

UNSW Submission – NSW Higher Education Strategy

UNSW welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposed updated Higher Education Strategy for NSW. At UNSW, we are proud to play a critical role in addressing a range of challenging and urgent societal issues, and see our collaboration with the NSW Government as an important opportunity to have long-lasting impact for the benefit of NSW. The development of an updated strategy should be used to increase collaboration between the NSW Government and the state's universities to support the enhanced prosperity of NSW.

Recommendations

The NSW Government should support a thriving and sustainable higher education sector that meets the needs of students and the state's policy objectives in the following ways:

1. **Coordinate a 'whole of government' approach to higher education:** Ensure that a 'whole of government' approach is in place in NSW that responds to university and government priorities, and builds a more connected and coordinated relationship between universities and relevant NSW departments. This should include promoting and advocating shared priorities to the Commonwealth Government.
2. **Support new modes of teaching and learning, including greater integration with VET:** Support the establishment of a holistic and integrated national tertiary education system with harmonised regulation and funding models between different tiers of government. The NSW Government also has a role to play in promoting the importance of ongoing education after the completion of a vocational qualification or Bachelor's degree, to the benefit of the individual, employers, and the state's productivity over the long-term.
3. **Support equitable access and success at university:** The NSW Government should support the equity targets set out in the Universities Accord, by enabling and supporting access for university pathway programs to prospective students in their school setting.
4. **Support student wellbeing and experience:** The NSW Government should work together with the Commonwealth Government and the sector to meet the following objectives:
 - a. Contribute to the National Student Charter, proposed in the Accord;
 - b. Support initiatives promoting quality teaching, including professional development;
 - c. Support and contribute to joint initiatives such as the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS) that support investment in university infrastructure, which help drive a positive and fulfilling student experience; and
 - d. Effectively help catalyse relationships by incentivising industry to participate in Work Integrated Learning (WIL), and support efforts to overcome challenges that may cause industry reluctance to participate in WIL initiatives and programs.

5. **Support innovation and research:** The NSW Government has previously partnered with the state's university sector to leverage their research capability to support important policy outcomes. There is a renewed opportunity for government to enhance NSW's long-term economic sustainability and competitiveness through a variety of measures that support research, and the translation of research by supporting the commercialisation of research.
6. **Build public-purpose capacity:** Broker relationships between universities and potential partners where it has identified policy challenges that we are well-placed to contribute to.

Introduction

UNSW was established with the explicit objective to help NSW meet its significant skills requirements, and generate knowledge with, and for, the benefit and prosperity of the people of NSW and Australia. For 75 years, we have stayed true to our founding mission, continuing to anticipate and respond to the changing needs of the society we serve – in NSW, Australia and around the world.

Universities such as UNSW therefore play a vital role in enhancing the state's prosperity, both through social, scientific and technological innovations that can improve our quality of life, as well as through their contribution to economic growth and productivity.

The updated NSW Higher Education Strategy provides an important opportunity to ensure that the teaching and research efforts of the higher education sector continue to effectively address pressing and complex societal needs, through effective and strong public-purpose partnerships.

The pressing importance of higher education

The Final Report of the *Australian Universities Accord* (Accord) noted that for Australia to remain globally competitive and meet our expected skills requirements, the proportion of Australians receiving a tertiary education must dramatically increase. This includes a 2050 target of 55% of 25-34 year olds obtaining a bachelor's degree or higher, while 82% of working age Australians will require a tertiary qualification at Certificate III or higher by 2050¹.

There also continues to be a skills shortage across a range of occupations, including those expected to be critical for our future economy. Most professional occupations are trained at university, and at UNSW, approximately half of all domestic students are enrolled in courses that map to jobs in critical shortage². More generally, skills such as creativity, critical thinking and problem solving are regularly identified as being in high demand, and these are central elements to the education in many disciplines at university, ranging across both STEM and humanities. If NSW is to take a leading role in priority sectors and new technologies such as quantum computing and artificial intelligence, a university education will be critical to ensure a skilled workforce can undertake these jobs of the future.

Changing nature of teaching and learning – emerging and ongoing developments

Building a holistic post-secondary school education system

To reach the Accord's targets, a holistic and integrated national education system should be established, comprising universities, TAFE / VET, private providers and industry, with each playing

¹ Department of Education (2024) Australian Universities Accord Final Report. Retrieved from: <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report>, p 65.

