

30 October 2020

Department of Education, Skills and Employment  
GPO Box 9880  
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Sir/ Madam

**Re: National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund Consultation Paper**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund (NPILF).

UNSW is one of Australia's leading research and teaching universities, ranked in the 2020 QS World University Rankings as one of the top 50 universities in the world.<sup>1</sup> Through our *2025 Strategy*, UNSW is committed to educating students to become highly employable skilled professionals and we're particularly proud that UNSW ranks 27<sup>th</sup> in the world in the 2020 QS Graduate Employability Rankings.<sup>2</sup>

**Recommendations:**

1. Work Integrated Learning should extend beyond STEM to cover all disciplines, and include human capabilities not currently considered.
2. Certain metrics should be revised to better align with current best practice, or to better specify the intended outcome. Alternatively, universities should be able to select a short list of metrics from a longer list that best reflects its particular characteristics and strategic emphasis.
3. Great care needs to be taken to ensure that reporting requirements do not become unnecessarily burdensome.
4. An appropriate definition of "industry" is required for this program, noting that work experience is often gained with public sector or not for profit employers.
5. To optimise this policy, consideration should be given to separate measures encouraging industry to partner with universities, including overcoming barriers faced by SMEs and other businesses.

UNSW already extensively engages with industry throughout our teaching and research activities, and Work Integrated Learning (WIL) experiences are integrated into the holistic education we provide, in line with our *2025 Strategy* objectives. Some examples of industry partnerships already undertaken by UNSW include our successful TechConnect program which targets partnerships with SMEs, and the CHALLENG program run by UNSW Engineering, which targets real world problem solving driven by industry. In many disciplines, there are industrial training requirements built into undergraduate degree programs as part of their professional accreditation. UNSW's

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2020>

<sup>2</sup> For further information, see <https://www.unsw.edu.au/about-us/university/reputation>

Founders Program includes a series of activities that has successfully supported university graduates into roles founding their own businesses or translating their research output into real world solutions.

We support the Government's objective of empowering higher education to seriously reimagine employability as a graduate outcome. We also note that the Group of Eight (Go8) Universities is putting in a more detailed submission, and would like to add our endorsement to that submission.

In response to the NPILF consultation paper, we would like to make the following comments.

### **Definition of Work Integrated Learning**

The definition of WIL in the consultation paper closely aligns with the WIL already practiced at UNSW. It uses the same language and ideas to define WIL as the UNSW WIL Procedure (authentic, purposeful, partnered, supervised, and assessed), and identifies the same two priorities in relation to WIL as are encapsulated in the UNSW WIL Procedure (namely, increasing the quantity of WIL opportunities while ensuring quality and compliance).

The UNSW WIL Procedure mandates that, "all in scope coursework programs will provide an opportunity for students to undertake work integrated learning (WIL)", while the details of the Procedure have been developed to "ensure all WIL is of high quality and mitigates risks to students, UNSW and partner organisations, and complies with relevant legislation and the requirements of professional registration and accrediting bodies".

### **The scope of WIL**

The discussion paper identifies the priority of supporting additional STEM qualified graduates. However, we note that the discussion paper references (at p6) a report published by CSIRO pointing to evidence that all degree programs with a WIL component have better graduate employment outcomes across all fields of study, HASS & STEM alike. This finding, the report notes, is especially important for the future design of "fundamental and non-vocational degrees in science, arts and humanities".<sup>3</sup> UNSW is concerned with achieving optimal employability outcomes for all our graduates, and we believe WIL opportunities should remain wholistic and available to support all UNSW students.

We also note that the consultation paper lists the following capabilities required of a job-ready STEM graduate to "confidently enter or remain in the work place", future-proofed "against robotic redundancy" and "to succeed in a future of multiple careers":

- critical thinking,
- creativity,
- communication and system problem solving,
- resilience,
- agency and engaging with complexity, and
- the ability to identify and access ongoing reskilling and upskilling.

However, the list excludes a number of other key distinctively human capabilities not easily automated or mechanised that are captured in the current literature on the 'future of work' and should be considered in the design of all STEM+ (and other) curriculum, including WIL. These include working in teams with people from diverse backgrounds, requiring dynamic, inter-disciplinary collaboration, open-mindedness, self-awareness, and respect for others.

