



2021 Budget Submission

University of New England



PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION – BUDGET POLICY PRIORITIES

The University of New England is pleased to provide a pre-budget submission for the 2021-22 Federal Budget.

Individuals and regional communities across Australia are responding to the disruption of drought, bushfires and COVID-19 through knowledge creation and innovation. These disruptions have compounded the existing comparative disadvantage of regional economies and communities. The effect has been profound.

Now, the time for rebuilding presents a unique opportunity for regional Australia to play an important part in a long-term and resilient national recovery. This opportunity is highlighted in the recently released report on the impact of regional inequality in Australia by the Senate Economics reference Committee. The report recommends a significant increase in and rethink of investment in regional economies; such an investment would significantly assist in rebuilding the Australian economy.

The Job Ready Graduates package of reforms laid a foundation for enhanced outcomes for individuals and employers by promoting industry engaged research and learning. The Commonwealth Government can further support the aspirations of regional Australia and drive broader economic outcomes for the nation by prioritising the following policies in the 2021/22 Budget:

1. Promoting **industry – and - education linked STEM** partnerships.
2. Supporting higher education that enables **entrepreneurship** – recognising that the jobs of the future will increasingly come from entrepreneurial endeavour.
3. Utilising technology to change the model of health care training and delivery in regional Australia via **virtual health networks**.

Investment in regional knowledge and innovation precincts

Regional universities are emerging as hubs for industry engagement in the broad fields of science, technology, education and maths. As an example, UNE has developed partnerships with industry bodies, global not-for-profit entities and government agencies in the field of agriculture that have resulted in UNE becoming one of the top institutions nationally for commercialisation of agriculture IP, with measureable improvements in farm productivity, and unique opportunities for industry engaged teaching and research for our global student body.

UNE is increasingly being sought out to extend existing partnerships and build new alliances with industry and community that extend beyond agriculture into other STEM fields and beyond the boundaries of our physical campuses. Our new decadal plan, *Future Fit*, aspires to build on our role as a regional anchor institution and deliver educational and research outcomes for all regional Australians. Investment by the Commonwealth in key pieces of regional education infrastructure that alleviate existing constraints will enable UNE and its partners to create opportunities for industry-relevant research, within a regional context, commercialisation of research, industry embedded teaching and creation of new jobs. This investment in a place-based approach would extend beyond the classic concept of a “precinct”

by engaging with community and industry beyond our campus – reflecting our broader engagement that extends across and beyond the New England North West. Importantly, any Commonwealth funding would leverage investment by industry, the community and UNE.

The co-investment sought in order to fund the New England North West Science and Innovation precinct would build on existing and proven partnerships, as well as offer the opportunity to propel innovative new industry development in this region. The University of New England and our government, community and industry partners have taken the lead on this in a number of deep and productive relationships. This undertakings across the spectrum of agri-industries, digital entrepreneurship and knowledge, and regional rural and remote health and well-being issues. New international industry partners are also committed to investing in this innovative 'precinct without walls' model.

Recommendation: Identify support for STEM partnerships in regions as a priority for the budget.

Innovation Ecosystems and Entrepreneurship education

Entrepreneurship is a uniquely powerful mechanism for economic and social development. Over the last 20 years evidence has been gathering across the globe of the major transformation that investment in entrepreneurial ecosystems can make to regional economies. [St Louis, Missouri](#) is one such example that has transformed using a deliberate innovation ecosystem approach that includes universities, industry and government to stimulate a collaborative approach to economic development. The [2020 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor Report](#) notes the four key weaknesses in Australia's entrepreneurship ecosystem as: access to financial support, government policies, market openness and capacity building entrepreneurs. At a regional level, regional development and governance literature suggests that when there are modest policy settings to support entrepreneurship (tax, finance, R&D), combined with a talent development approach (education, incubators) and regional leadership from anchor institutions such as universities (that also drive a social inclusion agenda for those who may be marginalised), then the engine for change is set to transform regional outcomes.

Our regions are not systems in isolation. Their integration into metropolitan and urban Australia planning provide opportunity for both the city and the bush. The significant investment in the Western Sydney airport provides an opportunity to further unlock the potential of regional NSW to access global markets, particularly in relation to the export of high-quality agricultural commodities. Interconnection and access to markets is a key requirement for success in regional innovation and entrepreneurship.

Through our 'Smart Regions Incubator' (UNE SRI) initiative, new short courses delivered within the framework of the *Job Ready Graduates* policies, and industry engagement (for example in building a new campus model in Tamworth), UNE is developing the entrepreneurs of the future who will drive economic and jobs growth in the regions. Our approach recognises that the ecosystems for innovation in regions are different from those of the city, requiring unique models of education and incubation of start-ups. UNE recommends that the Commonwealth prioritise investment in the ecosystems for entrepreneurship in regions, including education

and incubation delivered by regional universities. UNE looks forward to providing specific initiatives to supporting such a policy priority in our budget submission.