² Deloitte (2022) The economic contribution of UNSW. Retrieved from: <https://www.unsw.edu.au/content/dam/pdfs/unsw-adobe-websites/about-us/reports-publications/2022-12-DAE-UNSW-Economic-Contribution-Final-Report.pdf>, pp 39-43.

critical but complementary roles. Each of these different types of providers is funded and regulated differently, meaning that attempts to integrate them have some immediate challenges to overcome. There is already a degree of inter-operability between different modes of training, but there is a role for government to support their better integration, including through harmonised regulation and funding models between the different tiers of government.

The development of a National Skills Passport will be especially important in this context, as a means to enable Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) to a common standard. RPL already widely occurs throughout the university system, but it is subject to each institution's different application. Developing a national framework would establish a uniform standard of recognition, in turn providing clearer pathways and greater mobility between different categories of provider. With a clearer pathway to a formal qualification, this measure would also play a major role in supporting greater lifelong learning.

Lifelong learning

A growing trend in the workforce is the requirement for workers to regularly learn new skills and be adaptable as the skills required to do their job evolve over time. Indeed, today's graduates are likely to need different skillsets throughout their career, supported by ongoing learning. Universities are already well placed to address the need to upskill and reskill workers, with offerings ranging from Masters degrees through to micro-credentials, and emerging programs that take a different approach to education altogether, including integrating vocational education or curriculum co-design with employers.

However, for Australia to truly realise the benefits of ongoing education for the workforce, lifelong learning opportunities need to be widely and equitably accessible, and broadly appreciated as an important step in career development – addressing both supply and demand challenges. With the skills required by today's workforce rapidly evolving, ongoing education to adapt to these changes is more important than ever. Government and other stakeholders need to play a role in highlighting the importance of ongoing education after the completion of a vocational qualification or a Bachelors degree, to the benefit both of the individual and, also, national productivity over the long term.

This will require cultural change, with the involvement of universities, industry and government all treating lifelong learning as a 'business as usual' activity. With many lifelong learning options, such as micro-credentials, designed to be 'stackable', tracking an individual's learning through a National Skills Passport that also builds a common currency for RPL, would be of great value.

Furthermore, there is an existing and growing equity challenge where some employers pay for their staff to undertake further education, while others simply do not have the ability or desire to do so. This risks a situation where employees in larger, wealthier, premium firms that see the value of further education will be able to partake in lifelong learning opportunities, while employees of small to medium businesses (SMEs) or workers who move jobs more frequently for example, risk being locked out of lifelong learning opportunities unless they can personally afford to pay for them. It is therefore critical that access to lifelong learning opportunities is equitable.

Government needs to play a leading role in developing a framework around how such programs are funded, accredited, offered and made available. Pleasingly, the Accord made a series of recommendations covering the accreditation and public funding of microcredentials³.

³ Department of Education (2024) Australian Universities Accord Final Report. Retrieved from: <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report>, recommendations 5, 6, and 41.

Equity

For Australian society to prosper in the future, it needs to draw upon the skills, talents and perspectives of our entire population. Ensuring access to a university education for all students at the university of their choice, irrespective of their background, will greatly benefit Australia. This was widely recognised in the Accord.

However, the success of students from under-represented cohorts at university is every bit as important as access and should have equal standing as a key metric of equity in the sector. The success of these cohorts of students to graduate and find meaningful employment that draws on their skills is critical. Support measures to drive success include targeted early orientation and transition support for students, financial support, targeted and effective academic support, preparatory course offerings, and holistic support programs, such as affordable on-campus accommodation, mentoring and supporting their efforts to find meaningful employment in their chosen career upon graduation. The NSW Government is well placed to support many of these activities that drive success, and should also play a major role in emphasising that success is as important as access for equity cohorts.

Where students make the decision to discontinue their university studies, it is also important to have an appropriate “exit ramp” from their studies, that recognises the skills acquired to that point, and offering the opportunity to recognise those skills towards different qualifications in the future. This point should be addressed through the ongoing integration of higher education with VET and other training offerings.

Student wellbeing and experience

Ensuring a positive student experience is central to our missions as public purpose institutions. This includes ensuring a safe and fulfilling campus experience, while also ensuring access to world-class teaching and facilities.

