

Consultation on National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund (NPILF)

30 October 2020

The Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN), in collaboration with The University of Newcastle and Deakin University, is pleased to make this submission to the Department of Education, Skills and Employment on NPILF.

ATN universities already proudly deliver Australia's most work-ready graduates. We recognise the importance of equipping graduates with the skills that industry requires, ensuring they can take advantage of the opportunities and challenges of the future.

NPILF will support the innovations in teaching and learning and meaningful connections with industry in which ATN is already invested and engaged. The establishment of NPILF sends an important signal to universities and industry about the importance of collaboration and partnerships for the benefit of students and graduates.

It is important that the paper takes a broad view of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) by including a wide range of skills and capabilities, as well as technical skills. It should also be recognised that these skills are also developed across all fields and they are often built into multi-disciplinary programs that reflect the need for adaptability and flexibility in the workforce. The emphasis on undertaking STEM units in non-STEM courses is also welcome and aligns with Minister Tehan's intention for students to 'mix and match' their subjects.

The broad view of work integrated learning (WIL) adopted by the paper is also important. It includes a wide variety of authentic industry engagement and this continues to broaden the practice of WIL beyond placements, internships and other similar activities. For example, ATN is a proponent of authentic assessment, which focuses on realistic practices, scenarios and contexts and develops students' graduate capabilities and evaluative judgement, preparing them to face the challenges of the future world of work.

We need to encourage and reward innovative and transformational approaches like authentic assessment. It is important that this has been recognised in the design of NPILF by enabling universities to develop new ideas aligned to identified needs and their teaching and learning strategies and it should be guided by clearly defined measures of quality.

The wide range of indicators allows universities not to be overly worried about meeting simplistic and compliance focused metrics, but it does have the potential to introduce more complexity. The metrics that are included should take into account the different ways of learning STEM skills and participating in WIL, and be aligned or integrated with existing data collections and reporting without significantly adding to the existing complexities.

While there are benefits from ensuring the businesses engage with a similar and structured approach across the sector, it is by encouraging universities to develop new ideas that we can improve our industry engagement. The understanding of the diversity of universities and the flexibility they need to carry out their mission is crucial, and it allows universities to target the areas that are important to them, their students, their communities and the Government.

The indicators and assessment of them recognise that some universities are already leaders in these areas, but it also encourages these leaders to continue innovating and trying new approaches. Universities should be encouraged to build in 'stretch' goals into their plans.

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The sharing of best practice is important and recognises the open and collaborative approach of Australian universities. It is also important because the success of NPILF will be in demonstrating to industry the great opportunities we can create in partnership with them. This is an opportunity to demonstrate the impact of our work and build in feedback mechanisms that involve and encourage industry participation.

It is important that we involve industry as much as possible in the design and delivery of NPILF, because it is by working together that we will achieve the best results. There could be more focus on promoting and supporting industry engagement and voice in the NPILF process.

The process is currently geared around universities and their roles and responsibilities. However, there is an opportunity to foster industry engagement in the design of the initiatives, not just the end product. Industry involvement in universities developing and selecting their indicators should be encouraged, as this would better indicate the development of authentic and meaningful industry partnerships.

In other words, NPILF is an important push for universities to engage with industry, but there also need to be incentives for industry. The need for both sides to meaningfully and systematically work together has been a lesson learned from previous experience with research and development incentives. Industry incentives need not be financial incentives, but could be less tangible benefits – which emphasises the importance of demonstrating the impact of NPILF.

The breadth of employers across Australia should be reflected in design of NPILF – university graduates contribute across a range of organisations including small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs), government agencies and community organisations. The type of industry linkage and interaction will vary considerably between industry partners. In particular, innovative approaches to working with SMEs will be needed given the resource and staff constraints that they face.

From an impact perspective, it is important to champion projects that have an immediate effect and benefit. However, we should not lose focus on hard, challenging and tricky projects that really have the capacity to change culture and develop new ideas. Sustainability needs to be central to the design to encourage and support long-term, multi-year and multi-level strategic partnerships – and this will only happen if the timeframes are not prohibitive.

The allocation of funding should reflect the scale of action required by universities. This would be based on their student load either on a per EFTSL rate or according to enrolment bands.

ATN always applies an access and equity lens to measures in higher education. Traditionally, students with higher levels of social, cultural and political capital have had an advantage in accessing WIL and other industry experiences due to their personal networks. It is important to ensure that Indigenous students, students from low SES backgrounds, first-in-family students, regional and remote students, and other disadvantaged or under-represented groups are afforded access to (and support to access) the benefits of NPILF.

ATN thanks the Department for the opportunity to provide feedback and looks forward to continuing to develop and refine NPILF over the pilot period from 2021 to 2023 and beyond. It will be important to review and improve the processes to ensure the fund continues to support universities, industry and students.