



Growing our own: A Community-led Approach to Building a Local Health Workforce

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Abstract

Rural and regional Australia faces significant healthcare challenges, exacerbated by chronic workforce shortages and limited access to higher education opportunities. Uni Hub Spencer Gulf (Uni Hub) has undertaken a community-led initiative to address these gaps growing in our local health workforce. Established in 2019, Uni Hub delivers support for regional students pursuing university qualifications, focusing on locally delivered, industry-relevant education that meets the specific needs of regional communities.

By partnering with universities, schools, and health networks, Uni Hub has grown from a single study centre with 15 students to five campuses supporting over 500 students, including more than 100 in health-related fields. Since 2019, Uni Hub has supported 16 local nursing and social work graduates, with an additional 70 graduates projected by 2027. Uni Hub's model combines a whole-of-workforce perspective with dedicated student support services, including academic tutoring, placement coordination, and career guidance, ensuring students can succeed.

Key to Uni Hub's success is its focus on partnerships and advocacy. Collaborations with universities have increased accessibility to health qualifications, while persistent engagement with government has secured investment in regional training facilities. The initiative demonstrates a strengths-based, place-based approach, addressing critical workforce shortages while empowering local students to transform their communities. Growing a regional health workforce is complex, but Uni Hub's model demonstrates that sustainable, community-driven solutions are achievable and impactful.

Keywords: *rural health workforce, nursing, community-led, allied health, social work*

Background

Australia's rural and regional communities face unique healthcare challenges, compounded by longstanding workforce shortages (National Rural Health Alliance, 2023). Addressing these gaps requires targeted, place-based solutions that support the development of a sustainable local workforce (Gillespie et al., 2022). Ongoing regional health workforce shortages are well documented (Kumar et al., 2020; National Rural Health Alliance, 2023; Russell et al., 2021). Ten years ago, the Spencer Gulf cities recognised that a new approach was needed to grow the regional workforce. The Spencer Gulf region has high levels of socio-economic disadvantage, intergenerational unemployment, and decades of underinvestment in higher education (Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2023; King et al., 2022). Uni Hub Spencer

Gulf (Uni Hub) regions have vocational qualifications on par with the nation, but there has been a persistent and significant gap in attaining university qualifications (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d, 2021e, 2024). While 32% of Australians aged 15–74 years have completed a bachelor's degree or higher, only 9% in our region have done so (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d, 2021e, 2024; King et al., 2022). Despite online access to university, only 4.5% of our population are currently studying at university compared to 15% nationally (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d, 2021e; King et al., 2022). The old way of doing things was not working. A different, more proactive, and empowering approach was needed.

A Local Solution

Uni Hub emerged from an alliance of business, community, local government, and educational leaders who saw that access to locally delivered, industry-relevant tertiary education was critical to the future health workforce and economic sustainability of this region. Uni Hub is a community-owned not-for-profit, funded through the federal government's Regional University Study Hubs program. The study hubs program aims to enable students in rural, regional, and remote Australia to pursue higher education while staying in their communities (Stone et al., 2022).

In 2019, Uni Hub Spencer Gulf opened with one study centre and 15 students. In 2024, there are five campuses in regional and remote South Australia—in Port Lincoln, Port Augusta, Roxby Downs, Port Pirie, and Kadina on Barnagarla, Nukunu, Kokatha, and Nharangga Countries. Figure 1 shows Uni Hub locations. Uni Hub supports over 500 students, with more than 100 studying health-related degrees. Sixteen social work and nursing students have graduated and started work in local health services. Figure 2 shows 2024 graduates, including nursing students. An estimated additional 60 nurses, eight social workers, and two psychologists or counsellors will graduate and be working locally by the end of 2027.

Figure 1: Uni Hub Locations in South Australia



Figure 2: 2024 Graduates, Including 13 Nursing Students

Uni Hub supports students in pursuing higher education locally in courses which meet regional industry demands. The primary objective is to retain skilled individuals within regional areas, addressing critical workforce shortages. Uni Hub facilitates partnerships with universities who are committed to delivering qualifications that specifically target regional workforce needs, including those in nursing and allied health. A core component of Uni Hub's operational strategy involves substantial investment in local industry and school engagement, supporting a sustainable pipeline of students that includes recent school graduates as well as individuals seeking to upskill or reskill.

Critically, Uni Hub provides focused support for regional students, offering face-to-face assistance and ensuring holistic care. This support encompasses course selection, enrolment and orientation guidance, academic tutoring, coordination of placements and residential schools, exam invigilation, and organisation of annual graduation ceremonies. A significant proportion of Uni Hub students are first in family to attend university. For many, access to this local support is essential; without it, our students tell us they would be unlikely to pursue higher education due to financial, social, and logistical barriers that prevent relocation to Adelaide or independent online study from home.

