LA TROBE UNIVERSITY

La Trobe University's response to the Department of Education, Skills and Employment

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# National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund (NPILF)

**ENQUIRIES**
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## INTRODUCTION AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

La Trobe University welcomes the establishment of the new National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund (NPILF) which places university-industry engagement at the forefront of university missions.

We broadly support the proposed definitions and settings but recommend caution in the use of STEM+ as a concept, given that the intent behind the coining of this term was to draw into STEM subjects the elements of capability present across other fields of study and graduate capabilities. We note that the framework envisages a very broad definition of Work integrated Learning (WIL), which is to be applauded. However, this does lead to difficulties with data collection at the level required. Further comments on this matter are provided in the answers to the consultation questions.

We further strongly recommend a tighter number of indicators. The three-year transition period will be a useful period for universities (and industry) to adjust to the new settings. Rather than seeking to pin down the NPILF settings from 2024, it will be useful to focus on the lessons learnt in these three years. Related to this, a multi-annual process with annual reporting rather than a 12-month NPILF cycle should be used.

In determining the metrics, it is important not to replicate existing processes which would further increase universities' regulatory burdens and distract from the focus on building meaningful partnerships that translate into authentic learning outcomes for our students. This should remain front and centre of the framework. A key question is how industry can be incentivised to be full, involved partners in what universities are seeking to achieve. This is particularly crucial when working with SMEs which tend to have significant resource constraints. Any further impost on industry should be avoided at all costs, and any indicators and metrics must be set cognisant of the limitations of scale inherent in activities that require time-intensive engagement.

Finally, as further outlined in our submission, serious consideration should be given to directing a portion of NPLIF funds towards clinical placements in health disciplines where placements are a condition for accreditation. Securing a sufficient number of clinical placements has always been a challenge for universities but the problem has grown exponentially due to backlogs caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. If other areas are intended to be prioritised in the NPILF, then we would urgently recommend that another source of funding be made available without further delay given the impact that this shortage and backlog in clinical placements will have on the future of the health workforce especially in regional Australia.

Our response to the consultation questions is included below. We look forward to continuing to work with the Department towards a successful framework for the NPILF.

## RESPONSE TO CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

**Principles**

1. **Do the principles provide clear guidance on what is expected of an indicator?**

   Yes

**Tiered indicators**

2. **How many indicators (i.e. 10, 12, or 15) might universities need to meet, to achieve the outcomes of NPILF, while also accounting for university missions?**

   Considering the degree of overlap, 12 indicators seems an excessively high and unworkable number of indicators. There needs to be a balance between achieving NPILF outcomes while also delivering on universities' missions. Universities will need to employ significant resources to manage this process and will require additional funding to enable adjustment if significant increased data collection and reporting requirements are introduced. We would recommend a maximum of 9 indicators.

**3. Do the indicators provide enough flexibility to meet the varied needs of business?**

The issue is not flexibility but the degree of overlap across and within the indicators provided as examples which is likely to cause confusion. For example, in the draft list of metrics outlined in Table 1, curriculum review by industry is included both under the 'WIL' priority *(Increase/proportion of curriculum that is co-designed and/or reviewed that year by industry)* and under the 'Industry Partnerships' priority *(Increase in the number of courses co-designed with industry)*.

The lack of clarity and overlap linked to the demonstrator and innovator metrics, as well as the highly granular approach to recording activities and outcomes is problematic.

**4. Do you agree with the metrics listed? Which are the most valuable? Would you add other metrics?**

Our overarching comment is that there are too many metrics. However, in terms of a pure evaluation of the most valuable metrics, we would recommend the following:

- The number of partners engaged by the sector identified by the type of organisation
- Number of students engaged with industry-informed or industry-led activities

The following metrics are also worth considering, provided that any measures involving industry would not place any additional burden on industry partners and could be demonstrated through existing data collection exercises required under DESE or TEQSA:

- The number of licences and businesses (e.g. start-ups and SMEs) supported in innovation and entrepreneurship programs
- Student and industry partner satisfaction with the experience and the support received from the institution
- Proportion of industry-funded Higher Degree by Research (HDR) scholarships and related industry partner satisfaction

<u>Observations on listed metrics</u> (Table 1)

WIL

- *Increase/proportion of credit bearing, undergraduate WIL at your institution*, *broken down by: field of education; and depth* (Table 1, 'WIL' priority): Further clarity is required on this metric. As it stands, given the broadness of the definition of WIL, it would require significant mapping at a lesson level and there is a near-impossibility of categorisation (unless 'other' is allowed). A more realistic target would be 'number of subjects containing WIL, broken down by type: work-based learning; work-integrated learning.

Industry partnerships

- *Improvement in graduate employment outcomes overall* (Table 1, 'Industry partnerships' priority): While inclusions from GOS outcomes make sense, it is important to consider the lag effect of this data set which will make it really difficult to measure an institution and the impact of their work under NPILF if the students supported through the program are not those graduating in that cohort (or in the case of the first year – the year before). Another challenge is the low response rates in the employer surveys which means that it will be harder to make a realistic judgment of the job readiness of the entire cohort. Linked to the issue of getting greater buy-in from industry on making the whole process work better, the Department could more

usefully engage with employers on the importance of participating in the GOS surveys.

STEM +

- *Increase/proportion of non-STEM units with STEM skills embedded*: We strongly recommend the exclusion of this metric. In the first instance, there is no evidence on which to base a definition of problem-solving as being 'STEM-based'. Secondly, this metric wrongly implies that non-STEM disciplines do not equip students with skills that are relevant to industry. Finally, the work required to track and monitor such a metric would be extremely resource-intensive, for unknown benefit. It is unclear whether this metric would apply to undergraduate bachelor courses or whether it is intended to be across every course type. Care needs to be taken that there is not over-reach for courses that comprise only four subjects (certificates).

  If, contrary to our recommendation, this metric is retained, we would strongly argue that existing mechanisms, namely graduate capability mapping, is used. Already in place across many universities, graduate capability mapping already addresses these critical capabilities across all courses. The creation of additional layers of mapping requirements for universities at subject level creates significant costs both in terms of systems and in the manual handling of data. A better approach would be to allow universities to use their existing capability mapping, aligned to the definitions provided, and to demonstrate how skills are met across the curriculum and within specialist culminating subjects such as capstones.

**5. To be able to measure industry linkages, is there an appetite to create a new system of data collection?**

Further information is required on what a new system of data collection would entail. As already highlighted, creating new systems of data collection and reporting is resource-intensive both in terms of systems changes and manual effort for academic and administrative staff, and will impose additional regulatory burdens for universities. It is critical that this work is bounded, not duplicative, and the benefits are understood.

For example, La Trobe's data collection is a blend of automated and manual methods. To simplify and reduce resource intensity of data collection, our internal research management systems (PRIME/CRM) would need to be implemented across all industry engagement including research, WIL, co-location etc. Similarly, our course management systems would need to have additional fields and processes added, the cost of which is very high. In both cases, time would be required to design and procure these system changes, and then to analyse and populate the required data.

Universities will require further administrative funding to enable adjustment to increased data collection requirements.

**Allocation methodology**

**6. Is the proposed mechanism for allocation appropriate as a mechanism to incentivise new behaviours in the sector? Could re-allocation be introduced earlier/not at all?**

The overall mechanism needs to take into account the time to plan, develop and implement new industry programs and then for them to mature and start yielding results.

The proposed assessment criteria appear quite rigid and may not cover all aspects particularly when universities will be choosing their own measures. More information is required overall including on the innovators category.

**Distribution options**

**7. Which distribution method (i.e. banded; per EFTSL-rate; base; loadings) makes most sense? Or can you propose another method?**

Our preferred distribution option is 'Per-EFSTL rate + base + loading'. This would allow for the increased challenges of La Trobe's geographical spread and target market. There should be weighting for programs targeting SMEs to allow for resource intensiveness when dealing with smaller organisations, which is often the case in regional areas.

