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ACADEMY OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES
IN AUSTRALIA SUBMISSION TO:

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
SKILLS AND EMPLOYMENT

Submission to the National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund (NPILF) Consultation Paper 2020

30 October 2020

The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (the Academy) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) *National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund (NPILF) Consultation Paper 2020* (the Consultation Paper).

The Academy is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that draws on the expertise of over 680 elected Fellows to provide practical, evidence-based advice to governments, businesses and the community on important social policy issues. The Academy actively promotes understanding of the social sciences and champions excellence across its many fields of learning.

The Academy supports the intention of the NPILF to encourage deeper partnerships between universities and industry, with a focus on improving graduate outcomes. The Academy considers the overall intention of the initiative worthwhile and educationally appropriate, particularly in an era beset with concerns about graduate employment and the need for graduates able to adapt to the changing requirements of contemporary work.

In particular, the Academy welcomes the NPILF's educational focus (appropriate curriculum and pedagogic practices), flexibility, active encouragement of exploratory and risk-taking approaches and recognition that there is a need to go beyond traditional models of Work Integrated Learning (WIL) (i.e. supervised placements).

However, the Academy is concerned about the operation and implementation aspects of the NPILF design, which may undermine successful realisation of the Government's objectives for the program. Therefore, our comments in this submission are directed at recommendations to finesse the current proposals along with suggesting alternative ideas.

Businesses want well-rounded graduates with generalist expertise

The Academy questions the narrow focus on core STEM and STEM+ skills under the broader Job-ready Graduate Package including the NPILF. It's been shown repeatedly that employers place a high value on transferrable skills, such as teamwork, communication, problem-solving, innovation and emotional judgement that are best taught through broad programs of study that incorporate the humanities and social sciences alongside technical and scientific disciplines. More importantly, these are skills that *"have become widely acknowledged as important in driving business success"*.¹ According to a recent study conducted by LinkedIn, communication, business management and problem solving were the most commonly required skills in job opportunities posted to the platform in June and July of this year,² and 75% of employers place at least as much emphasis, if not more, on personal transferable skills than they do on technical skills when

¹ Available: <https://www2.deloitte.com/au/en/pages/economics/articles/value-humanities.html>

² *The Skills Companies are Hiring For—Right Now*. Available [here](#).

recruiting.³ These suggestions are well supported by the Australian outcomes of the Programme of International Assessment for Adult Competencies which focused on adults problem-solving and technology competence, which found that these capacities are required within all forms and classifications of work.⁴ These kinds of capacities need to be embedded within the preparation for all occupations across tertiary education not just those commonly listed as STEM.⁵

If the aspiration of the NPILF is to *ensure Australia has the skills and capacity to meet tomorrow's workforce needs and drive future economic prosperity for the nation* (p.10) then, the Academy suggests higher education policy and programs should encourage broad courses of study that incorporate the arts, humanities and social sciences alongside STEM and other subjects.

'Job readiness' is not uniform across workplaces

There is a significant difference between preparation for occupations (i.e. being occupational ready), and 'job readiness'. The former is about developing the technical knowledge of the occupation. This is what successive governments have requested tertiary education secures for the Australian population: being prepared for the requirements of an occupation and having the capacity to grow into that occupation. In contrast, and as noted in the Consultation Paper, job readiness includes the development of relevant occupational knowledge and skills, plus ability to apply it to specific workplace requirements.

The application of occupational knowledge differs substantially across workplaces because each workplace is quite distinct, with its own culture, range and nature of tasks and degree of team collaboration and support. The public service differs from the finance sector; not-for profits differ from mining companies; small start-ups differ from small retail businesses; aged care differs from manufacturing. The requirements of the job will mostly not be known to the graduate or the education institution until the graduate has been employed. In addition, outside the regulated professions, there is a surprisingly weak match across the workforce between the qualifications of workers and the job that they are doing. Therefore, graduates should be equipped with skills that enable adaptability to varying workplace requirements as opposed to the specific needs of each individual workplace. These skills comprise the general thinking capacity of the educated mind, developed in the learning of the canonical knowledge of the occupation or discipline, and awareness of and capacities to adapt that knowledge to address specific problems.

Recommendation 1: NPILF should prioritise adaptability as well as specific needs of particular occupations – developing adaptable occupational knowledge is a prudent educational goal.

³ *The importance of personal skills when looking for a job.* Available: <https://lmip.gov.au/default.aspx?LMIP/GainInsights/EmployersRecruitmentInsights>

⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2013). Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (Australia 2011-2012) In A. B. o. Statistics (Ed.), Cat 42280.0. Canberra.

⁵ Beven, F. (1997). Learning in the workplace: Airline customer service. Retrieved from Brisbane: Centre for Learning and Work Research

Collaborating with ‘industries’ versus ‘enterprises’

The Consultation Paper contains several references to meeting the needs of *industry* however job readiness as noted above, is about meeting the needs of the specific *enterprises* who employ graduates. Industries do not employ graduates, enterprises do. The Academy suggests clarification is needed regarding the proposed collaborating parties and if it is intended to be at the peak industry group or individual enterprises level.