Key Components to Growing our own Health Workforce

Whole-of-Workforce Perspective

Uni Hub conducted regional stakeholder consultations including: an industry skills shortage survey in 2019 and in 2022, a further survey of more than 30 schools and 80 employers, and a heavy industry workforce summit in 2023 with more than 100 participants. Although the summit was not focused on health, it was understood that any regional growth requires a corresponding growth in the health workforce (South Australian Council of Social Service, 2024). The consultations explored the extent of professional and skilled workforce shortages, the tertiary

study and support required to meet those needs, barriers for employment or study, and the need to explore local solutions to bring employers, schools, and tertiary providers closer. The data gathered through the surveys and summit indicated growing a local health workforce was critical to community wellbeing and the regional economy.

Actions Reflect Regional Needs

Schools and businesses shared challenges including low visibility of career opportunities, lack of relevant career advice in schools, irrelevant marketing by city-based universities, and complex pathways between school, vocational education and training, university, and work. Health care and social assistance were identified as critical workforce shortage areas. An opportunity emerged for Uni Hub to facilitate increased study options, coordination of health career and study information, increased visibility of hidden careers, and awareness of health qualifications and pathways. Uni Hub is now working with more than 40 schools to raise aspiration to higher education, connect students, schools, and employers, and to showcase healthcare careers. Further, Uni Hub has hosted career events for schools and the wider community, in partnership with local health networks and health-related employers.

Partnerships

Based on the survey results, Uni Hub established a partnership with CQUniversity for nursing qualifications. Between 2019 and 2021, students were required to travel to Queensland for residential schools and placements, which was a barrier for many. Uni Hub and CQUniversity worked together to address this and in 2021, CQUniversity changed the location of residential schools and placement from Queensland to South Australia. Nursing student numbers doubled within 12 months. We partner with Flinders University for social work and allied health degrees. In 2024, Flinders University launched three new allied health degrees offered face-to-face to regional students in three South Australian locations, one of which is Uni Hub Spencer Gulf. The first cohort of 10 students began in February, with four local allied health professionals employed by the university as academic staff.

Local partnerships are central to effectiveness. Uni Hub actively works with local health networks and health service providers. The conversion rate from university to regional employment as registered nurses or social workers to date is 100%.

Dedicated Support

A central question guiding our efforts is: How effectively are we preparing students for success? In regional settings, building a health workforce pipeline extends beyond simply encouraging residents to enrol in local programs. Comprehensive support systems are essential to help students achieve strong academic performance, access available resources, persevere through challenges, and ultimately graduate and transition into the workforce. Uni Hub provides a range of targeted support services for students in health-related programs, including local academic tutors, and specialised course tutors in nursing, allied health, and social work, supplementing university-provided tutoring. Study Hub managers support with application and enrolment and provide networking sessions to connect students with potential employers and placement providers. Additionally, a dedicated coordinator offers support specifically for nursing and allied health students. Further, Uni Hub offers financial support through a scholarship program.

Lessons Learned

Uni Hub has adopted a growth-oriented, strengths-based approach. Recognising that initial strategies may not always succeed, we analyse outcomes to refine our practices. We draw inspiration from our students, who demonstrate creativity and resilience in overcoming obstacles. To effectively encourage individuals to pursue university education and healthcare

careers locally, we have adapted our communication strategies. Our messaging on available support is now designed to be consistent, multi-channel, and easily accessible, ensuring that prospective students are well-informed about the resources available to facilitate their educational journey.

Persistent advocacy to universities and government is also vital. Regional Uni Study Hubs play a key role in supporting students through their qualification; thus, funding remains an essential part of what we do. Since 2019, Uni Hub has collaborated with local health partners, students, and MPs, advocating for a clinical simulation training space to be established in one of our regional hospitals. This year the state health budget includes allocation for a purpose-built training facility in our region, for use by health services and students studying health-care university qualifications locally (Government of South Australia, 2024).

Regional communities need local health services and continue to struggle to meet the need (Gillespie et al., 2022; Kumar et al., 2020). A new approach is needed (National Rural Health Alliance, 2024). Growing our own health professionals supports better outcomes for the communities we care about (National Rural Health Alliance, 2023). Our regional health workforce cannot be grown by one organisation alone, we are one piece of a complex puzzle (Gillespie et al., 2022). Uni Hub contributes to solutions and makes a local difference. Each local student supported to study, graduate, and gain employment has an impact on our community – and that is what we're here for.

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