

**LA TROBE UNIVERSITY'S SUBMISSION TO
THE SENATE FINANCE AND PUBLIC
ADMINISTRATION COMMITTEE**

September 2019

Inquiry into the Emergency Response Fund
Bill 2019 and the Emergency Response
Fund (Consequential Amendments) Bill
2019 – Abolition of the Education
Investment Fund (EIF)

ENQUIRIES
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INTRODUCTION

La Trobe University welcomes the opportunity to respond to this Inquiry into the Emergency Response Fund Bill 2019 and Emergency Response Fund (Consequential Amendments) Bill 2019. La Trobe's comments refer to Sections 10 and 11 of the Emergency Response Fund Bill 2019 and to Schedule 2 of the Emergency Response Fund (Consequential Amendments) Bill that proposes to repeal the Nation-building Funds Act 2008, which established the Education Investment Fund (EIF).

La Trobe endorses the need for an Emergency Response Fund to provide a secure source of funding to be used for emergency response and recovery from natural disasters. However, La Trobe submits that this Fund should not be introduced at the cost of closing the EIF, which should be used for the purpose allocated: building world-class teaching and research facilities in Australia's universities.

REASONS FOR NOT CLOSING THE EIF

La Trobe strongly opposes the closure of the EIF for the following reasons:

- The EIF has a track record of demonstrable success in supporting critical teaching and research infrastructure in Australia's world-leading universities.
- When established, the EIF "aimed to build a modern, productive, internationally competitive Australian economy by supporting world-leading, strategically-focused infrastructure investments that would transform Australian tertiary education and research."¹ These aims remain valid today.
- EIF investments have not just led to new buildings – they have broadened research capability and enabled new opportunities in regional and rural Australia.
- La Trobe University's Rural Health School (LRHS) and La Trobe's Institute for Molecular Sciences (LIMS) would not have been possible without EIF grants. Our students, researchers and wider university communities have reaped significant benefit from these two institutes – see Annex 1.
- The EIF is an indispensable source of funding for new infrastructure for universities across Australia. Universities currently have no ongoing source of capital funding to renew their facilities. They must turn to their own margins to fund new infrastructure.
- Capacity to generate margins for reinvesting in capital infrastructure is of particular concern for suburban and regional universities. As the Higher Education and Infrastructure Working Group reported in 2015, some suburban and regional universities, "which are significant drivers of local economies and play a vital role in the fabric of local communities", "have no realistic prospect of amassing significant surpluses or developing balance sheets that allow them, acting alone, to effectively access capital markets."²
- Current funding restrictions in place since the 2017 Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO) exacerbate these challenges.
- The permanent closure of the EIF will make it extremely hard for universities to both address maintenance backlogs and invest in new teaching and research infrastructure. This has the potential to significantly impact the student experience, the attractiveness of an institution to prospective students (domestic and international), and the continuing ability of universities to drive the innovation, skills development and productivity that the Australian economy needs, particularly in regional Australia.

¹ <https://www.education.gov.au/education-investment-fund>

² Higher Education Infrastructure Working Group Final Report (2015)

A MISSED OPPORTUNITY FOR REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

La Trobe acknowledges this Government's intent to support equal opportunity and educational equity for people from rural, regional and remote areas of Australia in line with the recommendations outlined in the National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy (Naphthine Review).

However, closing the EIF runs counter to the recommendations of the Naphthine Review and would have a disproportionate impact on universities like La Trobe, which have a strong regional footprint.

Specifically, the Naphthine Review recommends enhancing regional research capacity "by supporting regional university providers to improve their research capacity by...identifying opportunities to establish national research infrastructure in RRR areas, including undertaking a comprehensive scoping study to underpin future national research infrastructure investments."³

In particular, Action 29 recommends implementing a new grants program to enhance research capacity in regional universities, exploring new forms of engagement, **and identifying opportunities to establish national research infrastructure in RRR areas.**

³ Commonwealth of Australia 2019, National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy, p.53.