**Priorities – WIL, STEM-skills and Industry partnerships**

**8. Do you agree with the definitions of WIL, STEM+ and Industry partnerships in the context of NPILF?**

We are broadly supportive of the proposed definitions.

Specific comments on WIL definition:

- We support the proposed broad definition of WIL, which fits well with La Trobe's definition and activities, and the desire for allowing innovation to occur. However, the expectation in terms of 'industry supervision' is unclear. As outlined under Q.18, there is a significant impost on industry when it comes to actively supervise students, so it is not practical to expect a significant expansion of this approach. If the intent is that the WIL approach is inclusive of, but not defined by, industry supervision, then that is appropriate, and we would be supportive of the inclusion of 'industry supervision' in the definition.
- Our assumption is that the intent is to encourage all types of WIL. However, there is a significant challenge to meet the stated aims of allowing for innovation, while capturing detailed data at subject and lesson level within pre-determined categories. There is therefore a significant task to be carried out in developing categorisations that allow for such innovation and for determining what would be valid but achievable data collection that can reasonably capture this information. For example, an industry-set project may take place for an hour or across two or more subjects, and the scope/partners involved may vary from instance to instance. At the other end of the spectrum, industry engagement could entail industry-funded (fully or in part) HDR scholarships and external industry PhD supervision.
- While universities can capture the subject level, the detail required to understand whether this activity is sufficient under the guidelines is enormous when considering that universities typically are delivering 2,000 or more subjects each year, with continuous updates and innovation activity within delivery. This comprehensive process should not be constrained by copious requirements for record keeping.

**9. How does a university measure and maintain the quality of WIL activities? – consider if a current program/framework could be used broadly across the sector.**

Universities have in place (under the auspices of TEQSA) requirements for evaluation of WIL (including work-based learning). These are both general and specific to those activities. WIL is a broad set of activities and satisfaction is therefore captured in internal and external student surveys. Work-based learning activities also have student and employer surveys applied. Universities generally have robust policies and procedures that provide a quality assurance framework for WIL to capture the broader quality assurance and duty of care to students and industry partners in work-based activities (placements and internships). For example, La Trobe has in place an Educational Partnerships Procedure (Work Based Learning) that outlines requirements for all work-based learning arrangements undertaken by

Latrobe students. The procedure has been developed to meet the university's legislative obligations including the Higher Education Threshold Standards.

It is our view that an additional framework is not required and that any such activity should use the existing expert-developed frameworks and cases developed by ACEN and leaders across the sector in ALT Fellowships and Grant programs.

**10. How does a university promote WIL, and the benefits of WIL (especially new, innovative or 'remote' approaches) to SMEs and large organisations, and is there a role for Government?**

- At La Trobe we work through a range of industry networks (e.g. Northlink NISPP program) to engage with SMEs. Our staff in Industry Engagement teams, WIL teams and academics leverage our alumni and wider industry networks to ensure we maximise opportunities for students. We are also building WIL into our major partnerships with industry to maximise the benefits of strategic industry partnerships.
- In terms of a role for government, government support for an SME matching/clearing house or platform for WIL to simplify the landscape for SMEs would be useful. This would mean that SMEs would only have one spot to go to for WIL rather than 39 different university websites.

Further detail on the way Government can incentivise industry engagement is included in the response to Q.18.

**11. How can universities best engage industry, particularly SMEs, with WIL?**

Engagement in WIL programs needs to be included in all broader partnership discussions between universities and their industry partners, through targeted programs with alumni, and across all work with a university's local community partners. In order to minimise the administrative burden on the university, it would be much better if this were a centrally coordinated process. As outlined in Q10, it would also be helpful to have in place a standardised platform or portal to simplify SME engagement.

