



The Role of Place in the Widening Participation Functions of Regional University Study Hubs

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Abstract

The Regional University Study Hub program aims to enhance higher education participation for individuals from regional, rural, and remote areas in Australia. This paper explores the significance of place in the success of Regional Hubs as an equity tool to bridge the educational gap between regional/rural/remote and urban populations. Through mixed-method research, including interviews and ethnographic observations, findings reveal that a place dedicated to study, appropriate facilities and amenities, and extended access hours are important factors in the widening participation functions of the Regional Hubs. The study also theorises on the type of place that Regional Hubs are by suggesting that they are ‘third places’. By providing a distraction-free environment and necessary resources, Regional Hubs not only support student success but also promote a culture of learning within regional, rural, and remote communities.

Keywords: *widening participation, regional education, third places, regional university study hubs, Australian higher education, Place-based education*

Introduction

The Regional University Study Hubs program (shortened to Regional Hubs) is a government-funded initiative that seeks to increase the number of people from regional, rural, and remote areas in Australia participating in higher education (Baker et al., 2025; Davis & Taylor, 2019; Stone, et al., 2022). People from regional, rural and remote areas participate in higher education less than those from metropolitan areas (Barnes et al., 2024); data from the 2021 census shows that of the 1,788,109 tertiary students, less than one per cent are from areas with very remote and remote classifications (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Regional Hubs act as an equity tool designed to help address the regional/rural/remote-urban gap in accessing higher education. Recent research indicates that Regional Hubs are successful in widening participation, particularly due to their place-based nature, their staff, and their partnerships with their local communities and higher education institutions (Baker et al., 2025; Keenan, 2025).

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the role of place in the widening participation functions of Regional Hubs, as well as to contribute to the broader theoretical discussion of what type of place Regional Hubs are. Place is an important consideration in the equitable access to higher education; the physical distance between university campuses and regional, rural, and remote communities as well as the associated economic and social costs of moving to a Metropolitan area are two examples of place-based barriers to equitable access (Brett et al., 2015; Cooper et

al., 2017). Moreover, young people who chose not to leave their place to access education or employment in metropolitan areas often face social sanction or stigma (Cook & Cuervo, 2020). While ‘place’ has emerged in the literature as a consideration in the widening participation agenda, there is still a considerable gap which this article seeks to fill. We do so by first explaining what Regional Hubs are and then detailing the existing literature on the relationship between place and widening participation, before discussing the methods and background to this research. We then present the results of this research that pertain to the relationship between place and widening participation. Specifically, how the following place-based characteristics contribute to the widening participation functions of the Regional Hub:

- A place dedicated to study,
- The facilities and amenities within the place (the Regional Hubs), for example Wi-Fi and kitchens,
- The physical space within the place,
- How access and extended access to the Regional Hubs can enhance the widening participation effect.

We conclude the article with a discussion about what *type* of place Regional Hubs are; we suggest that Regional Hubs can be considered as ‘third places’. Third places are a designation of a place that is neither home nor work, where a person can spend time without cost or obligation and contributes to the betterment and strength of their community (Yuen & Johnson, 2017). In presenting this discussion, we link Regional Hubs, place, and widening participation to the theoretical concept of a Third Place, and in doing so provide ontological clarity on the type of place that Regional Hubs are.

What are Regional Hubs?

Regional Hubs are community-owned and run facilities that provide students in regional, rural, and remote communities access to tertiary education without the need to relocate to metropolitan areas. Regional Hubs offer high-speed internet, academic and administrative support, a connection to peers, which creates a learning environment that fosters student success (Baker et al., 2025; Keenan, 2025). Regional Hubs are also a dedicated place to study, and in many communities, they are the only place that has a group of users with the shared intention to study (e.g. libraries). Regional Hubs are partnered with universities (although the intensity and latitude of these partnerships vary across the program), which enables students to pursue a wide range of courses while remaining embedded in their local communities. This model not only enhances accessibility but also strengthens local workforce development by supporting students to gain qualifications relevant to their region’s needs (Keenan, 2025).

