



University of
**Southern
Queensland**

**Response to draft Drought Resilience Funding Plan 2023 and draft
Future Drought Fund Investment Strategy 2024 to 2028**

This submission is made on behalf of the University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ) [REDACTED]
[REDACTED].

Background

UniSQ is a dynamic, regional University that has established its position as a prominent teaching and research institution, providing education worldwide from three physical locations across South East Queensland (Toowoomba, Springfield, and Ipswich) with an extensive online presence. The University's mission is to drive economic and social development through higher education and research excellence. University researchers work directly with local communities, industry, and our national and international partners to form strong and enduring research partnerships that deliver tangible benefits and real impact.

The University's Flagship Research Areas relevant to the Future Drought Fund include:

- Agriculture and the Environment including Climate Science, Drought Mitigation and Adaptation, Crop Health, Agricultural Technology and Environmental Science
- Regional Development including Agribusiness, Energy, Sustainable Economic Development, Workforce Development, Community Wellbeing, Climate Variability, Culture and Heritage
- Health including Sport and Exercise Science, Mental Health and Allied Health.

UniSQ leads the Southern Queensland and Northern New South Wales (SQNNSW) Hub, one of eight national Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hubs. The SQNNSW Hub empowers stakeholders to co-design drought preparedness activities in the SQNNSW region and supports producers and their communities in growing resilience to manage climate variability through innovation, collaboration, and building capacity and capability. Headquartered at UniSQ in Toowoomba, the Hub covers over 1.7MKm² from Longreach in Queensland to Dubbo in New South Wales, and from the coast to the South Australian and Northern Territory borders in the west. The Hub has a presence throughout the region through nodes run by its partners in Longreach, Roma, Stanthorpe, South East Queensland, Narrabri, Lismore and Armidale. Via the Hub and Nodes model, the SQNNSW Hub works with a range of industries including cotton, livestock, broadacre cropping, horticulture, viticulture, tree crops and sugarcane. The SQNNSW Hub has 37 Members and Network Partners, and has secured total cash and in-kind contributions of \$26.88M including \$14M in Federal funding.

The Hub's Mission is to support producers and their communities in growing resilience and capacity in managing climate variability through:

- Innovation – extension and adoption of agtech, soils knowledge and practice change information
- Collaboration – with service providers, business partners and producers' groups
- Building capacity and capability with producers, regions and community

The Hub's co-designed priorities are:

- (i) Data & Decision making - access to, as well as prioritisation and interpretation of data relevant to drought preparedness and resilience
- (ii) Wellbeing and employability in regions across the Hub
- (iii) Environmental Commodities as an alternate business opportunity for landholders throughout the Hub region
- (iv) Best Practice Agriculture and Preparing for Drought in terms of agronomic, land management, animal husbandry and farm management research and methodologies.

Draft Drought Resilience Funding Plan 2023

UniSQ broadly supports the purpose, vision, aims, strategic objectives and funding principles outlined in the draft Drought Resilience Funding Plan 2023 (Funding Plan) and welcomes its focus on public good. In relation to the vision statement, UniSQ suggests that the vision statement could be expanded to encompass place-based action and partnerships including unique regional leadership structures that facilitate and practice change and preparedness.

The structure of the Future Drought Hub funding, in particular, the hub and node model has proven successful in the instance of the SQNNSW Hub. It has fostered collaboration between the University and industry, and is working well to build capacity within the University, in industry and in the region it serves. By way of example, in the last six months, the Hub and nodes have held or participated in 88 events involving more than 3,000 people across the Northern New South Wales and Southern Queensland regions.

The Hub has involved a significant investment in time and funds. It has taken 18 months to embed the Hub and nodes into the region, and the Hub is now set up to fully progress its RDEA&C plan, which has been co-designed in consultation with its members and network partners, and the community in the region. It would be very difficult to leverage the structure that has been established and continue the Hub's good work, without continued Federal funding.

One of the fund wide principles guiding decision-making about the mix of programs, is supporting activities that have enduring outcomes including longer term programs. UniSQ strongly supports a longer-term funding cycle in relation to the Hubs. Voids in funding are detrimental to the work of the Hubs, resulting in attrition of personnel. Loss of capability is a concern even in a four year cycle, as personnel are looking for employment security earlier during the four year term. As such, it is suggested that the goal of supporting activities that have enduring outcomes including (where appropriate) through longer term grants, also be reflected in the remaining funding principles applying to grants made under the Future Drought Fund Act 2019.

Other fund wide principles are that eligibility for programs is streamlined and, where possible compliance costs are minimized on businesses, community organisations and individuals, and that there are no unnecessary ongoing operational or maintenance dependencies from investments. UniSQ supports program streamlining including clearer and more reasonable timing of funding submissions as well as greater integration of FDF programs. In particular, the timing of grant should take into account holiday periods, planting and harvesting schedules, wet seasons and other predictable or known events and seasons. In addition, if the Hubs are to be fully recognised as regionally relevant knowledge sharing networks, they should be utilised in both program planning, and grant and funding arrangements.

