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2022-23 Budget

ENQUIRIES

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INTRODUCTION

La Trobe University welcomes the opportunity to make a pre-budget submission for the 2022-23 Federal Budget. As the leading state-wide higher education provider in Victoria, La Trobe plays an important role providing people with access to higher education they may not otherwise have.

Regional campuses are central to La Trobe's identity, mission, and purpose. Our campuses in Albury Wodonga, Bendigo, Mildura, and Shepparton are located in unique and thriving communities with strong industry connections and key local partnerships.

We are the largest employer in many of our regional communities, and they look to La Trobe for opportunity and growth. Regional communities are also where we have achieved closest integration with our TAFE partners, creating new pathways from vocation education and training to higher education.

The COVID-19 pandemic has shaken the world, and its profound impacts have extended to Australia's higher education system, including La Trobe.

La Trobe is a university known for making a positive difference in the lives of our students, partners, and communities. We will become an even more valued and relevant university because of the way we respond to their needs at this time of great local and national challenge.

Australian universities are well placed to play an important role to contribute to our national recovery and growing prosperity across our economy for the long term. The pandemic presents an opportunity to re- envision our role and impact locally and globally in a post-COVID world.

La Trobe is an active member of the Innovative Research Universities (IRU) Network and Universities Australia (UA). We are supportive of their broader policy and budget recommendations to address the major issues facing the Australian higher education sector and to ensure policy and regulatory settings are appropriately balanced. This includes advocating for direct incentives for industry and universities to drive research commercialisation opportunities; increase investment in university research; and provide flexible access to higher education to support Australians to up-skill and re-skill to meet future skill needs.

The proposals outlined in our pre-budget submission are part of our long-term plan and vision to reshape and grow La Trobe University. Not only will they provide more higher education and research opportunities for aspiring Australians, but they will also deliver local, regional, and national economic benefits as Australia emerges from the pandemic.

BUDGET PROPOSALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Establish an Australian Food Innovation Centre

La Trobe is proud to be the home of AgriBio and has strong links with the farming and agriculture sector across a range of leading teaching and research disciplines. To complement and build on this existing foundation, La Trobe is progressing an exciting proposal to establish the *Australian Food Innovation Centre* (AFIC). Designed in collaboration with industry and the CSIRO, the AFIC will create a new national agri-food facility to support research innovation and commercialisation in the agriculture and food sector.

AFIC will accommodate food labs and pilot scale end-to-end food processing and manufacturing. La Trobe and CSIRO's joint expertise will support Australian businesses from start-ups to SME's and multinationals to develop capability between the agriculture and food manufacturing pipeline.

Our vision is for AFIC to become a thriving hub for industry to benefit from local manufacturing, world-leading research, and dedicated infrastructure facilities. It will both inspire new careers in food and fibre and provide significant opportunities for teaching and learning to support Australia's growing agriculture sector. Although located at La Trobe's Bundoora campus in Melbourne's North, AFIC will leverage La Trobe's network of regional campuses and CSIRO's national footprint.

This combined capability is not available anywhere else in Australia. Economic modelling projects the \$375 million development will generate \$6.9 billion of economic activity over 15 years, creating up to 3,000 jobs in the first decade and increasing Australia's exports by up to \$100 million per year.

The proposal is currently being considered as part of the North and West Melbourne City Deal discussions with Local, State, and Federal Governments. La Trobe encourages the Federal Government to progress the development of the Deal with governments, stakeholders, and the community.

Recommendation:

La Trobe is committed to investing \$125 million in AFIC, and delivery of the \$375 million initiative will be possible with a capital contribution of \$250 million shared between the Commonwealth and Victorian governments.

2. Expand La Trobe's Rural Medical Pathway

La Trobe's Rural Medical Pathway is a dedicated medical training program for aspiring rural doctors as part of the Murray Darling Medical Schools Network. Our end-to-end approach to rural medical training contributes to the Federal Government's objective to improve the distribution of health professionals across regional Australia and build a sustainable rural medical workforce.

Since the program's commencement in 2019, demand from regional and rural students has continued to grow year on year with applications far exceeding the places available. Our Pathway – a partnership with the University of Melbourne in Shepparton - has lifted the aspiration of regional, rural, and remote students to pursue medical training and then proceed to practice medicine in the regions. In its three years of operation, the program boasts a 100 per cent student retention and success rate.

Given the Rural Medical Pathway's outstanding success, La Trobe proposes to expand the program to the Mildura and the Sunraysia region.