In 2018, the federal government began to fund the Regional University Study Hubs program, and since then the program has experienced rapid expansion: the number of Regional Hubs has increased to fifty-six since 2018 through five cohorts of funding (Department of Education, 2025a). This program expansion was driven by—and in the context of—several key educational reviews, including the Halsey Review, the Napthine Review, and the Australian Universities Accord (Keenan, 2025). Department of Education data from October/November 2024 shows that 12,253 students have used a Regional University Study Hub since the program’s inception, and in 2024 5,270 students used a Regional Hubs, 32% more students than in 2023 (Department of Education, 2025b).

The Relationship Between Place and Widening Participation

Widening participation refers to the purposeful attempt to increase the number of students from equity groups starting and completing higher education to comparable levels of the general population (Tham et al., 2023). This study relies on the definition within the ‘Widening

Participation Agenda' as defined by Grant-Smith et al (2020, p. 9) who write that the widening participation agenda is an attempt "to increase the participation of students from these underrepresented social groups to levels which reflect their representation in the broader Australian population." In the context of this study, the underrepresented group is people who live and work in regional, rural, and remote areas.

There is a fundamental link between widening participation for people from regional, rural, and remote areas and 'place', as place is the "key to the unequal distribution of [higher education] opportunities" (Leaney & Mwale, 2021, p. 980). Those who live in regional, rural, and remote areas in Australia live in places with significantly fewer higher education opportunities, where higher education can be seen to be less worth than the considerable cost of obtaining it (Fray et al., 2020), and sometimes experience pressures to remain in community (place) for work, community, or family obligations (Delahunty, 2022; Fray et al., 2020). We feel it is important to note that these barriers to higher education are not *inherent* to regional, rural, and remote places, but instead result from the complex interplay between government policies, economic structures, socio-cultural factors, and the tyranny of distance. Furthermore, we acknowledge that widening participation—both theoretical and in practice—is similarly burdened with degrees of nuance. For example, Lumb et al. (2022, p. 61) suggest that the neoliberal widening participation agenda for regional, rural and remote Australia reduces these communities into statistical units and in doing so "obliterates place, local interests, even the idea of community" (for additional critiques of widening participation see: Harwood et al. (2016), Thomas (2001) and Burke (2012)).

These place-based barriers underscore the importance of place-based initiatives for widening participation, such as the Regional Hubs and the Regional Partnership Pool Project Program (Singh et al., 2023). The importance of place-based initiatives has been recognised in the Australian Universities Accord, with the recommendation that there should be "more targeted, place-based and community-focused" approaches to outreach and initiatives (Australian Universities Accord Review Panel, 2023, p. 129). The importance of place is also evident in the limited extant literature on the Regional Hubs; Bunn and Lumb's (2024) evaluation of the Country Universities Centre (an affiliated network of Regional Hubs) found that having access to a dedicated place to study was an important factor in the Country Universities Centre's success. This factor was also echoed by Stone, King, et al., (2022), and Baker et al (2025, p. 11), the latter of which said that "[Country Universities Centres] have created a new population of university-educated people by virtue of supporting localised study for those that are more place-bound or place-attached." The role of place was similarly echoed in our own research, and this paper builds on the existing literature and contributes to underscoring the importance of place in the success of Regional Hubs' in widening participation.

Defining Third Places

Third places are a conceptual designation or classification of place that enables us to think about the form and function of a place. Third places are informal, socially neutral environments that foster community interaction and civic life, and are typically characterised by accessibility, inclusivity, and conversational engagement; these are features that distinguish them from more formal or transactional public spaces. This conceptual designation has its ontological roots in Ray Oldenburg's idea that there are third places that are not home (the first place) or work (the second place) that serve a common good (Oldenburg, 1999; Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982). These third places are a common good for society as they "foster sociability" and provide a space for interactions between strangers (Williams & Hipp, 2019, p. 68). Oldenburg claims that these third places are "crucial" to civil society and have a far wider impact than just socialisation between strangers but instead supports the wellbeing of communities and improved social cohesion (Oldenburg, 1989, as cited in Williams & Hipp, 2019, p. 68).

