

## National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund consultation paper Flinders University Response

### Overall comments

Flinders University supports the broad aim of the National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund to enhance engagement between universities and industry in order to better develop job-ready graduates. We also recognise the importance of ensuring our graduates are prepared for a *career* which will require them to respond and adapt to economic and societal changes which are as yet unknown.

Graduates need to be prepared for the workplace upon graduation but also have the skills and capabilities to adapt to changes and drive innovation into the future.

Flinders University supports the principles around:

- Increasing work-integrated learning opportunities for students
- Increasing the number of graduates with STEM+ skills
- Developing partnerships and collaborations between universities and industry

These principles are core to what we do. Flinders partners closely with industry in both education and research and our Strategic Plan commits us to:

*proactively engage with business, industry, government and non-government organisations to deliver outcomes that promote economic development and change lives for the better.*

The NPILF should recognise and reward those universities which are already committed to this aim and which perform strongly in this area, not only those who make improvements.

### The Model

The consultation paper proposes an implementation model which we feel would benefit from more detailed discussion and planning during the proposed pilot period from 2021 to 2023.

The paper provides a basis for further development to ensure the NPILF can and does meet its aims and principles without unnecessary complexity or administrative burden for industry or universities.

The proposed use of a system of 12 indicators which includes Metrics, Demonstrators and Indicators aligned with each Principle is intended to support both measurable accountability and bold endeavour. This is ambitious and may create a mechanism which stifles innovation, rather than encouraging it. We would argue for greater flexibility in developing and demonstrating excellence and innovation in partnerships and preparing graduates for the future of work. We see a risk that the cost of designing, developing, implementing, measuring and reporting against the current model would take resources away from the core activities required to achieve the principles, especially if a one-year reporting cycle is adopted.

Good partnerships take time to develop; short-term outcomes are unlikely to be meaningful or sustainable. A three-year planning and reporting cycle would allow for development and evaluation of effective partnerships.

### Metrics

Several of the consultation paper's metrics do not appear to specifically measure the Tier they are intended to measure but may be more indirect indicators of the extent to which universities are engaged with industry more broadly.

For example:

- *The proportion of staff actively from industry, and the proportion of co-curriculum that is co-designed by industry* are not direct measures of WIL.
- *The proportion of final year students rated as job ready* does not measure STEM+ skills specifically and is not currently collected at a scale which would be valid and reliable.
- *Increase in Cat 2-4 income* does not only measure industry partnerships and funding

These examples highlight the difficulty of constructing a model which measures what it aims to measure and incentivises behaviour appropriately. Some of these measures may be valid indicators of the overall aim (e.g. *the proportion of staff from industry*), but do not align with the intended tier. This points to a need for greater flexibility in the use of indicators to reflect an individual university's context. The requirement to use 12 indicators and for these to be defined as proposed by Tier and Priority may constrain innovation and increase the burden of monitoring and reporting. A more limited number of innovators and greater flexibility in how these would be focussed would allow individual universities to develop plans which meet their current context and the needs of the industry partners.

### Work-Integrated Learning (WIL)

*Universities Australia's 2017 report on Work-Integrated Learning (WIL)* identified the challenges of measuring WIL across the sector. A sector-wide definition and agreed measurement methodology would be welcomed. This could usefully be undertaken during the pilot phase of the NPILF.

The challenge of equitable access to WIL for students from disadvantaged background needs recognition in a funding model which seeks to increase WIL. Students who are wage-earners in families which rely on their income for basic needs face significant barriers to increased participation in WIL. These barriers arise from loss of a wage during the WIL experience itself, as well as increased costs of travel and possibly accommodation if the available WIL experience are distant from the student's home location.

Innovative developments such as the e-WIL projects trialled by the Innovative Research Universities in 2020 can address these inequities to some degree but are not able to fully compensate for the inherent difficulties faced by student from disadvantaged backgrounds. The model would benefit from contextualisation according to the profile of students in each university.

### STEM+

Jobs and careers of the future are likely to need skills outside the STEM+ disciplines and these would also be enhanced by closer partnerships between universities and industry. Nevertheless, if the National Priority is to promote skills in sciences and technologies, Flinders University supports the extension of the definition of STEM to include the health sciences and their application. We would argue further that Nursing, Medicine and professional Psychology should be included along with the Allied Health disciplines in STEM+ as these disciplines have the same underpinning in science, and the evidence is

that all health-related jobs will be in demand into the future, not only those in the Allied health disciplines.

### Partnerships

As currently proposed, a university's NPILF funding outcome will require industry to also commit to partnerships. For this to be supported and encouraged, other mechanisms would be helpful to provide an incentive to industry to engage with universities, such as further extensions of tax-incentives for industries to take students for work-integrated learning experiences. Currently there is a risk that universities will be financially penalised for actions over which they have little control.

The model at present does not distinguish between partnership with industry for research outcomes, and partnership for graduate outcomes. Whilst these two outcomes can sometimes align closely (for example industry-embedded Higher Degree by Research students), the needs of a partner for Research and Development outcomes may not be at a scale or in an area which impacts on outcomes for graduates. The aim of the NPILF is to develop job-ready graduates and should be focussed on this outcome.

The proposal to develop an Industry Linkage data collection is not supported as it risks creating an additional burden on universities, and potentially industry, without evidence as to what data and methodology of collection would be valid to reflect the aims of the NPILF. Resources which might be put to this initiative might be better utilised in the initial implementation period to supporting and encouraging industries in their partnerships with universities.

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