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House of Representatives  
Regional Development and Decentralization Committee  
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Dear Ms Agostino,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission to the Committee.

In this submission The University of Western Australia (UWA) advances the proposition that:

There is an opportunity for the University and the Federal Government to work together to identify government functions that, when sensibly located in regional Australia and combined with university, State and private sector activities create a 'critical mass' of capability for the betterment of the community as a whole.

#### UWA in Regional Australia

UWA actively supports regional Australia in a role framed by the founders of the University. UWA has a significant interest in regional Australia and is working towards the prosperity and welfare of this part of the Australian community.

UWA has both an opportunity and a responsibility to work to the benefit of regional Australia. Throughout most of Western Australia's history, UWA was the State's only university and is now counted amongst the top 100 Universities in the world.

UWA has a footprint in 14 regional centres throughout Western Australia, comprising a campus in Albany, and in the nodes of the Rural Clinical School (with the University of Notre Dame Australia). UWA also operates its own Agricultural Research farm, the Gravity Research Centre, and the Ningaloo Research Centre. Researchers from all five Western Australian-based universities regularly collaborate and share knowledge and resources, particularly in rural, regional and remote locations. In addition, UWA research and educational activities are conducted throughout the State on a functional basis, with a range of field trips, student placements and community events.

Developing aspiration for regional students to attend university has been a central commitment of UWA in recent years, via Aspire and other programs.

Currently UWA has around 279 unique active research projects, of the order of \$50M, that are focussed in the regions, with many researchers conducting an element of their general research agenda in the regions. Other Perth based activities in research and education are being conducted for regional stakeholders.

UWA's capacity to deliver undergraduate programs with an emphasis on face-to-face delivery in rural, regional and remote locations has been tested, but for the most part, it has not been as successful as would be hoped. Western Australia's non-metropolitan small communities are spread across large distances, thereby limiting the viability of most face-to-face teaching programs.

### Terms of Reference Part 1

*Topics include - best practice, growth, capability, diversification, quality of life, engagement leverage, place-based competitive advantage and collective governance.*

Best practice, which is one of the key terms of reference for the committee, should recognise the concept of facilitating regional Australians' access to higher education. This would be achieved by aligning the research activities of Australian universities with the day to day work of relevant government agencies through decentralisation of those agencies in order to provide a beneficial impact to people living and working in Australia's regions.

In 2014 the State Government (Department of Education Services) commissioned ACIL Allen Consulting to examine unmet demand for higher education in regional WA. The final report, '*Unmet Demand for Higher Education in Regional Western Australia*,' found considerable under-representation of regional and remote students in WA universities compared to other regions of Australia. The average participation rate for the eight WA regions is 5.3 per cent – significantly lower than in comparator regions across Australia (7.2 per cent).

UWA is committed to providing world class and best practice research and educational activities in regional Western Australia, and to do that reliable, accessible, sophisticated telecommunications and internet services must be available.

UWA is cognisant of the value that well-educated residents bring to a community, assisting in its growth, development and overall sustainability. Further, the importance of the knowledge economy to the key regional industries in Western Australia is well recognised. Accessibility to quality education is an important factor for attracting and retaining regional populations: the challenge is providing quality education in these areas.

It is likely that there will continue to be more emphasis on online education, with a supplementary need for students to work in structured tutorials, with 'hands on'

elements and an increasing blend of academic and industry instruction and experience.

There is a current opportunity to build Australia's market share of international students through broader regional offerings. However, international students and scholars have an expectation of sophisticated cyber connectivity.

UWA is also actively seeking to supplement its "Study Abroad" program with "Study InBroad", to have UWA Students spend a semester or undertake units in a regional centre.

From a public policy perspective, there are many benefits to securing University activities in regional Australia that contribute to growth, capability, diversification, quality of life, engagement leverage and place-based competitive advantage. Utilising decentralisation of government agencies as a tool to deliver those outcomes in the context of alliances with Universities and communities is a goal worth pursuing.

## Terms of Reference Part 2

*Topics include - potential for decentralisation, characteristics, locations, functions, positions, co-location, social and community impact, lessons learned, private sector access to capital.*

UWA suggests that the Federal Government consider decentralising a number of its agencies that could efficiently build a presence in regional WA while maintaining national service delivery. A decentralised government agency in a regional location presents the opportunity to optimise mature, sophisticated connectivity for non-metropolitan locations which, through active partnerships with WA Universities, has the potential to enhance educational outcomes and research practice.