While there are several scholars concerned with third places (such as Jeffres et al., 2009; Klinenberg, 2018), and those who theorise about the production of social spaces (such as Bhabha, 1994; Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996), Oldenburg's theory of the third place has been used in this article because of its established typological application. Oldenburg's concept of third places was initially centred around cafes, coffee shops, community centres, general stores, and bars, but also drew on historical equivalents such as the *agora* in Greece and the American tavern in the American Revolution (Oldenburg, 1999, 2013). However, the boundaries of what could constitute a third place has expanded significantly to include art galleries (Slater & Jung Koo, 2010), online games (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006), community libraries (Harris, 2007), university libraries (Fang, 2008), and others (see the following for more examples: Banning et al., 2010; Brown, 2017; Mair, 2009). We argue that Regional Hubs can be included in the list of third places.

Methodology

This paper is a result of the research “*We want to build a culture of learning in our community*”: The widening participation functions of the Regional University Study Hubs Program, an Equity Fellowship that was conducted in 2024-2025. This fellowship, funded by the Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success and hosted by the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), explored the widening participation mechanisms of the Regional Hubs. Ethics was granted for this research by the UTS Human Research Ethics Committee (ETH24-9301).

We employed a mixed-method methodology that included interviews and ethnographic observations during site visits. We also conducted a survey that was administered to the management of Regional Hubs. However, this has been excluded from this article as only the results of the interviews and ethnographic observations have contributed to this argument. Fifty-seven interviews were conducted with participants from nine Regional Hubs in all six Australian states and the Northern Territory. The nine chosen Regional Hubs represent variation in cohort funding (e.g., were at different stages of maturity), geographic location, and operating models. Interviews were conducted with staff and students of Regional Hubs as well as community stakeholders, typically those involved with the governance of the Regional Hubs. The full list of Regional Hubs we visited and the number of participants by participant-type is below in Table 1.

Table 1. An Overview of the Nine Regional Hubs which Participated in this Research

Regional University Study Hub name	State or Territory	Cohort	Number of participants	Staff	Student	Community
Uni Hub Spencer Gulf, Port Pirie	South Australia	1	8	2	3	3
Uni Hub Spencer Gulf, Port Lincoln	South Australia	3				
Study Hub West Coast	Tasmania	1	12	5	4	3
Regional University Centre Goondiwindi	Queensland	1	6	3	1	2
Country Universities Centre Cape York	Queensland	3	5	2	2	2
Taree Universities Campus	New South Wales	2	8	4	2	2
Wuyagiba Bush Uni	Northern Territories	2	4	2	2	
Great Southern Universities Centre	Western Australia	2	4	2	2	
Country Universities Centre Ovens Murray	Victoria	2	8	3	2	4

These interviews were semi-structured and were conducted primarily in-person during site visits, but some did occur over video conference. Participants were recruited through a modified snowball sample technique which utilised staff at Regional Hubs to identify potential participants, as well as participate in the research themselves (Negrin et al., 2022). Following the interviews, the audios were transcribed, and an organic thematic analysis was conducted in NVivo; this organic thematic analysis involved coding the files several times to best understand the raw material (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday, 2006; Galletta, 2012). The purpose of the interviews was to better understand how the participants use the Regional Hubs, their perceived impact on education enrolment and attainment rates, and the perceived value they add to regional, rural and remote communities.

Keenan conducted ethnographic observations during site visits before and after interviews occurred. The ethnographic observational tool was designed to capture Keenan's practitioner expertise during site visits and was based on, among others, the frameworks proposed by Angrosino (2007) and FitzGerald and Mills (2022) (for more, see: Daniel & Harland, 2018). A more detailed account of the methodology can be found at Keenan (2025, pp. 21-31).

Results

The concept of *place*, and the role of place in widening participation, emerged as a key theme in our analysis of the data: rather than simply referring to the Regional Hubs as a physical location, participants described the Regional Hubs as places that shaped their education experiences, routines, and sense of belonging. In the interview data, themes relating to access and place-based dimensions were prominent. When participants were discussing the role of Regional Hubs in widening participation, nearly a third of all responses were related to place-based elements (such as access, location). This demonstrates a clear conceptual link between widening participation and place and is reinforced in the ethnographic observations that Keenan made. Keenan's field notes consistently highlight how Regional Hubs users interact with the physical environment, particularly how they used the space and responded to its atmosphere. These observations demonstrate how Regional Hubs are not just study spaces, but environments that fostered comfort, routine, and importantly, return visits (all of which are aligned with the idea of third places).