La Trobe proposes to:

- **Introduce** a new Bachelor of Biomedical Science (Medical) degree at our Mildura campus;
- **Support** a new rural 'end to end' medical pathway partnership between La Trobe (Mildura campus) and Monash Universities, recruiting the first intake of 10 pathway students in 2023; and
- **Expand** our existing rural 'end to end' medical pathway partnership with the University of Melbourne from 15 to 20 pathway students annually.

In line with the Federal Government's objective to improve health outcomes for regional Australians, the expansion of La Trobe's Rural Medical Pathway will create more opportunities for rural doctors to live, work and train in country communities.

We are extremely proud of the program and believe the end-to-end rural training model should be appropriately recognised and supported as a key lever to increase access to health services and build capacity in the medical workforce in rural and regional Australia.

A more detailed funding breakdown of the proposal can be provided on request.

Recommendation:

La Trobe is seeking a funding commitment of \$6.25 million for capital and program establishment funding, and an additional 15 medical CSPs from the Federal Government to expand the Rural Medical Pathway training program.

3. Increase investment in alternative pathways to teaching – La Trobe’s Nexus program

The increasing national shortage of teachers in Australia requires innovative and alternate approaches to attract and support career-changers to the teaching profession. As part of the Federal Government’s High Achieving Teachers Program, La Trobe received \$6.3 million in funding in 2019 to deliver the Nexus programme to 80 participants – a first-of-its-kind employment-based pathway into Secondary teaching.

La Trobe’s Nexus program prepares, mentors and graduates selected teaching candidates for economically, culturally diverse, and hard-to-staff schools across Melbourne and in regional and rural Victoria. The program offers a unique and practical way for people to transition from other careers into the teaching professional and receive a part-time salary while studying.

A key aspect of the program’s success is the unique model of carefully scaffolding participants in Education Support roles to build confidence along their journey to running their own classrooms. This approach also builds professional capacity and resilience in the school and broader staffing cohort.

La Trobe has highlighted the need for increased investment and alternative pathways to teaching to attract career changers and broaden the pipeline of high-quality teaching professionals in our submission to the *Quality Initial Teacher Education Review* in July 2021.

The Nexus program is a successful and valued model which could be further expanded and rolled out nationally to attract and retain quality teachers. As a regional Initial Teacher Education provider, La Trobe is well-placed to deliver an expansion of the Nexus program with a focus on regional, rural, and remote schools.

Recommendation:

In response to the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review, the Federal Government should increase investment in alternative pathways to teaching, including by expanding the reach of La Trobe’s Nexus program, to attract professionals from other career fields to the teaching profession.

4. Bendigo School of Rural Health – expansion of the Dental Training Program

The La Trobe University Rural Health School is the largest rural health school in Australia with more than 3,000 students enrolled across 11 disciplines at our regional campuses. We deliver regional dentistry education through our dedicated end-to-end training pathway, which evidence shows is more likely to lead to rural recruitment and retention.

We are developing a proposal to expand Dental and Oral Health clinical learning and training facilities at our Bendigo campus to meet growing student demand and community need for increased access to dental services in regional areas.

Despite extremely strong local and international student demand, La Trobe can only admit 60 Dentistry and 27 Oral Health students each year owing to constraints on clinical placement availability in regional and rural locations.

To meet demand from students and increase access to dental services in regional communities, La Trobe proposes to establish a new purpose-built public dental clinic at our Bendigo campus. Our investment will be targeted to provide an optimal clinical training environment for third and fourth-year dental students, as well as second year oral health students.

The establishment costs for the renovation and fit-out of an existing campus building into dental clinic with 40 plus dental chairs is estimated to cost approximately \$3 million. The expansion will enable La Trobe to increase its annual intake of Dentistry and Oral Health students by 33 per cent and support more students to complete regional and rural clinical training placements.

As part of our plans to expand our regional dental training program in Bendigo, we are also in discussions with relevant Victorian government agencies to seek recognition as a public dental provider.

In the broader policy context, we acknowledge the findings from the Rural Health Multidisciplinary Training Program (RHMT) review and the Australian Government's commitment in the 2020-21 Federal Budget for a feasibility study to examine the barriers to increasing dental training in regional locations. We note that the findings from the feasibility study won't be available until after the conclusion of the study in the second half of 2022.

Current funding for regionally dentistry education does not prioritise rural based training pathways, despite evidence showing they deliver better rural health outcomes. Both the RHMT Review and the feasibility study provide the opportunity for Government to reform regional dental training and recognise end-to-end rural training pathways. In response to this body of work, the RHMT program needs to be expanded to recognise and support regionally based dental schools.

Recommendation:

2a. La Trobe is seeking a funding commitment of \$3 million capital contribution for a new purpose-built public dental clinic based in Bendigo which will support regional dental training and service delivery across northern Victoria.