ANNEX 1: LA TROBE'S EIF-FUNDED PROJECTS

La Trobe Rural Health School (LRHS)

In response to its strategy to address rural and regional health workforce shortages, in 2009 La Trobe University received Commonwealth funding from the EIF and from the Commonwealth Diversity and Structural Investment Fund to set up the La Trobe Rural Health School. The project involved the construction of three facilities namely the Health Sciences Facility at La Trobe's Bendigo Campus, the Clinical Teaching Facility co-located with the Monash School of Rural Health on the site of Bendigo Hospital, and student accommodation for students undertaking clinical placements at Wodonga, Shepparton, Echuca, Swan Hill and Bendigo.

Back in 2009, La Trobe's proposal for EIF funding was to increase student load by 70% to 1889 EFSTL. **The LHRS has significantly exceeded these targets with the current LHRS student load at 2547.** The Rural Health School is active across all La Trobe's regional campuses namely Albury-Wodonga, Bendigo, Shepparton and Mildura. The School has enabled the delivery of undergraduate and postgraduate course offerings including nursing and allied health and established the first rural dental course in Australia that continues to produce graduates for rural and regional areas. LRHS has one research Centre, The John Richards Centre for Rural Ageing Research, which is based at the Albury-Wodonga campus, with research activities occurring across all regional campuses. The Violet Marshman Rural Health Initiative was created in 2018 and supports research on and with rural communities on all aspects of health, wellbeing, and access to services. La Trobe attained University Department of Rural Health (UDRH) status in 2018 and has recently signed an MOU with the other three Victorian UDRHs to support collaboration on clinical placement and research-related activities.

In addition to its pre-service and postgraduate health professional education programs, there are currently over 100 Higher Degree by Research (HDR) enrolled in the LHRS. The LHRS works in partnership with over 300 different rural and regional health agencies and in 2018, close some 3,800 clinical placement hours were completed by LRHS students in multiple locations across rural and regional Victoria.

La Trobe Institute of Molecular Science (LIMS)

Launched in 2009 - the LIMS complex has more than 60 research and support laboratories, advanced research equipment, a 200-seat auditorium, and over 3,000 square metres of teaching facilities. Around 400 La Trobe academics, research fellows, postgraduate students and support staff are based at the Institute. LIMS also has two important regional nodes: many of its scientists work at La Trobe's Bendigo and Albury Wodonga campuses. The focus of LIMS is on six areas of research strength: cancer, infection and immunity, neurobiology, molecular design, molecular imaging and molecular sensing.

LIMS also has two embedded companies:

- Hexima Ltd, who are developing plant-derived proteins and peptides for application as human therapeutics and the genetic modification of crops; and
- AdAlta Ltd, who are developing the next generation antibody platform, the i-body, to deliver high affinity and specific biologics against a variety of therapeutic and diagnostic targets.

LIMS has an important collaboration with the Olivia Newton-John Cancer Research Institute that facilitates the sharing of knowledge, skills, research, training and facilities. LIMS is known for its research, but it is also a training centre, providing students and early career researchers with access to the latest equipment and exposure to high impact research projects.

Key Achievements:

- Emeritus Professor Nick Hoogenraad AO and Dr Amelia Johnston led an international research team that discovered the cause of cancer cachexia, a condition that kills up to one third of late-stage cancer patients.
- Dr Ivan Poon and Georgia Atkin-Smith captured the death of a human white blood cell for the first time.
- Dr Karen Harris and Professor Marilyn Anderson AO, together with collaborators at the University of Queensland, identified and produced the key enzyme that can turn small proteins known as linear peptides into more robust and chemically stable circular ones. The discovery makes the peptides a leading candidate for future pharmaceutical drug design.
- LIMS Stone Fellow in Chemical Biology, Dr Donna Whelan, built a highly specialised microscope to assist with her research into fundamental biology and DNA damage in diseases such as cancer.
- Dr Brian Abbey and Professor Keith Nugent, also members of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Advanced Molecular Imaging, collaborated with the Deutsches Elektronen-Synchrotron and the Center for Free-Electron Laser Science in Germany on the first-ever megahertz crystallography experiments.