The Accord included a recommendation to develop a “national student charter” covering student welfare, safety and wellbeing. UNSW supports this recommendation, and has already been proactive in ensuring that our campuses are safe and conducive to learning and the exchange of ideas. For example, we support our students’ wellbeing through a number of initiatives and efforts, as highlighted in the *UNSW Student Health, Safety and Wellbeing Strategy*. We are also advanced in developing the *UNSW Safer Communities Plan for 2024* that will encompass gendered violence, respect at work, and psychosocial risk centred on prevention, early intervention, and response. This supports existing efforts by UNSW to eliminate gender-based violence as set out in our *UNSW Gendered Violence Strategy and Action Plan 2022-2025*.

Quality teaching

All universities constantly seek to improve the quality of their teaching, to attract students, to maximise the quality of their education, and to improve overall student experience. At present there is a range of government led initiatives and schemes at both state and federal level that support university research. However, there is no equivalent support for teaching activities.

Previously, the Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) provided grant funding and other initiatives to support best practice in learning and teaching. The Accord, meanwhile, has recommended establishing an “Australian Higher Education Teaching Quality Framework”. By way of an overseas example, the UK

has the *AdvancedHE* higher education academy, which appears to be expanding to Australia⁴. The HEA Fellowship is an internationally recognised badge of expertise and experience for those who teach and support learning in higher education. As of 2024, UNSW has over 500 HEA Fellows, including over 100 Fellows, Senior Fellows and Principal Fellows. As an institutional member, UNSW also provides staff with access to a range of resources, events, and accreditation programs.

These and any other initiatives seeking to support and recognise educational excellence should continue to help define best practice teaching, while also ensuring there are opportunities for professional development for teaching staff.

University infrastructure

Student experience, and indeed the success of Australia's university system also relies on quality infrastructure, used for both teaching and research activities. A range of programs have previously existed to support university infrastructure, while the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS), jointly funded by states and the Commonwealth, remains valuable. However, a sector-wide funding measure to support investment in infrastructure would be of great benefit to the sector in driving a positive and rewarding student experience. The Higher Education Infrastructure Working Group Final Report in 2015 noted that there is a strong argument for public funding in infrastructure, and that the benefits of previous investments were apparent in both teaching and research⁵. There would be immense benefit from large-scale funding that would help to put the sector on a secure footing, as seen from the Education Investment Fund where funding was not limited to research infrastructure, but instead funded a wide range of investments.

Connection with industry and employers

Industry stands to benefit from a successful university system, including being able to draw on world-class graduates to fill their workforce and meet shortages in critical skills. Work Integrated Learning (WIL) is a particular area where greater industry involvement would lead to more benefits for participants and the nation, although industry can face challenges to participating in WIL. Government can play a role in catalysing these relationships by incentivising industry to participate in WIL, and supporting efforts to overcome any challenges that may cause industry reluctance to participate. To help address these issues, the NSW Government should consider contributing to a directory for WIL to more effectively connect prospective employers with students.

Innovation and research

The research output of the state's universities is an important asset for NSW. It is estimated that every dollar invested in university research generates a \$5 return to the economy, while university research has also played a critical role in addressing key societal challenges.⁶ For example, we are proud of the role our researchers continue to play in developing solutions to climate change and sustainability, ranging from new energy technologies and battery storage through to new waste recycling technologies. To help address the risks from climate change, UNSW has created the world's first early warning system for extreme bushfires that has become an invaluable tool for firefighting services.

⁴ AdvancedHE (2024) Australasian Strategic Advisory Board. Retrieved from: www.advance-he.ac.uk/about-us/strategic-advisory-groups/australasian-strategic-advisory-board

⁵ Department of Education (2015) Higher Education Infrastructure Working Group. Retrieved from: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-3072760614/view>

⁶ Deloitte (2022) The economic contribution of UNSW. Retrieved from: <https://www.unsw.edu.au/content/dam/pdfs/unsw-adobe-websites/about-us/reports-publications/2022-12-DAE-UNSW-Economic-Contribution-Final-Report.pdf>

The NSW Government has previously partnered with the state's university sector to use their research capability to support important policy outcomes. However, there is an important opportunity for the NSW Government to enhance the long-term sustainability and competitiveness of the state's innovation ecosystem in the following ways:

- Play a more active role in accessing and leveraging the research expertise and capabilities of the State's universities such as UNSW to help address NSW's critical policy challenges; and
- Foster innovation, collaboration and commercialisation of research and development (R&D) through a long-term and consistent focus on innovation policy, with targeted funding and promotional activities. This would include:
 - Driving solutions to improve NSW's commercialisation and translation performance including scoping potential solutions relating to NSW's growing gap in university research commercialisation that are co-designed with key stakeholders, including universities, while ensuring they are empowered to be agile and innovative;
 - Supporting talent attraction and retention efforts to ensure intellectual capital remains in NSW;
 - Continuing to develop and support innovation precincts and co-location initiatives that boost collaboration with universities and industry partners;
 - Prioritising co-investment and providing stable funding to enable universities to retain and grow research capacity;
 - NSW Government establishing its own research translation fund that accelerates delivery of new technologies to global markets from NSW;
 - Committing to co-creating a partnership fund with NSW universities to support researchers in translating research into real-world solutions;
 - Increasing support for existing innovation programs with a track-record of success;
 - Evaluating existing incentives to boost R&D activity in priority policy areas; and
 - Continuing to promote the global contributions of NSW's higher education and research sectors to international audiences

Support talent attraction and retention efforts to ensure intellectual capital remains in NSW

It is also important that we develop and retain the workforce able to undertake and disseminate world-class research. Many of the best researchers will be in high demand in private industry, or at overseas institutions, and with a reasonable degree of mobility, they will move to the location that best supports their efforts. Not only is it important that Australia remains an attractive location to undertake research, but it is also essential that we build a pipeline of researchers to continue that effort.

The NSW Government is therefore urged to advocate for policies that facilitate the migration of top-tier talent into the State through admission to NSW universities, especially as NSW leads Australia as the preferred study destination for higher education.

Building public purpose capacity

The NSW Government rightly recognises the importance of partnerships that include the state's universities as a means to improve lives throughout NSW. At UNSW, we are developing our first Societal Impact Framework, to measure the impact our work has on the lives of people in NSW, across Australia and around the world. The magnitude of societal impact we are aspiring to achieve requires

strong partnerships, including with the government, and drawing upon collective resources, insights and expertise.

Of course, we are already an enthusiastic participant in a number of partnerships with industry, NGOs and government that generate strong outcomes for communities. We are particularly proud of our contributions to the NSW community, including across the government's priority policy areas and sectors – for example:

- UNSW's CommUNity-Lead Development in Walgett supports the building of greater Aboriginal community control and capacity, improving education and employment, reducing the number of people who have contact with the criminal justice system, and improving access to fresh food and safe drinking water.
- Recognising that housing affordability is a key priority for the NSW Government, UNSW is proud to have already hosted the Premier and a number of Ministers to campus to meet with relevant experts on housing, to provide a range of possible solutions for consideration by government.
- UNSW is a key partner in three of NSW's major precincts: Western Sydney Aerotropolis, the Liverpool Innovation Precinct and our flagship Randwick Health and Innovation Precinct (RHIP). The RHIP brings together UNSW, government, industry, four hospitals, preclinical facilities and nine institutes spanning neuroscience, mental health, cancer and other fields – to supercharge research and bringing expertise into a clinical setting.
- UNSW's Decarbonisation Innovation Hub is part of the NSW Government's Net Zero Industry and Innovation Program. The Hub is helping to build a viable clean energy manufacturing sector to benefit the NSW community.
- The NSW Smart Sensing Network (NSSN) is a joint initiative with the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment, Office of the Chief Scientist and Engineer that uses innovative technology to enhance the state's knowledge of water movement. The NSSN includes leading researchers from UNSW to combine existing government data with new findings from gravity, quantum and low-cost sensors.
- In another example, an innovative collaboration between UNSW and the Murrumbidgee Local Health District is addressing the shortage of general practitioners in regional NSW. This collaboration won the 2023 Premier's Award for quality healthcare. The Single Employer Model developed through the partnership is now transforming the landscape for the support and training of junior doctors in regional communities, and is being used widely across Australia.

As well as directly partnering with institutions, the NSW Government can also play an important role, by brokering relationships between universities and potential partners where it has identified policy challenges that we are well placed to contribute to. Furthermore, the simple act of publicly acknowledging the value of the state's universities has the ability to attract new partners looking to collaborate on solutions to important challenges.

Conclusion

Thank you once again for the opportunity to contribute to this update of the NSW Higher Education Strategy. The state's universities are an important asset to drive the productivity and ultimately prosperity of NSW, by supporting the skills uplift of the population, generating new ideas that improve quality of life, and through the transformational power of education, to ensure everyone is able to contribute to the state's future. We look forward to working with the NSW Government to further develop this Strategy, and then bringing it to life.

Should you wish to discuss any issue raised in this submission, please do not hesitate to contact our Head of Government Relations, Mr Robin Schuck, on 0411 124 258 or r.schuck@unsw.edu.au.