When the corpus of evidence is analysed as a whole, we suggest that the concept of place of the Regional Hubs contributes to its widening participation functions through being a place dedicated to study, a place with appropriate study infrastructure, and an accessible place. These three themes are explored below

A Place Dedicated to Study

One of the key themes that emerged from the interviews was the importance of having a dedicated place for study—distinct from the distractions and demands of home or work. This theme was particularly salient among student participants who described the Regional Hubs as enabling focused, sustained engagement with their coursework. These insights were not prompted by direct questions about space or place but surfaced organically in participants' reflections on what supported or hindered their learning.

For many participants, the Regional Hub provided a physical and psychological separation from their domestic environment. One student, reflecting on the challenges of studying at home with young children, described how the lack of a proper workspace and constant interruptions made it nearly impossible to concentrate. The student said:

Because I have to do [study] around work. My kids are always around me around work [...] I started [studying] at home, so I was doing it in the bedroom and there was no desk or anything, so I was using my nightstand with multiple books, sitting on an uncomfortable chair. The kids are still screaming in the background and because my youngest at that point would've been just over a year old, she still obviously, [mimics baby sound] a lot. The attention span was not there to really take it in and so my husband actually was like, why don't you just go sign up to the thing? [...] So yeah, I don't think I would've been able to really focus on it and actually knuckle down and get it done, because I'll be able to finish it before the 18-month mark and I think that's only purely because I've got this space." – Student Interview Participant

This quote from the participant speaks to how the Regional Hubs reduce external distractions and give them a place to “knuckle down” and complete their coursework. An additional distraction in the home that was identified by many participants was animals and livestock; one participant discussed how it is difficult to study at home as their family and “sixty million animals” distracted them. Therefore, having an ability to leave home and access a place that was free of animals and associated distractions enabled them to succeed in their studies. Considering that many students in regional, rural and remote areas have pastoral/farming backgrounds and occupations, we suggest that this could be a considerable problem for many students from regional, rural and remote backgrounds.

The sentiment of the Regional Hubs being a place free of distractions was echoed in other comments from student participants. One participant said that having a place that was neither home nor work that they could exclusively focus on their studies was the key to their study success. Many of the distractions that female participants mentioned were centred on domestic labour around the home, such as washing, childcare, and other domestic chores. Therefore, the Regional Hubs as a place reduced not just the distractions but also acts to enable women to succeed in their studies through reducing gendered labour expectations.

The ethnographic observations suggest that the dedicated study areas within the Regional Hubs are designed to support a range of student needs. Observations of these facilities revealed that multiple rooms serve different functions, allowing students to choose areas for individual study or spaces designed for collaboration with peers and other users of the Regional Hubs. These purpose-built environments are equipped with all the necessary infrastructure and technology, including high-speed internet, computers, printing facilities, and video conferencing, to create a positive and effective learning space. By providing a well-resourced learning environment, the Regional Hubs reinforce their role as essential places for academic success, particularly for those balancing competing demands at home.

The significance of distraction-free environments is supported by research on cognitive load and learning: distractions can impair memory, increase fatigue, and reduce the efficiency of study (Schmidt, 2020). In this context, the Regional Hubs function as spatial interventions that help level the playing field for students in regional, rural and remote communities by offering access to study environments more commonly available to students in urban and metropolitan areas.

A Place with Appropriate Study Infrastructure

Beyond providing a distraction-free environment, the Regional Hubs were consistently described by participants as places equipped with the infrastructure necessary for effective study. This theme emerged through both the interview narratives and ethnographic observations, where students and staff highlighted how access to reliable facilities and amenities directly supported educational engagement and persistence. Facilities and amenities that were identified include high-speed internet, second screens (monitors), laptops and computers, conference rooms, air conditioning/heating, free or low-cost food, and free or low-cost toiletries, such as deodorant and period products

Kitchens were a noted facility in both Keenan's observations and mentioned in the staff and student interviews. For example, one student said that having everything she needs to study, including a kitchen, in one comfortable place allows her to "zero in" on her studies. Another student discussed how the kitchen in the Regional Hub encouraged her to take breaks in her study and allowed her to dedicate more time at the Regional Hub as she did not have to leave the place to buy or make meals. She said:

I love that there's a kitchenette here. It's got everything that you need, so I can pretty much bring my breakfast, lunch and dinner here if I need to. Sometimes I do spend the whole day here. My house is freezing, so I really appreciate the heating ... it's like I don't even need to have a cup of tea or coffee, but I make it part of my routine. It also causes me to have a break, so I'm not sitting at the computer all the time." – Student Interview Participant

The student's reference to their house being cold is not a unique experience to this student and is one of the many financial and social pressures that students experience (Devlin & McKay, 2018). Staff are aware of these financial and social pressures, and many discussed how they try to make the Regional Hubs a place that meets the needs of the students by providing the necessary facilities and amenities that students may go without. This does not just extend to heating, but also to providing snacks and other items that students might need; Keenan observed many Regional Hubs offering snacks, such as muesli bars, at either little or no cost. Keenan also

observed how some Regional Hubs offered period products and deodorant for their students. These facilities and amenities alleviate the financial pressures of studying, in effect widening participation, but also enhancing the wellbeing of their students. This is summarised well by the below quote from a staff participant:

I just think students, because they're not earning money, a lot of people they can't afford to turn on the heater, things like that, so to have a place where you can come and you can be warm. It sounds a bit hypothetical, whatever, but it gives you a sense of wellbeing that makes it one less onerous thing. You've got all these studies that at least you're warm and you're not freezing. They even have snacks, [I] think that's just lovely." – Staff Interview Participant

The importance of having access to reliable and high-speed internet was recognised by many participants in this research, including one staff member who said that many in their region did not have internet at home therefore having access to internet at the Regional Hub was a “really big driver” for some of the students. As regional, rural and remote areas across Australia have poor internet access (Archer et al., 2024; Parke, 2024), the ability for Regional Hubs to provide high-speed free internet widens participation through filling a deficit in a student’s study infrastructure. Other technology that Regional Hubs offer was also mentioned frequently by participants in this research, such as the availability of computers and laptops, video conferencing tech, and dual screens were some of the common technological facilities and amenities that students valued. This is demonstrated in the below quote from a student participant:

Access to internet is really good and the facilities are really good. I can do a Zoom if I need. I can type up my assignments with Word and those kinds of apps and that. That's probably the biggest tick." – Student Interview Participant

In the ethnographic observations, Keenan observed that the physical environment of the Regional Hubs plays a significant role in student engagement. For example, the reception area is the first point of contact for students and contributes to the overall experience that students have in the place. Keenan observed friendly and approachable staff at reception areas, which contributes to the feeling of welcoming and belonging, which can make students feel more connected to the Regional Hubs. This sense of connection is particularly important in the context of this study, as regional, rural and remote students often feel isolated or disconnected from their university or higher education in general (Bunn & Lumb, 2024).

The provision of appropriate study infrastructure is not just a matter of convenience; it is a widening participation function of Regional Hubs. Not only do these facilities, amenities, and physical space all fill an infrastructure gap, they also contribute to the environment of the place in which students feel welcome and like they belong there. As this feeling of belonging and welcoming is a contributed factor in student retention and academic success (O'Keeffe, 2013; Woods & Hinton, 2019), this should be considered a widening participation function of the Regional Hubs.

Extended Access to the Regional Hubs

Underpinning the widening participation function of a dedicated place to study with appropriate facilities and amenities was the access to the Regional Hubs itself; for many students, extended access to a Regional Hub was not simply a convenience, but instead a precondition for participation. Students frequently mentioned that accessing the Regional Hub outside of traditional business hours was a reason that they used the Regional Hub. This is demonstrated in the below quote from a student participant, who said that even though their Regional Hub is meant to be open from 9am they can usually gain access from 8am:

I really like having a physical place to come ... I love that they have afterhours access here, because I do like to start a bit earlier so I can come in - although they say they're open from 9:00 but there seems to always be someone here from 8:00 anyway. – Student Interview Participant