2b. The Federal Government should expand and reform the Dental Training Expanding Rural Placements programs under the RHMT program and prioritise funding for regional based undergraduate training models, such as La Trobe's Regional Dental Training Program.

5. Albury Wodonga Regional Deal

As the leading provider of higher education across northern Victoria, La Trobe supports the Albury Wodonga Regional Deal and has been working with governments, the community and industry sectors to finalise and deliver a plan for the region's future growth.

For more than three decades La Trobe has played a pivotal role in educating the region's future workforce and we have worked closely with stakeholders to expand our commitment and evolve education and training pathways under the Albury Wodonga Regional Deal. The Statement of Intent recognises Quality

Regional Education as a priority area for action and encapsulates the community's vision to establish the region as a research centre of excellence, better connect education and training providers, and integrate health facilities and services to attract health and education professionals. Further investment in local education and training pathways

Continuing to expand and invest in local higher education and training pathways under the Regional Deal will be fundamental to increasing liveability and supporting a growing population over the next two decades.

The broader package of commitments to shape the regional deal, supported by all three levels of government, will help drive the regional economy and support the region's future growth. The Deal will also contribute to the region's recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Following the announcement of the Albury Wodonga Regional Deal in March 2019 and the subsequent development of priorities and proposals from stakeholders and the community, it is important the Federal Government moves to finalise the Deal in the 2022-23 Budget.

La Trobe can provide a more detailed briefing on the work to date on request.

6. Higher education and regional economic development

Higher education and research plays a key role in the economic development of regional communities and can make a strong contribution to the national COVID economic recovery, however co-investment from government is required to support universities in this mission. We note there is currently no program or funding stream to support regional university infrastructure investment and believe a dedicated fund will help drive additional economic activity and the creation of local jobs in regional and rural communities.

La Trobe is grateful to have recently secured a \$5 million funding commitment from the Commonwealth to support an expansion of our Shepparton campus. The benefits from this co-investment extend beyond the university to the broader Shepparton community to meet local education and workforce needs and create new opportunities for partnerships with local industry.

Regional Australia is experiencing strong population and economic growth and with support to create the right policy and investment settings, the regions are in the box set to fuel Australia's next phase of economic growth. The establishment of a regional university infrastructure program presents the opportunity for the Government to recognise this confidence and back further growth to support regionalisation and industry-university partnerships.

7. Support for the diagnosis and early intervention of autism in Australian children

The Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC) is Australia's first centre dedicated to autism research. Established in 2008 at La Trobe University, the Centre has a strong focus on knowledge creation and translation, serving to shape policy and practice that improves the lives of autistic people and their families.

Autism is highly heterogeneous and requires personalised, evidence-based assessments and interventions which are accessible and affordable and needed to improve the lives of individuals and families. With increasing numbers of Australian children diagnosed as autistic (currently more than 2% of all births), and

the system to provide assessment and diagnosis services at capacity, there is an urgent need for further action to make a positive impact in the lives of autistic children.

There is an even greater need for access to autism support and services in regional and rural communities where families often must travel long distances for specialist services and expertise. La Trobe is aware of a proposal led by Greater Shepparton City Council to establish an Autism Centre in Shepparton and is supportive of local efforts to service the growing city and wider region.

Our expertise in the very early development of autistic infants and work to promote their developmental outcomes has underpinned the training of all Victorian and Tasmanian child health nurses on early signs of autism, and the delivery of evidence-based services at La Trobe University for this population.

La Trobe is home to the Victorian Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centre (ASELCC) which provides early intervention, education, and care services for approximately 35 very young autistic children annually. The service, which previously received federal funding under the *Helping Children with Autism Package*, has between 100 – 200 families on the waitlist each year. The demand for specialised services highlights the urgent need for expansion, not just within the Centre, but to also support external early childhood education and care services including those in rural and regional areas. We currently support Lady Gowrie (Docklands) in the provision of services for autistic children. However, there is a need to train many more early years professionals to offer individualised supports for young autistic children and families in their care, including in fostering inclusive practices.

To continue Australia's contribution to both basic and applied autism research more direct funding is needed for researching this highly prevalent condition. La Trobe welcomed the funding and establishment of the CRC for Living with Autism in 2013. Prior to this, there has been no federal funding for Autism research, except for limited research funding for specific applied research within the six Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centres.

Further support and investment is needed for diagnosis and early intervention, the development of new models of service delivery, increased research funding, and to understand the social and economic benefits of greater inclusion and participation of Australians living with Autism. These issues have recently been examined and explored in depth by the Senate Select Committee on Autism's *Inquiry into the services, support and life outcomes for autistic people in Australia*.

La Trobe acknowledges those who contributed to the Inquiry, and we look forward to the presentation of the Senate Select Committee's final report.