In June 2019 there were more than 900, 000⁶ actively trading companies in Australia⁷ highlighting the significant complexity and resourcing issues associated with engaging the range of enterprises that employ graduates, and co-constructing curriculum to meet their specific and diverse needs. The Consultation Paper also does not address mechanisms to permit small businesses, who are often poorly able to represent themselves or their interests in these kinds of consultations, as was found within the reforms of the vocational education system in the 1990s.⁸

Globally, these kinds of collaborations are usually mediated by a separate agency or committees, such as the local chambers of commerce in Germany. The most likely practical approach would be for curriculum co-construction to be conducted through an advisory process comprising and representing the interests of both large and small enterprises, not direct engagement between universities and the many hundreds of enterprises that they serve.

Recommendation 2: Clarification is needed regarding the collaborating parties and if it is intended to be at the peak industry group or individual enterprises level.

Recommendation 3: DESE should consider and explore international examples of how university engagement with the large number of enterprises can be effectively facilitated. This should include consideration of the impact of enterprise size on their capacity to engage.

A ‘university-industry partnership’ is a bi-lateral arrangement with mutual obligations

Throughout the Consultation Paper, university-industry partnerships and collaboration is referenced, with the occasional reference to mutuality, for example:

This requires universities and industry to embed mutual engagement in their day to day operations and the incentives in the system need to be realigned to support this outcome (p.5)

Yet, significant onus and the majority of measures under the NPILF are directed towards the university partner, noting *they may seek involvement from industry in selecting indicators and*

⁶ Total Companies only. Excludes sole proprietors, public sector, partnerships and trusts

⁷ ABS Counts of Australian Businesses, including Entries and Exits, June 2015 to June 2019. Available: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/business-indicators/counts-australian-businesses-including-entries-and-exits/latest-release>

⁸ Billett, S (2004) From your business to our business: Industry and vocational education in Australia. Oxford Review of Education 30 (1) 12-33

developing the plan (p.15). In essence, this suggests that universities will be held largely accountable for engagements with enterprises that in some cases will be beyond their control. There is already evidence from those trying to organise work placements to suggest that enterprises have struggled with the demands for requests from schooling and tertiary education (for example, challenges faced by the national APR.Intern program to fill additional industry placements for PhD students provided as part of the National Innovation and Science Agenda), and their interest in and ability to collaborate is largely beyond the control of the university.

Genuine, meaningful and enduring partnerships and collaborations between workplaces and educational institutions are not based upon unilateral decisions and actions, but shared aims and understandings of partners' needs.⁹ Therefore, any allocation methodology needs to accommodate the varied ways that such collaborations might arise. For instance, hospitals and healthcare systems have an existing set of bases for engaging with tertiary education institutions. Whereas, other kinds of enterprises are less likely to have these kind of arrangements, expertise and resources. There are also likely to be issues for regional universities with their more limited scope of industry partners.

Recommendation 4: NPILF should better reflect the role of enterprises in governance and metrics and include consideration of the process to build partnerships and maturing relationships.

Work integrated learning is more than just placements

WIL is much more than placements. It is providing, integrating and enriching students' experiences in both workplaces and educational settings. Essentially, it is primarily an educational process, rather than an administrative one. That is, it requires the identification of goals, then the organisation and sequencing of experiences, enriching those experiences and engaging students. It is important to acknowledge that contemporary students are 'time jealous', which is different than being time poor. They will only engage effortfully in activities that are credit bearing, that they view as worthwhile and are aligned with their personal career or educational goals.

The definition used in the Consultation Paper refers to work integrated *education* (i.e. the kinds and provisions of experiences), whereas work integrated learning is something that students do (i.e. their reconciliation of what they have experienced through both the workplace and university). Ultimately, it will be the degree by which students come to engage in these processes, together with the skill and commitment of the enterprise in the provision of a valuable experience, that will determine the value added by the inclusion of placements within a degree.

Consequently, the WIL definition could usefully be extended and the 'integration' focus made stronger. Without that integration emphasis and its educational processes emphasised it could amount to no more than placements. The whole point about generating adaptable and critical knowledge is the integration of the experiences that students have through both the workplace

⁹ Seddon, T & Billett, S (2004) *Social Partnerships in Vocational Education: Building Community Capacity*, Adelaide, NCVET

and educational institution and their ability to develop informed practices and principles that adapt to different situations (e.g. where they find employment). It is through these kinds of processes that students can develop the kind of adaptability that this policy is seeking to achieve.

Recommendation 5: Extend the WIL definition to include a stronger focus on 'integration'.

Occupational standards need to be considered

Universities and other tertiary education institutions are guided by a range of external standards in parts of their teaching and learning efforts. Sometimes these are industry or occupationally stipulated. For instance, providers of education training are accountable to teach registration boards, medical faculties to medical boards and nursing to nursing boards et cetera. These external standards apply mainly to professional degrees. There will be inevitable questions about the degree by which these need to be prioritised against the requirements of specific enterprises to meet job readiness requirements.

Recommendation 6: DESE should consider how the needs of individual enterprises can be reconciled with national or state-based occupational standards or guidelines that are used to regulate employment as an occupational practitioner and are used to mandate curriculum in some parts of higher education.

The Academy and its Fellows would welcome the opportunity to discuss any of the matters raised in this submission. Please contact Andi Horsburgh, Policy Manager on 0466 123 178, or andrea.horsburgh@socialsciences.org.au.