**12. How can universities help STEM+ students "think beyond the lab" and expose them to the vast employment landscape they can access?**

La Trobe has in place a number of such programs, ranging from subjects at Bachelor level to Industry PhD scholarships:

- The **SCI2COP** subject in which students explore the range of career options for graduates working in science and science-related professions, and learn about the future of the STEM workforce locally and globally. Through a series of workshop activities and assessment tasks, students explore the importance of ethical conduct when working as a scientifically literate professional and create a portfolio where they reflect on their professional identity, knowledge base and skillset for a range of job types. This is a scalable subject model and core to all Science students.
- **La Trobe's Industry PhD scholarship program** which is offered in partnership with an industry organisation from private, government or the not-for-profit sector. The partnership aims to skill industry-ready employees with enrolled students undertaking a research project that addresses real-world challenges identified by and of critical importance to the industry partner.
- La Trobe's **ARC Research Hub for Medicinal Agriculture Graduate Research Scholarships**, a multi-disciplinary collaboration involving numerous industry partners, which offers scholarships for candidates to undertake research aimed at improving

the profitability and sustainability of medicinal agriculture for primary producers and adding value for pharmaceutical manufacturers and end-users.

**13. Are there specific challenges for SMEs in engaging with universities that need to be addressed in the framework?**

- Difficulty in making initial engagement: SMEs find it difficult to find their way to the 'right person' within a university. While this is not something that necessarily needs to be addressed within this framework, it is certainly a consideration.

- Capacity: At times, SMEs struggle to take on placement students due to the size of their organisation and the lack of additional staff who are able to provide support while a student is learning on the job. Similarly, engaging SMEs in subject and course design and delivery requires a significant investment of their time. It is critical that there is a framework of benefits to SMEs for engaging beyond a desire to contribute, identify potential employees or inject new ideas and capabilities into a team through student placements. In research and innovation, SMEs typically lack the investment capacity to engage in research. This is a problem that is endemic, but it could be ameliorated by providing some form of monetary benefit and opportunities for support to those SMEs with innovation ambitions as outlined in the response to Q.18.

**14. Does the framework allow sufficient knowledge sharing to enable universities and industry to build on successful models?**

This is difficult to assess because the framework focuses on measuring university activity and performance rather than on assessing the collaborative and collegial approach. It is too early to tell what the impact of the funding incentive for universities will have on the overall collaboration. There are currently very active national and international WIL network organisations comprising researchers, academic and professional staff involved in the advancement of WIL across the sector. These are robust and effective, delivering shared resources, information on innovations and collaboration activities. However, if the framework were to incorporate acknowledgement of these networks and provide some support via transparency of programs underway, that may be a useful augmentation.

**Existing practice**

**15. Does your business or university have good examples of WIL, or partnerships, which can be used as exemplars?**

- La Trobe University has a long history of establishing mutually beneficial relationships with government, private business and community groups that have delivered exceptional results. This is also a key feature of our Strategic Plan. These include partnerships with Optus, Cisco, Medibank, numerous partnerships with regional SMEs as well as the Industry PhD scholarships mentioned above.
- In terms of WIL examples, La Trobe's Engineering WIL program features a sector-leading WIL program embedded in an engineering degree where students spend six months within a company, learning on the job, while simultaneously undertaking their capstone project. They receive a full semester (60CP) credit and a minimum $10,000 industry-funded scholarship as part of their experience.

**General**

**16. Does the framework sufficiently address the lifetime of learning challenge facing the workforce?**

It is questionable whether the framework will have the capacity to measure a concept as developmental as employability. Strictly speaking this is more about providing industry experiences which ought to build confidence and reinforce skills – these are however not the sole solution to long-term employability.

**17. Does the 12-month NPILF cycle (as set out above) allow enough time to implement and report on activities?**

In our view timelines are not realistic. The envisaged four months between submission and receiving an outcome with a subsequent report due 7-8 months later, means that there will be less than six months for activation. There needs to be recognition that particularly new and large-scale initiatives may require a longer cycle to allow for planning, implementation and outcomes to be established and measured.

We would recommend a three-year cycle with annual update reporting.