Draft Future Drought Fund Investment Strategy 2024 to 2028

We note that consistent with the FDF Act, the Future Drought Fund operates under a 4-year funding review and renewal cycle. As mentioned above, we strongly suggest that longer term funding cycles for the Hubs are considered to avoid gaps in funding and loss of momentum in delivery through loss of key personnel delivering FDF activities on the grounds in the regions. While the focus on 2024-28 seems appropriate in terms of the design of other individual programs, it is important to have long term certainty of continuation of the FDF and the Hubs beyond 2028.

Appendix B describes the 17 foundational FDF programs and there appears to some overlap across those programs. We suggest that funding be concentrated in funding in fewer but longer-term programs. Indeed, the entire FDF program could be better focused if the hub structure was utilised as the heart of all FDF activities. The Drought Resilient Leaders Program (DRLP), for example, could benefit from relevant Hubs hosting ongoing alumni support and activities for DRLP graduates. The implementation of Regional Drought Resilience Plans, for example, could be coordinated through relevant Hubs. It is also vital to continue to integrate Hub activities with state agencies. The SQNNSW Hub has seen great benefit in considering integration between the programs.

New FDF Grant rounds are now required to reflect Hub priorities, which is positive and proof that Hubs are actually at the coal face of drought resilience. The Hubs are now established and ideally placed to leverage public good investment that is available with other partner funding to continue to build a legacy for the long term. Given their developing regional expertise, future FDF program arrangements and grant rounds should be co-designed between the department and Hubs. Whilst government agencies, particularly at a State level, have gradually withdrawn from agricultural extension services over recent decades, the public good benefit of such services has been lost. Commercial extension services can only be reasonably expected to focus their attention on their clients and, therefore, adoption of new technology and methodologies has become piecemeal. The FDF Hubs have only just begun the task of rebuilding a coordinated extension and adoption network – an effort that must be retained, if regional communities and industries are to continue to build resilience.

Further, we suggest that the Hubs should play a central role in coordinating and administering the FDF Programs, as some programs such as the Extension and Adoption Farming Practices Grants, Drought Resilience Innovation Grants, NRM Drought Resilience Program (Grants and Landscapes), and the Helping Regional Communities Prepare for Drought Initiative are aligned with key functions of the Hubs. The Hubs and the Hub partners and communities have invested heavily in terms of both time and money into establishing the Hub networks and presence throughout the regions. Therefore, the FDF should make the most of this investment and utilise the Hubs to a larger extent. We submit that the Hubs should not be one of many FDF Programs but, rather, the central mechanism to deliver the programs.

In terms of recognition of climate resilience by the FDF, our experience via the SQNNSW Hub is that stakeholders recognise drought as part of the broader climate cycle. Therefore, we are supportive of the programs considering a broader range of climate risks where they meet the requirements of the Funding Plan, provided care is taken not to lose the benefit of the specific drought resilience knowledge and tools.

UniSQ strongly supports the proposed place-based action and partnerships investment. We support the continuation of the Hubs and recognise the importance of strong local networks, and the experience of First Nations communities and their unique and continuing connection to land, sea, environment and water. In particular, we support the extension of funding for the Hubs, operational funding for regional engagement and communication including adoption/outreach officers and knowledge brokers, funding to deliver priority projects, competitive funding to deliver cross-Hub or cross regions projects and Hubs being tasked to take forward aspects of regional plans provided there is appropriate funding for such tasks.

As regards agriculture landscapes management and the innovation and transformation program, there seems to be some overlap with respect to trialling innovative approaches, but the link is unclear. We submit that innovation should be at the heart of all approaches to developing solutions

and building resilience. Innovative landscape management approaches should be linked to long-term trials because landscape change and the impacts takes many years to take effect and really understand. Landscape management cannot be viewed as separate from farm management - they need to be integrated as part of a unified approach, if we are going to deliver real benefits. There also needs to be clear mechanisms to fund research into understanding the impacts of these new approaches. Agroforestry trials and demonstration farms should become a priority with research effort concentrated around the natural capital benefits of these systems in an Australian context and also on mechanisms to promote their uptake. In order to make landscapes and communities more resilient there needs to be a more holistic approach. Managing only for drought resilience is likely to have wider consequences, particularly on the environment, which could produce both positive and negative impacts. Therefore, agriculture landscapes management funding needs to consider the development of multi-functional landscapes. Managing landscapes in such a manner would be consistent with the objective to strengthen natural capital, and avoid other unintended consequences. Therefore, we support a holistic multi-functional approach with drought resilience at the heart. Natural capital projects should be a priority, but they should be integrated and holistic.



University of Southern Queensland

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