Such a decentralisation initiative could support the work of the university sector in the areas discussed above, and contribute to:

- Building the knowledge economy for the key industries in the regions;
- Supporting research and education initiatives in the university sector that contribute to Australia's international competitiveness;
- Supporting regional Australians' access to higher education;
- Supporting more reliable, sophisticated telecommunications and internet services for regional centres;
- Contributing to building Australia's market share of international students; and
- Attracting and retaining regional populations, particularly younger, working-age cohorts.

There are a range of opportunities to decentralise Federal agencies to a regional location in Western Australia and which have the potential to collaborate with the tertiary education sector (and others) in Western Australia, including:

- Geoscience - UWA and Curtin University have a geo-technology research and education niche. Approximately 50% of all mining and energy activity in Australia occurs in WA, but there is minimal direct Geoscience Australia presence. If part of Geoscience Australia were to be relocated to a regional centre in WA it could be co-located with the WA Geological Survey and Western Australian universities. The Western Australian School of Mines, located in Kalgoorlie is a logical co-location option, given that there is also a “Core Library” located in Kalgoorlie.
- Natural resources and ocean science are very important for the Indian Ocean Rim. There is already considerable collaboration between CSIRO, AIMS and UWA in the form of key scientific, education and research activities. The advent of the federally supported Indian Ocean Marine Research Centre at UWA has provided a focus for that collaboration. UWA has recently committed to conducting a research program in the Ningaloo Centre based in Exmouth. Relocating parts of Federal Agencies that are responsible for supporting marine research and regulation to Exmouth and the Mid West region could be explored.
- UWA has been a strong supporter of international relations, with a particular focus on those countries that fall within our region and shared time zone. UWA hosts the Perth USAsia Centre and runs the “In the Zone” conference and meeting series. There has been strong support from DFAT for those initiatives and, given Western Australia’s strategic location by time zone and Indian Ocean rim location, further exploration of the strategic, defence and foreign affairs capability as it pertains to those initiatives would be prescient.
- Building on the regional presence that is provided via the Rural Clinical School system could be of great strategic value. There is already a significant teaching, clinical and administrative infrastructure in regional Australia under this program. Expanding the Rural Clinical School system to accommodate a broader range of health related services by partnering with university, community and professional stakeholders in the regions would enhance the training of medical and health professionals for international remote conditions. This potentially is an international market which to date has not been tapped.
- The UWA presence at its Albany campus provides opportunity for exploring co-location with biodiversity and renewable energy functions of the Federal Government. The Albany campus hosts the Centre for Excellence in Natural Resource Management and, expectedly, the new State Government supported wave energy research centre.

- Northern Australia is also a further opportunity for multi-disciplinary activity to be supported on a 'place' basis. Establishing some agile and flexible pilots of multi-department, multi-institutional presence in Northern Australia based around current economic drivers and activities could be explored.

UWA has a very good relationship with the CSIRO and a range of collaborations with that organisation. There are no doubt further opportunities to support significant collaborations and co-locations with that agency. There is an observable trend within the CSIRO to look to rationalisation of its facilities and UWA is certainly interested in how it and CSIRO might converge for mutual benefit across a range of regional research opportunities, including those listed above, as well as radio astronomy and agriculture.

UWA is primarily seeking to illustrate that there are a range of real possibilities available to the Commonwealth to add in-kind strength to building regional communities' breadth, diversity and sustainability. Decentralisation of appropriate agencies not only has the potential to create a better outcome for the community more broadly: the strategy also places relevant federal agencies in the regions where their key responsibilities or discipline specific areas are based.

In supporting the examination of decentralisation opportunities, UWA makes the following further points:

- The activity to be considered for decentralisation must have a natural affinity with the region that is contemplated for the relocation;
- The decentralisation opportunities that have been identified would trigger a consideration of further reorientation of UWA resources and priorities to match the Federal agenda;
- The opportunities for decentralisation should also activate an alignment with further State and private sector investments;
- Regional Western Australia is too sparsely populated to sustain a competitive model for resource allocation, and a planned approach with logical partners is the preferred model; and
- This is an agenda that should be built over the next decade. Moving people and their families to regions and to different states will not happen overnight. Building a year-by-year program of creating positions in a decentralised context is a more sustainable approach than a "heroic gesture".

The capacity for the Commonwealth to play a positive role here is significant.

UWA embraces its regional role and is ready, willing and able to partner with Federal government in scoping out appropriate opportunities. It is steadfast in its commitment to partnering with the public and private sectors to breathe life into the educational and lifelong learning opportunities for all Western Australians and providing educational solutions to meet international demand.

UWA looks forward to contributing to the work of the Committee and would be pleased to provide further input.