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<sup>3</sup> CSIRO (2019) *Higher Education and Employment in Australia: The Impact of Internships*, at p4.

## **Assessment principles**

The assessment methodology outlined in the discussion paper is generally positive, with its focus on flexibility, self-assessment and the 'failure tolerance' that encourages universities to take risks. This is particularly empowering and will support innovative approaches to industry engagement.

The concept of 'stretch goals' to meet the priorities and purpose set out in the discussion paper is incorporated in the assessment framework. This goal, known as the 'innovator' indicator, would form part of the compulsory 12 indicators to be considered by universities. In general, it is a positive that this is the indicator that will compel universities to think 'outside of the box' when designing the proposed initiatives. However, retaining a tolerance for failure is critical if universities are to continue to nominate stretch goals.

## **Proposed metrics**

A number of the draft metrics are quite narrow and should be revised to more closely match the desired outcome. For example, the metric to "increase/proportion of HDR students undertaking internship/placement within first 18 months of commencing HDR". Internships and placements are just one means of achieving work ready HDR students. Focussing on this one metric could undermine practice which includes a range of alternative forms of WIL, including hands-on industry involvement in university research projects involving HDR students, appropriate co-designed courses (short and long) to upskill HDR students on topics such as intellectual property, standards and compliance, entrepreneurship and industrial research processes. This metric should be broadened to include current best practice.

Other metrics seem vague and might not easily be measured. For example, the metric covering the "proportion of final year students rated as job-ready". UNSW considers all our students, upon graduation, to be job-ready. Further guidance would be required in this instance.

It is important that universities have input into the final list of metrics, and it would be valuable for each university to select a short list of metrics from a longer list that best reflects its particular characteristics and strategic emphasis.

## **Reporting requirements**

Perhaps the greatest challenge arising from the proposed changes relate to reporting requirements. Essentially, universities are being asked to undertake additional reporting and compliance in order to receive funding that previously we would automatically have received for education purposes. While it is understandable that there will be some reporting requirements associated with the administration of any new measure such as the NPILF, great care needs to be taken to ensure that reporting requirements do not become unnecessarily burdensome. Should this occur, there is the risk that resources would need to be diverted from teaching to reporting activities.

## **Supporting new partnerships**

As government funding for university engagement with industry is developed, an appropriate definition of 'industry' is required that aligns with the intent of the NPILF. In many instances, WIL might occur in a public service or not for profit organisation. This paper also does not include the concept of a 'job-creating graduate', taking into account those graduates who take their skills developed at university and founding their own enterprise. As such, the NPILF could be strengthened by including scope for universities to assist graduates to create their own jobs through programs that support and reward

entrepreneurial student activities. If this policy's main focus is on job creation and new industries, then a broader understanding of 'industry', including entrepreneurship should be used.

Consideration should also be given to encouraging industry to partner with universities and overcoming the challenges they face. The NPILF would create a system of incentives for universities to work with industry, but its intended outcomes would be further strengthened if industry were similarly incentivised to partner with universities. While UNSW engages with a significant number of SMEs, high value university-industry partnerships are usually built on personal relationships and/or long-term strategic partnerships. While SMEs are considered in this discussion paper, their involvement could involve an unacceptable cost and time commitment in order to establish a relationship or partnership of this nature. SMEs are also less likely to have capacity for activities such as co-curriculum design.

Finally, we note that while the focus of the consultation paper is on integrating industry partnerships into teaching and learning activities, research-based partnerships between universities and industry remain of critical importance to our sector. The implementation of this package should take care not to de-emphasise the importance of research partnerships to universities, industry, and the Australian economy more generally.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you once again for the opportunity to comment on this discussion paper. To further discuss any issue raised in this submission, please do not hesitate to contact our Head of Government Relations, Mr Robin Schuck on (02) 9385 9509 or by email at [r.schuck@unsw.edu.au](mailto:r.schuck@unsw.edu.au). We look forward to contributing to this important conversation.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Ian Jacobs  
President and Vice-Chancellor