The importance of this access was echoed by other students, with one pointing out that the library closed at 17:00 so being able to use the Regional Hub at nighttime and have all the study infrastructure they need got them “over the line” to complete their studies. The importance of access was also recognised by the staff of Regional Hubs. For example, one staff member said that they had changed their opening hours to be responsive to the needs of medical students who wanted to study before their shift started at 07:00. By opening at 05:00 it allowed the students to access the space and study while they were “still fresh.” Other staff recognised the importance of flexible access to the Regional Hubs, with one saying:

When we first got the job out of hours I would drive home, you know, from grocery shopping and I would see a car in the car park, and I would be like yes someone is there using it ... Or, like, driving to town on a Saturday morning and seeing two or three cars there and be so excited. – Staff Interview Participant

It should be noted that access and extended access to Regional Hubs can also raise safety concerns for students, particularly female students. For example, one female participant was concerned about accessing the Regional Hub at night due to a blind corner and minimal lighting. However, when the issue was raised with staff the issue was addressed increasing the student’s safety and their ability to study at a time that suits them. The student’s original words are below.

I study at night too, I at first - was a bit weird because of the corner, and as soon as I said something to the [staff] they're like, they put mirrors up and they put floodlights on, and I feel totally safe coming to study and then leaving by myself, as a female, at 9:00 pm at night, which is important. – Student Interview Participant

This quote from the student re-enforces the relationship between extended access, safety, and widening participation. While in this instance the participant was already using the Regional Hubs during extended hours, the increased safety made the place more welcoming and hospitable. This is articulated well by a student at a different Regional Hub who said that they fit visiting the Regional Hubs around their life, which often means they visit the Regional Hub at night. The participant said:

Because I usually study around about late hours of the night, between eight and ten, just because I knock off work, I have to go home, do all the things, have dinner, then I go to the [Regional Hub] and study for a couple hours. Because [the Regional Hub] has that security system, and all that kind of stuff, even in some of the study areas they have lockable doors, just tap ones, which also I always do it when I'm there alone, just because being a female in a way, it's always scary going somewhere by yourself, even when you know the facility is safe, it's still nerve-wracking, you're always extra cautious. So just having that accessibility, and knowing that it's a safe environment, and that there's all these precautions in place to make sure you're safe, I think definitely makes me feel a little better. – Student Interview Participant

The role of access and extended access to study spaces is supported by international evidence, which suggests that there is a relationship between access and longer opening hours of places (Delafontaine et al., 2011), and there are positive educational outcomes associated with extended access hours when there are safety measures in place (Budzise-Weaver et al., 2024). Further to this, the role of convenience is widely established in the literature; when students can access a place at a time that is convenient to them, they are more likely to use it (Connaway et al., 2011).

To conclude the results of this research, we suggest that the role of place in the Regional University Study Hub program is significant when assessing their widening participation functions. When students can safely access a place dedicated to study that has appropriate facilities, amenities, and a welcoming environment, then they are more likely to succeed in their studies. As students in metropolitan areas have more access to these types of places, it is widening the participation of students in regional, rural and remote areas to have equitable accesses to places where they can succeed in their studies.

Regional Hubs as ‘Third Places’

The preceding analysis highlights the importance of *place* in the ability of Regional University Study Hubs in widening participation for students from regional, rural, and remote areas. While the operational and educational functions of the Regional Hubs are well documents, there remains a gap in the literature theorising the type of place they represent. We suggest that Regional Hubs can be conceptualised as *third places* as they meet most of the characteristics of third places. Oldenburg (1999) provides eight characteristics of sociability that should be considered when ascertaining if a place constitutes a third places (for more see: Vaux & Langlais, 2021). We have condensed these eight characteristics into the below table and have indicated if Regional Hubs meet the characteristic.

As Table 2 indicates, Regional Hubs meet five of the eight characteristics defined by Oldenburg. Our data suggests that Regional Hubs meet most of these characteristics and partially meets others. For example, while access to the Regional Hubs often requires enrolment in higher education and registration for a keycard or fob, there are no socio-economic or cultural barriers to entry. This supports the idea of Regional Hubs meeting the leveller characteristic, where students from diverse backgrounds share a common space and purpose.