**18. Do you have any other feedback or comments?**

The need for government to incentivise Industry Involvement

- A key issue is identifying ways in which government can incentivise industry to be involved in supporting universities to achieve these aims especially noting the high cost of some critical work-based learning activities (e.g. the cost of nursing placements which is discussed in more detail further below). In line with the recommendation of the Innovative Research Universities (IRU), La Trobe recommends the introduction of financial incentives for industry to partner with universities under the NPILF.
- Related to this, inclusion of any measures that require growth in industry inputs relating to students and curriculum needs to consider the cost to industry and the scale of efforts required from universities to ensure coverage across all subjects.
- Universities typically use industry advisory boards for whole of course design/subject inputs and guidance and individuals for support into the curriculum (guest lectures, advice on activities) – these may not be employers, but their input is still very relevant.
- One simple way of incentivising industry involvement is to reduce the reporting requirements for universities and industries engaged in collaboration. Universities generally bear the reporting obligation but securing data from industry – and any ensuing delay in approval of funding – becomes an additional burden which makes collaborating with universities less attractive.
- In terms of transnational industry involvement, such as with state-owned major pharmaceutical or manufacturing entities, it is crucial to consider the implications of the draft Foreign Relations legislation which is currently before the Senate. As argued by La Trobe in its **submission** to the Senate Inquiry, the fact that the Australian Foreign Minister would be able to veto agreements with foreign partners, could have significant implications on universities' ability to collaborate with international partners in good faith. This legislation, if passed, would also have an impact on La Trobe's Industry PhD programme referred to above since La Trobe has a number of existing PhD agreements with international partners.

Specific challenges this year relating to WIL:

- We have faced a lot of challenges this year in moving to virtual or remote delivery of WIL programmes in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. While we have attempted to transition placements to online delivery as much as possible, we have lost a large percentage of the opportunities we would usually have available for our students. There is therefore work to be undertaken in working with industry and educating them on the benefits of engaging with students through this medium. Support from government to reinforce relevant messaging would be hugely beneficial and required moving forward if we wish to increase the number of WIL opportunities available to students. The involvement of the Australian Collaborative Education Network Limited (ACEN)[1] will also be imperative.

- Exacerbated challenges relating to clinical placements posing risks to the health workforce

The limited availability of adequate clinical placements is a long-standing challenge for both providers and universities. Providers already experiencing workforce shortages often lack the human resources to provide adequate supervision for placements while universities face increasing difficulties to organise placements. Clinical placements in health disciplines incur a direct cost to universities, but are crucial since they are required for accreditation and to ensure that students are appropriately qualified to enter the workforce.

For instance, La Trobe's rural health school has the research and teaching capacity to skill a significant proportion of Australia's future nursing workforce. However, we are artificially capped in terms of the numbers of students that we can skill because of this recurring challenge of clinical placements. This is not merely an issue of numbers but also of the level of supervision required during the clinical placement. Each year we are limited in terms of the number of nursing students that we can enrol even though there is considerable demand for our courses and significant workforce shortages. This is clearly an area where policy settings have failed and need adjustment both at federal and state level.

Another major challenge relating to clinical placements is the significant cost incurred by universities which is not covered by the funding allocated to universities for teaching costs in these disciplines. To demonstrate the magnitude of this issue, cumulative placements costs for health placements for La Trobe are at least $8.5 million per annum, with nursing placements costing in the vicinity of $2.5 million.

**The challenge of obtaining clinical placements has grown exponentially as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This means that we now face a backlog in 2021 and beyond which will become even more challenging as the cost of health placements continues to escalate.**

**La Trobe strongly recommends that serious consideration is given to allowing a portion of NPLIF funds to be used to address this problem. If other areas are intended to be prioritised in the NPILF, then we would urgently recommend that another source of funding be made available without further delay given the impact that this shortage and backlog in clinical placements will have on the future of the health workforce especially in regional Australia.**

[1] The Australian Collaborative Education Network Limited (ACEN) is the professional association for practitioners and researchers from the tertiary education sector, industry, community and government representatives, involved in work integrated learning (WIL) in Australia.