



Review of the Wide Bay Burnett Regional Plan 2022

The University of the Sunshine Coast (UniSC) welcomes the review of the current Wide Bay Burnett Regional Plan and is pleased to provide a submission to inform the finalisation of the Draft Wide Bay Burnett Regional Plan 2022.

UniSC would welcome the opportunity to elaborate on any aspect of our submission. If this is of interest, please contact Jason Mills, Head of Government Relations, UniSC at jmills3@usc.edu.au.

About UniSC

Since opening in 1996, UniSC has rapidly expanded in size, footprint and reputation, working with our communities and stakeholders to create greater opportunities for our regions. With five campuses stretching from the Fraser Coast down to Moreton Bay, UniSC is a comprehensive university focused on excellent teaching, ground-breaking research, championing sustainability, and producing award-winning alumni. UniSC has two campuses located in the Wide Bay Burnett region at Gympie and Hervey Bay, along with a research and education centre on K'gari.

We are one of Australia's highest-rated public universities in key areas of overall experience, skills development, student support, teaching quality, social equity, first generation, learner resources (undergraduate and postgraduate) and learner engagement (postgraduate). Our research explores the timeliest topics of our era, those with the most significance for the future, with a focus on environmental impact, mental and medical health, technology, and human behaviour.

Key points / recommendations

1. With two campuses in the Wide Bay Burnett region, at Gympie and Hervey Bay, along with a research and education centre on K'gari, UniSC is playing a key role in driving higher tertiary education participation rates, producing job-ready graduates, undertaking research, and contributing to the region's economy and social fabric. UniSC therefore recommends more deliberately recognising the important role that tertiary education providers play across many facets of the Plan.
2. UniSC endorses the development of a Regional Workforce Strategy and we recommend it includes specific reference to the region's tertiary and vocational education providers given their responsibility for the Strategy's success.
3. UniSC agrees with the importance of addressing housing affordability and availability in the region and we recommend the inclusion of short- and medium-term actions, for example by committing to develop a Regional Housing Strategy.
4. UniSC agrees with the need to develop a Regional Investment Prospectus and recommend established education providers are consulted in its development, including for case studies, and that the Regional Workforce Strategy is added as an addendum.

Introduction

UniSC recognises that within the Wide Bay Burnett region there is important, specialist knowledge in agriculture, forestry and advanced manufacturing, alongside environments of national and international significance and attraction, prominent natural resources and significant and increasing renewable energy generation.

However, we also acknowledge the regional challenges, including an ageing population, exacerbated by the outbound migration of young people, lower levels of higher education participation rates, higher unemployment, infrastructure shortfalls and vulnerability to climate change.

Given all of this, UniSC continues to see tremendous opportunity to deliver value to the region by partnering with local communities, industry and governments to drive higher tertiary education participation rates, produce job-ready graduates that meet local industry and skill needs, undertake regionally relevant and impactful research and contribute to the regional economic and social fabric.

UniSC looks forward to supporting the delivery of the final Wide Bay Burnett Regional Plan, recognising the importance of its aspirational 25-year vision and the clear alignment with our own mission of 'enriching our regions, connecting with our communities and creating opportunities for all'.

Strategic priority 1: Growing our people and places

The draft Plan recognises the importance of a strong, responsive and educated workforce, noting that specialist skill gaps will likely emerge in professions not currently catered for in local education and training facilities.

UniSC is committed to continuing to enhance its role as a central player in the delivery of accessible and world class education and training in the region. Working side by side with industry and government will be critical for developing the skills and human capital to become innovators in the knowledge and service economies and ensure increasing competitiveness of the region's labour force.

The promotion, support and maintenance of a high-quality education system will be essential for:

- Attracting new workforce entrants, especially those from outside the region;
- Closing the gap between skills demand and supply and providing opportunities for life-long learning; and
- Re-engaging, re-skilling and empowering the existing working age populace.

It should be noted that a high-quality education system goes beyond vocational and tertiary education to include early education, and primary and secondary schooling. The Plan would be strengthened by more deliberately recognising the importance of supporting the continued presence and growth of comprehensive, high quality tertiary education providers and the contribution they make in developing the region's future workforce capability.

UniSC endorses the development of a Regional Workforce Strategy, a framework for industry workforce planning that aligns public education investment, vocational training and tertiary education initiatives with future workforce and industry needs, and recommends including specific reference to the region's tertiary and vocational education providers with responsibility for delivering actions.

Objective 1.2: Plan for our future

The draft Plan correctly identifies the provision of well-designed and diverse housing choices in vibrant and attractive locations, close to a variety of services and amenities as a key driver in the region's ability to successfully attract new population growth. UniSC's own experience has found that the current lack of housing choice and availability has proven an obstacle for attracting staff and students to the region.