Table 2. Comparison Between the Eight Characteristics of Third Places and Regional Hubs

Third Place Characteristic	Does the Regional Hub meet this characteristic?
Third places are neutral ground, as users have little obligations to others in the space, individuals are free to come and go, and different views can be expressed.	Yes
The rank or status of individuals in third places is of little importance to their use or access. There is no precondition to be able to use a third place, such as a membership.	Partial
Conversation is a key activity of the third place.	Partial
Third places are accessible, accommodating, and comfortable.	Yes
There are regulars at third places who contribute to the environment or ‘vibe’ of the place.	Yes
Third places are homely and low profile, without extravagance or pomp.	Yes
There is a playful mood at third places.	Partial
Third places are viewed as homes away from home by individuals because they get a sense of being at ease or being at home when using the space.	Yes

Although study, and not conversation, is the primary activity of Regional Hubs, participants frequently described the social dimensions of Regional Hubs—sharing meals, chatting with staff, and forming informal peer networks. These interactions, while not always central, contribute to a sense of community and mutual support. One student described how the kitchen space encouraged breaks and casual conversation, reinforcing the Regional Hub’s role as a welcoming and socially engaging environment. Keenan’s ethnographic observations also noted the presence of regulars who shaped the atmosphere of the Regional Hub, contributing to its identity as a familiar and comfortable space.

Furthermore, the idea of Regional Hubs as “*home away from home*” was echoed across interviews with students who use Regional Hubs. Students spoke of feeling safe, supported, and at ease, particularly when escaping the distractions or pressures of home. For female students, this often included relief from domestic labour and/or caregiving responsibilities. The physical design of the Regional Hubs, which include quiet study rooms, communal areas, and approachable staff, reinforced this sense of belonging.

Conceptualising Regional Hubs as third places helps us understand their broader social function. Beyond academic support, they foster a culture of learning and community engagement in RRR areas. Keenan’s observations noted a shift in local attitudes toward higher education in communities with a Regional Hub—suggesting that the presence of a third place dedicated to study can influence not only individual outcomes, but also collective aspirations. This aligns with Oldenburg’s view of third places as serving a “*common good*,” and helps clarify the role Regional Hubs play in their communities.

Discussion and Conclusion

This research has implications for both practice and theory. We have demonstrated that *place* is a critical factor in the widening participation functions of Regional University Study Hubs. Specifically, our findings show that Regional Hubs support students’ success by:

1. Reducing distractions and domestic pressures, particularly gendered household labour, thereby enabling healthier study habits.
2. Providing appropriate facilities, amenities, and study infrastructure in a comfortable, welcoming environment that encourages students to return regularly.

These functions align closely with the characteristics of third places. Regional Hubs offer neutral, accessible, and low-profile environments where students feel at ease, a home away from home. While study is the primacy activity, participants also spoke about informal conversations, shared routines, and a sense of community, suggesting the Regional Hubs foster sociability in ways that extend beyond academic tasks. This supports our interpretation and classification of Regional Hubs as third places.

For practitioners and policymakers, these findings underscore the importance of intentionally designing Regional Hubs with the concept of *place* in mind. The physical and social environment of a Regional Hub is not incidental; it plays a central role in enabling students to engage with their studies. Designing future Regional Hubs with the principles in mind from the outset, rather than retrofitting them later, could enhance their effectiveness and ensure they meet the needs of RRR communities.

There are several other implications of this research that either fall outside the scope of this paper, or areas where future research can address. For example, the role between place and identity has been widely established in the literature (such as Easthope, 2009), as has the relationship between student identity and student success (such as Bliuc et al., 2011). Therefore, future research could investigate the role of place informing student identity at Regional Hubs and the widening participations implications of this. Furthermore, the role of gender has not

been explored in detail in relation to the Regional Hubs, despite women making up 75% of all Regional Hub users (Department of Education, 2025b). Future research should be conducted to assess if Regional Hubs can be considered feminist third places and explore other gendered elements of the Regional University Study Hub program.

In conclusion, Regional University Study Hubs have been shown to widen participation in higher education (Keenan, 2025), and this study highlights *place* as a central mechanism in that process. When students can safely access a distraction-free, well-equipped, and welcoming space—one that supports both academic and social needs—they are more like to succeed in their studies. Conceptualising Regional Hubs as third places helps us understand not only their educational value, but also their broader role in fostering a culture of learning and inclusion in regional, rural, and remote communities.

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