While the [latest OECD report](#) on global regions notes that many regional and rural areas were slow to adopt digital remote working, the Armidale region, and UNE in particular, has thrived in terms of our ability to deploy technologies to connect across organisations, industries and communities. UNE's digitally connected model allows us to support our students across the region and across the globe. The New England and North West is well placed to become a hub for digitally based industries and knowledge work. In terms of regional impact, our digital capability also provides the springboard from which we can effect real change in areas such as rural health and well-being. The development of a Creative New England Hub with 'makers' facilities also connects the cultural economy with manufacturing and production.

UNE is currently engaging with community and industry to define the operating and governance model for this STEM precinct-without-walls and look forward to making a budget submission that outlines an opportunity for the Commonwealth to support this initiative.

Recommendations:

Direct new and existing discretionary higher education funding to support development and delivery of course offerings that enable entrepreneurship.

Prioritise development of programs that support delivery of start-up incubators in regional settings.

Expand the Building Better Regions eligibility to regional universities as 'anchor institutions' to support job creation in regional economies.

New England Virtual Health Network

The impact of bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the fragility of healthcare systems globally, and the ability of technology to assist us in times of unprecedented need. More efficient and effective methods of screening, monitoring and treatment are needed to deliver quality care to dispersed populations. This would help address the limitations in access to quality health care in rural communities is a leading cause of rural-urban health inequality and is responsible for at least 20% of premature morbidity and mortality. Significant investment in enabling programs and access to quality health services in regional Australia is overdue; the existing inequalities will continue to increase if this is not addressed.

The New England Virtual Health Network is an innovative, digitally-enabled network for delivering in-place education and healthcare in the New England North West. It supports the delivery of in-place healthcare for patients and in-place learning for medicine and health students across the region. The digitally-enabled network provides educational access across dispersed locations and between students, practitioners and local health services. With studies showing that participation in an extended rural clinical school (RCS) placement is strongly

associated with students entering rural practice, the NEVIHN's rural placements will facilitate a larger regional health workforce. It is a model that can be replicated in other regional location across Australia. As this model is not supported by existing programs such as the Rural Health Multidisciplinary Training Program (of which UNE is not a direct recipient of support), and straddles both Health and Education portfolios, a new programmatic approach is required to support this initiative in the broader regional context. The current bias towards models of healthcare education which depend upon a metro/urban framework must be challenged if the health inequalities of remote, rural and regional communities are to be addressed.

Recommendations:

Develop a New Policy Proposal (NPP) to prioritise funding for technology enabled regional health networks that address both training and health care delivery in regional, rural and remote communities.

For further information, please contact Vice-Chancellor, Professor Brigid Heywood
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About UNE

UNE is an institution whose DNA is in supporting opportunity through education. Through the accessibility of our teaching, the impact of our research, the innovation we are driving in regional service delivery, and our demonstrated capacity to build entrepreneurship in a regional context, UNE is delivering solutions for those individuals and communities seeking to adapt to our ever-changing world

For more than 60 years, the University of New England has delivered educational opportunities that transform lives and build resilient communities. Through flexible online education, community-focused research and unique support for entrepreneurship in a regional context, UNE is providing a strong future for regional Australia and the nation as a whole. Investing in UNE's capability to deliver outcomes for individuals and communities will support the nation as we respond to and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

At our core UNE is an institution that provides opportunity to people who do not fit the mould of the traditional on-campus mode of study in a city university. As such, we are the country's oldest distance education provider and have been refining our online teaching skills and knowledge for decades. Approximately 80% of UNE students' study in online mode. Our expertise in this area came to the forefront this year, with UNE seamlessly transitioning most of our domestic and international students to online study.

UNE's student experience is unrivalled by any other Australia public university – gaining the [highest rating of 5 stars, for the 15th consecutive year](#). Providing quality education, though a comprehensive course offering with industry-leading approaches to teaching, to those seeking to improve and advance their lives is what UNE was created for.

We use our regional perspective and expertise in digital technology to work with our communities and partners on innovative and life-changing projects. We recognise that building the innovation and entrepreneurship required to activate regional economies requires specific types of support – different to the capital city incubation models. We measure our success by our contribution to the growing strength of regional Australia and its broader ranging economic impacts for the country.

UNE is focussed on producing job-ready graduates who are prepared for the ever-evolving employment market. Despite impactful political, environmental and structural challenges, UNE has continued to achieve significant outcomes and maintain a track record of outstanding performance with steady enrolment growth and progressive development of online provision.

As a premier research university, UNE has experienced growth in research funding and impact, which has assisted us in delivering to communities locally, nationally and globally. Most notably we don't just train professionals in agriculture, a field of national interest, but we are one of the country's leading institutions for commercialisation of rural research.