

1. Context and Background

The University of Newcastle (UON) is a major provider of higher education teaching and learning, and research and innovation in NSW. UON is ranked in the top 250 universities worldwide (according to the latest QS World University Rankings and the Times Higher Education World University Rankings). The University's commitment to work-integrated and experiential learning to prepare students for the careers of the future has been praised by our students who rank UON amongst Australia's top 10 universities for quality teaching, graduate satisfaction and the development of skills valued by employers.

UON has a commitment to the regions it serves, which include the New England North West region as well as the Hunter, Central Coast and Mid North Coast regions of NSW.

Within the New England North West region in particular, UON has several key partnerships and facilities relevant to the scope of the draft Regional Plan:

- **Joint Medical Program (JMP)** with the University of New England (UNE)
- **University of Newcastle Department of Rural Health (UONDRH)** based at the Tamworth Education Centre (TEC) in Johnston Street, Tamworth
- The **UONDRH** also has offices in Armidale and Moree and supports students on placement in a number of smaller hospitals throughout the region (Inverell, Armidale, Narrabri, Quirindi)
- **Clinical teaching and research relationships** with the Hunter New England Local Health District (HNELHD), with a major presence at Tamworth and Armidale hospitals, and other regional hospitals
- **UON Gomerai Gaaynggal Centre** in Tamworth
- **Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Tamworth Regional Council (TRC)** to assess potential demand for an enhanced higher education presence in Tamworth.

2. Gaps in the current provision of Higher Education in the region

Under GOAL 4, DIRECTION 4.1 'Grow the regional cities of Tamworth and Armidale', the Draft Plan identifies that one in three of 'the region's houses and jobs are located' in Tamworth. However, despite having double the population, jobs and share of GRP relative to Armidale, Tamworth lacks direct access within the city to a higher education campus or capacity for students to enrol and study locally.

Direct access to undertake university education within the region is concentrated in Armidale. The only option for students in Tamworth and the Tamworth area wishing to pursue higher education studies is to travel or move out of Tamworth to study in Armidale, Newcastle or elsewhere. The provision of online education or local study centres, such as the UNE study centre in Peel Street Tamworth, is a limited option and supports only those students who are self-motivated or experienced learners to access programs supported through UNE's Armidale campus, but not necessarily school-leavers or those returning to learning as mature-age learners. It is not a substitute for a local campus offering opportunity for students to pursue higher education study in Tamworth itself.

UON's TEC is identified within the Draft Plan as being part of the Tamworth 'Education Precinct'. However, the TEC is a specialist facility supporting medicine and allied health students only. These students are undertaking a regional clinical placement of a semester or year's duration at the

Tamworth Hospital. It is the largest educational department of rural health in Australia and a highly successful exemplar of collaboration between the University and NSW Health. Nonetheless, students from Tamworth or other regional areas cannot 'enrol' in a program and nor do they complete all years of study at the TEC.

Consequently, Tamworth city has no equivalent to the Armidale 'Education Precinct' as identified in the Draft Plan. The Armidale Education Precinct is centred on the UNE campus, which provides a full service campus supporting local enrolment and study across an extensive range of undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs.

The Draft Plan commits the Government to work with Armidale and Tamworth Regional Council to 'Identify infrastructure that supports growth, including the activation of health, education ... precincts' (ACTION 4.1.1). However, the Draft Plan only identifies infrastructure investment at the Tamworth campus of NSW TAFE, but no equivalent investment in Tamworth to that proposed for Armidale in higher education and (agricultural) research facilities at UNE's campus there.

UON also acknowledges the importance of health and education infrastructure in towns and centres across the region. The UONDRH supports students from the region to undertake health careers and to return not just to the regional cities of Tamworth and Armidale but also to the smaller centres as primary health care services are distributed throughout the region.

3. Assessments of regional demand for higher education

In the 2015 Universities Admissions Centre (UAC) main round, a total of 1064 first preferences for university study were lodged by prospective students who reside and completed their high school studies in the region. This compares to 3323 for the NSW Central Coast region, 2213 for Newcastle and 1833 for Lake Macquarie. Although each of these regions is larger in population than the New England North West region, there are considerably fewer students proportionately from the New England North West region expressing interest for university study, as identified through the UAC process. In addition, the NSW Mid North Coast region is of only modestly larger population than the New England region, but had almost 50% more first preferences in 2015, with 1521.