The draft Plan suggests a policy response to housing diversity, including investigating opportunities to use state and local government-owned land in appropriately located areas to provide affordable or social housing, but does not provide clear actions to address the issue. UniSC recommends the inclusion of short- and medium-term priorities aimed at increasing housing choice and availability in the region. For example, a Regional Housing Strategy which includes a focus on low-cost accommodation options for students needing to relocate to a regional centre to study.

Objective 1.3: Make places we're proud of

UniSC endorses the creation of an addendum to the Regional Investment Prospectus showcasing the best aspects of liveability the region has to offer. UniSC recommends strengthening the approach with the inclusion of examples of established education providers.

Strategic priority 2: Taking charge of our economic future

A strong and resilient regional economy relies on a range of factors including a well-educated and skilled workforce, well-developed infrastructure, a diverse population, a mix of industries and businesses, innovation, development of new products and services and quality of life, characterised by safe and affordable housing, good schools, and recreational opportunities. Having an established university like UniSC, with local campuses and study locations providing research and education services is an asset worthy of recognition in the final Plan.

Objective 2.1: Transition into Queensland's powerhouse for advanced manufacturing

The region's manufacturing sector is diverse, with strengths in agricultural processing, food and beverage production, rail and rollingstock, transport equipment, primary metal and metal manufacturing, and timber industries. UniSC looks forward to its continued contribution to the development of a highly skilled workforce, which is critical to driving future industry competitiveness and expansion as these sectors innovate and increase the adoption of leading-edge technologies.

UniSC recommends including the Regional Workforce Strategy as an addendum to the Regional Investment Prospectus.

Objective 2.2: Lead primary production into the mid-21st Century

UniSC's research centres and institutes, such as the Forest Research Institute and the Centre for Bioinnovation, will continue to play an important role in the development of AgTech innovation, skills and capacity-building in the region by bringing together local, national and international experts to solve real world challenges. Through productive partnerships with industry and commercial partners, research outcomes will be relevant, impactful and applied where they are most needed. We recommend that this ongoing research effort and the influence and contribution of research organisations such as UniSC are recognised in the final Plan.

Objective 2.3: Create employment pathways for all

Health care, aged care, social assistance, education and training, and tourism are identified as the key regional employers within Wide Bay Burnett region. UniSC agrees and offers study programs at its Hervey Bay and Gympie campuses, as well as online, that are aimed at supporting workforce development in these sectors.

UniSC is strengthening links between the health, allied health services, education, and research and development sectors. Our Healthy Ageing Hub at our Gympie campus provides an excellent example of an emerging centre with a focus on regional health, gerontology, caring for older people, and ageing-related education and research in the Gympie and broader Wide Bay Burnett region. Through research and innovation in the delivery of aged care, the Healthy Ageing Hub offers new solutions to pressing issues to transform health, communities, and lives. Partnerships with industry and government provide new opportunities for study and professional development as well as research and innovation in the delivery of aged care. UniSC has formed strong links with industry partners and launched a final year nursing internship for graduate nurses considering a career in aged care.

Planning and facilitating the expansion and clustering of education facilities and industry is to be encouraged and UniSC is eager to pursue further opportunities in the Wide Bay Burnett region, recognising the potential of the Gympie TAFE site and Hervey Bay City Centre and drawing on our experience of clustering and co-location across our footprint (UniSC Gympie, UniSC Caboolture, UniSC Moreton Bay, Sunshine Coast Health Institute).

With respect to the reference to new local opportunities for blended or mixed mode learning, we note that UniSC already offers blended learning across many of its courses and programs, which are supported by in person learning experiences at our Gympie and Fraser Coast campuses. We would encourage relevant communities in the region to consider the merits of the Commonwealth Government supported 'Regional University Centre' (RUC) model which funds open-access student support centres in smaller regional and remote locations. One or more appropriately located RUC in the region may further support higher education accessibility for students who prefer to remain in their local community while studying.

UniSC supports the proposed policy response across the three employment sectors and recommends including specific reference to the region's tertiary and vocational education as key stakeholders, particularly against actions 2.3.A. It is further recommended that these three employment sectors are recognised in the Regional Investment Prospectus (Action 2.1.C).

Strategic priority 3: Sustaining our environment and lifestyle

Objective 3.1: Conserve and celebrate the culture and environmental features that draw and keep people in the region

Championing environmental sustainable principles and practices is one of our values at UniSC and we are proud to be ranked the highest of any university in Queensland in the Times Higher Education assessment of universities against their progress towards the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

UniSC supports the proposed policy response, and we are pleased to see the inclusion of policy 3.1.7: 'Indigenous cultural heritage knowledge and connection to land and seascapes informs local planning and development in the sustainable management of landscapes, public space, heritage, cultural assets and values.'

We look forward to further opportunities to collaborate on the delivery of the proposed actions and we draw attention to our internationally recognised expertise in environmental restoration and conservation, koala conservation, and climate change and adaptation.