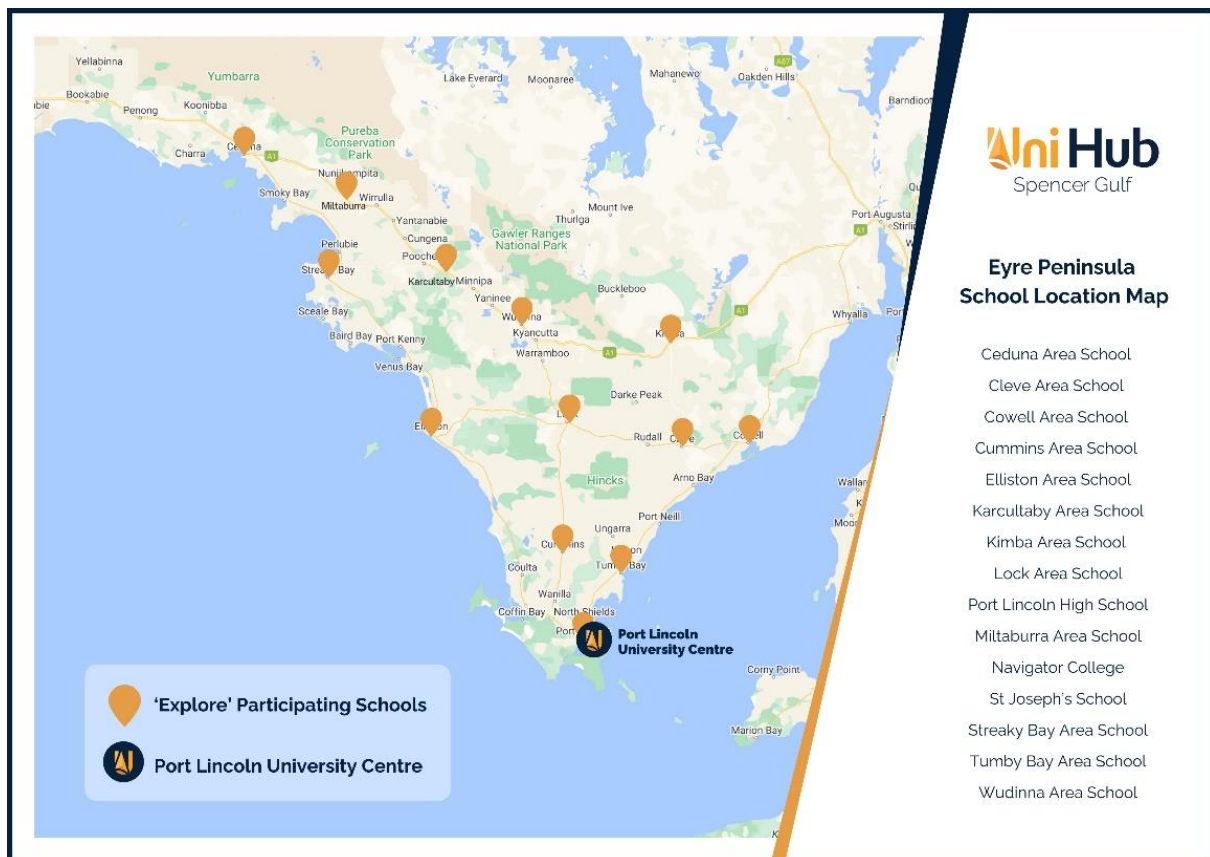
‘Explore’—An Industry Immersion and Taster Program

A critical component of Uni Hub’s strategy is to be responsive to local needs and nuances. Hence, an industry immersion event called *Explore* was developed to provide an insight into real-world work environments. This initiative brought together over 40 businesses and service providers with the aim of providing Year 9 and 10 students with personalised learning experiences tailored to their interests and career goals. Additionally, it complemented the information provided at the career expo, increasing understanding about career options and pathways. A program with 150 interactive sessions across 3 days was developed offering students a wide variety to choose from. Sessions were offered in small groups to ensure that students and presenter were able to genuinely engage (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: ‘Explore’ Highlights



Sessions included being a print journalist, a radio presenter, launching a rocket or finding out what it is like to be a skipper on a fishing vessel in the simulator. Other sessions included a visit to an aged care facility, and a virtual reality tour of a hydrogen plant. Students were able to participate in activities not normally available in their smaller communities. 490 students from 15 schools from across the Eyre Peninsula attended, with some schools travelling over 5 hours each way (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Participating School Locations

Like the career expos, *Explore* provided benefits across the community. The event facilitated a community-wide approach to local workforce development, creating valuable connections between students, educators, and industry leaders. In *Explore* feedback forms, a student at Tumby Bay Area School said there “were job opportunities I didn’t know existed” and local employers expressed their perception of value:

I loved seeing the students engage. Having curious learners arrive, bravely and jump into an immersive challenge with strangers was great. I feel they learnt a lot and so did I.