Collectively, UON and UNE account for slightly more than 50% of all UAC first preferences for university study from students across the region. Whilst the following data is for UON only, it reinforces the concern identified in the Draft Plan that the regional population is ageing and experiencing 'outward migration of young people (aged 20-30 years)' (p.44):

- The majority of first preferences for university study were from females (58%)
- Almost two-thirds were from School Leavers (63%)
- The vast majority were aged 21 or under at the time (83%).

All of these UON first preferences were for study at the Callaghan or other campuses of UON. The same inference can be drawn from students expressing preference for study at universities other than UNE. Roughly three-quarters of all students in the region seeking to undertake university study, express preference for study at universities and campuses outside the region.

4. Potential for future expansion of Higher Education in the region

ABS data (2011) identifies that the percentage of the New England/North West regional population with a bachelor degree or higher, is 11.2%. This compares to the overall regional NSW figure of 12.5%. Tamworth, which represents approximately one-third of the regional population and has the highest population growth in the region, has 10.4%, and is less than all other regional NSW cities of similar size, including Armidale.

Of particular relevance, Tamworth has just 1.7% of its population attending university compared to the regional NSW average of 2.9%. In comparison to a group of other inland, regional NSW cities:

- Albury, Bathurst, Dubbo, Orange and Wagga (but excluding Armidale), Tamworth's participation rate of 1.7% compares most unfavourably to their 4.34%¹.
- Tamworth is the lowest ranked of all 7 cities² on this measure, and is the only one of all of these regional NSW cities without a local university campus.

The Draft Plan identifies growth in the regional population to over 202,000 by 2036, with the health and education sectors accounting for 24% of the workforce by that time (p.5).

The Draft Plan is underpinned by key principles:

- respond to long-term structural economic and demographic changes
- facilitate economic activities consistent with changing market demands and industry needs, and
- commits to 'push for development of health, education and aviation precincts' (p.7).

As identified above, the focus in the Draft Plan for development of higher education and research capacity in the region is centred solely on Armidale. Armidale has experienced consistently lower rates of population and economic growth than Tamworth in recent years, but has the advantage of having high levels of university participation and percentage of people with a bachelor degree or higher. Tamworth by contrast, is considerably disadvantaged across all comparable measures of access, participation and attainment.

5. Research and Innovation

The Draft Plan 'acknowledges the importance of education and agricultural research facilities' (p.57).

The Draft Plan should consider the need for research infrastructure and facilities within the region that go beyond the historical focus on agriculture alone. Research undertaken by the NSW Parliamentary Research Services³ in 2014 identified that the main employing industries within the region were:

- agriculture, forestry and fishing (15%)
- health care and social assistance (12%)
- retail (11%)
- education and training (10%).

Further, the employing industries with the largest growth in the period 2001-2011 were:

- health care and social assistance (33%, 2227 additional jobs)
- building and construction (35%, 1292 jobs)
- education and training (16%, 1023 jobs).

This suggests that the focus for investment in research infrastructure, capacity and activity needs to go beyond agriculture and have some alignment with existing employment, industry, growth and innovation, but also the changes projected across the main employing industries through the life of the Plan, as the region's employment profile and population changes and expands. Having research infrastructure and capacity that can support economic growth, diversity and innovation throughout the region, including the provision of commercial speed affordable broadband, should be a focus of the Plan.

¹ Source atlas.id

² Albury, Armidale, Bathurst, Dubbo, Orange, Tamworth, Wagga. These are the 7 original 'Evocities' as launched in 2010

³ April 2014, e-brief 5/2014

RECOMMENDATION

UON is of the view that the Plan should recognise the economic, population and GRP significance of Tamworth to the region, and provide support for direct investment in infrastructure that addresses equitable provision and opportunities in higher education, research and innovation.

6. Further information and contact

UON would be happy to provide further comment or clarification on any of the above or other matters. The UON contact is:

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