With feedback demonstrating the value, the *Explore* event has now become an annual fixture for schools in the region.

The way Ahead

To increase awareness of and encourage tertiary education as an option within the wider community, Uni Hub is developing a series of university ‘taster’ programs that provide a firsthand glimpse into university and professional pathways. In collaboration with university and industry partners, it aims to facilitate alternative entry pathways, micro-credentials, and skill sets tailored for professional and technical careers that are in-demand locally. These initiatives will give individuals with practical job-ready skills and facilitate access to university. By offering hands-on experiences, it will enable exploration of various career paths, empowering individuals to make informed decisions about their futures and futureproofing our communities.

School and Community Outreach

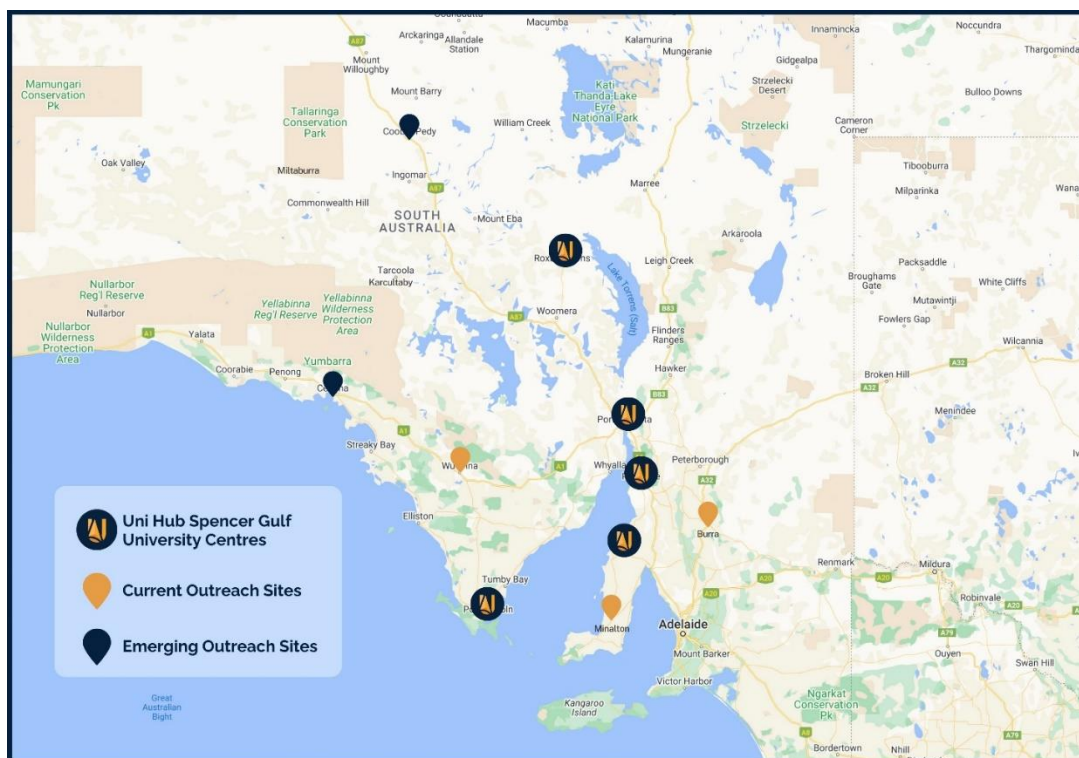
Uni Hub staff are embedded in the community and understand the challenges of accessing services and information while living in regional or remote areas. Whilst there are similarities in challenges experienced by regional and remote schools and communities, it is well known that a

‘one size fits all’ approach does not work. Outreach services are established through partnerships with local councils and in consultation with key industry, school and community members (see Figure 4). Currently, Uni Hub teams provide monthly outreach to smaller regional towns, at the request of local councils. Through personal communication, students have shared their experiences:

As a student living rurally it is often hard finding a way to start a degree and be able to study while still living at home. Uni Hub has made that experience an absolute breeze and I will be forever grateful for their services. (Ceduna student, 2024)

In doing this, Uni Hub contributes to community-led solutions to growing their own workforce. Uni Hub’s partnership initiative focuses on making education and career options accessible in regional and remote communities. By facilitating community-led and responsive initiatives, our programs enable students to explore possibilities and support them make informed choices about their futures. With future investments into the region leading to thousands of new jobs, the career expos, industry immersion initiatives, and community outreach aim to increase awareness of options and contribute to our community growing our own workforce (Commonwealth of Australia, 2024; Regional Development Australia Eyre Peninsula, 2022).

Figure 4: University Centres and Outreach Sites



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