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A Case Study of "NorVicFoods": A Knowledge Exchange Initiative in a Regional Agrifood Community[1]

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Abstract

NorVicFoods (NVF) was a knowledge exchange initiative that was supported primarily by the Victorian government and operated from early 2021 through to September 2025. The NVF program involved several sub-projects, the largest of which placed post-graduate students into agrifood companies in the Hume region of Victoria. It had a specific aim of enhancing innovation through improved engagement between a research-intensive University and selected companies, as well as a more general aim of building *cluster-like* connections among regional actors in the agrifood value chain. Other sub-projects supported higher degree by research students and convened knowledge exchange events for participants in the sector.

Here we present the inputs into and outputs of NVF and discuss them in the context of the microeconomic concept of club goods, and the economic geographical concept of clustering. While the program met many of the objectives set in the service-level agreement with government, we were interested in evaluating early indicators of future impact from this type of intervention.

Keywords: innovation. regional networks, economic assessment, impact, clusters

Introduction

The Hume region in central Victoria, Australia was the target for the NorVicFoods (NVF) intervention. Its boundaries are relevant because of the significance of the agrifood industry to the economy of the region, as shown in RDV (2025). The City of Shepparton was the epicentre of the intervention as it had

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the greatest concentration of post-farm gate agrifood enterprises. The region had been experiencing economic growth, though it and many other places were challenged during the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2008 and 2017, the Hume region experienced 42 per cent growth in gross regional product (GRP) to $16.7 billion (RDV, 2025) and experienced 20 per cent growth in the number of medium sized businesses. The region is diverse in its industry and employment make-up, with a concentration of agricultural enterprises in the west, and wine and gourmet food areas in the east. The agrifood sector contributed significantly to GRP in 2022: agriculture, forestry and fishing (8.9 per cent), and manufacturing (23 per cent), where a proportion of that will be manufacturing applied to food products. The Goulburn Valley catchment area is a long-established agricultural corridor, encompassing broadacre grain farming, dairy, viticulture, horticultural orchards and some aquaculture. Several large, international companies are located in the region, including SPC Global, Uncle Toby's, Mars Petcare, Bega, Tatura Milk, Noumi and the Woolworths Distribution Centre. In addition, two of Australia's most important transport routes – the Hume and Goulburn Valley transport corridors – traverse the region, linking supply chains to national and international markets through the urban centres of Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Canberra. As the major urban centre in the region, Greater Shepparton has a GRP in excess of $3.3 billion and provides $800 million of value add per annum, exporting $1.2 billion of product including $520 million to international markets (Committee for Greater Shepparton, 2022). Eighteen percent of Victoria's food processing is in Greater Shepparton. At the same time, some of the electoral areas within the region have been regarded as disadvantaged due to educational levels, economic capacities and long-term unemployment (DOTE, 2021).

In 2020, the Victorian populace and economy were severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The higher education sector was particularly badly affected due to State and Commonwealth policies relating to international students in particular. The Victorian government made resources available through the Victorian Higher Education State Investment Fund (VHESIF) to both underpin the sustainability of higher education and vocational education institutions and support future oriented initiatives from those sectors. In June 2021, after a competitive selection process, the University of Melbourne entered into an agreement with the Victorian Government to establish NVF and make a series of targeted interventions that sought to strengthen the innovation performance of enterprises in the region. Boosting Victoria's industrial productivity and economic resilience were among the top-level objectives of the funding package (VHESIF, 2025).

The NVF program of work was designed with two overarching concepts in mind. Firstly, that targeted interventions might help stimulate innovation in companies at various points in the agrifood value chains operating in the region – the base hypothesis. Secondly, those and other interventions might facilitate increased connectedness among the actors in the region, adding value jointly to several actors in those value chains.

There are many examples of government-funded interventions at levels above the individual firm, for example at the geographic regional level, that were relevant to the design of this program. To some extent the underpinning propositions of these interventions can be found in the international work of Mariana Mazzucato and colleagues (e.g. Mazzucato, 2014). CSIRO had emphasized the importance of collaboration building, knowledge sharing and skills development, in its landmark analysis of the opportunities available to the Australian Food and Agribusiness sector (CSIRO, 2017). The State of Victoria specifically had a long-established program to facilitate the biotechnology industry through investments in scientific and technological development at the ecosystem level, and this was shown to stimulate jobs and economic activity in the State (Acola, 2020). As Caples (2025) described in an industry press summary, government policy makers had perceived a correlation between "regional ecosystem" success and these six characteristics: foundational capability; people and talent; tools and infrastructure; investment attraction; testbeds and foundries; and government procurement.

In developing the funding case for NVF, the authors highlighted aspects of each of these, and argued that the Hume region had demonstrable strength in: *foundational capability*, through the links with University of Melbourne researchers; *people and talent*, through the pre-existing aggregation of food value-adding firms in the region; and *testbeds and foundries*, in that the companies who chose to engage with the NVF program had already decided to test new ideas and innovation options. It seemed that at a macro-level, the Hume region could be considered a *proto-cluster*, and hence government and University investments might be effective. The grant quantum was $2.7 million over four years to September 2025, and the funding leveraged in-kind contributions from the University as well as various Victorian agrifood value chain actors.

This case study presents measures of the performance of NVF in terms of inputs and outputs and seeks to assess the impacts of the intervention using established conceptual frameworks.

Results

The NVF program was funded and contracted on the 9th of September 2021. Before starting, we undertook an assessment of the opinions of selected regional stakeholders: a qualitative *ex-ante* analysis. This was completed by professional consultants (Augment Group, Australia) utilizing a defined set of questions, asked of 29 stakeholders from a range of fields relevant to the regional agrifood sector. The consultant's report was available to the NVF team in March 2022, but no changes were made to the strategy. The verbatim comments of the stakeholders are not presented here, but we utilised the University of Melbourne's *Spark AI* system *and* the *Open AI GPT 4o Large Language Model*, to query a document consisting of all the verbatim comments[2]. The summary was as follows:

"*The document discusses various challenges and opportunities related to the Hume region, focusing on its biological and agricultural systems. Key issues highlighted include the inadequacy of educational offerings, particularly in agriculture and horticulture, and the need for improved workforce supply. There is an emphasis on the importance of collaboration between academic institutions and industry to better utilize data and drive meaningful change. The document also mentions the potential for regional development through innovation hubs and food technology courses, as well as the need for improved succession planning in the agricultural sector. …* (irrelevant comment deleted). *The document underscores the need for leadership in strategy implementation and the importance of defining and communicating the value chain in agriculture and agri-food sectors. Overall, it advocates for more comprehensive and coordinated efforts to address regional development and workforce challenges."*

When prompted by "What do authors think about NorVicFoods", the Spark AI response was:

"Authors express a range of opinions about NorVicFoods. Some see it as a great initiative with the potential to boost research and innovation, particularly in the agri-food sector. There is enthusiasm about its role in fostering collaboration between industry and academia, which could lead to new vocational training opportunities and industry placements. However, there is skepticism regarding its effectiveness and concerns that it may prioritize the University of Melbourne's interests over those of the local community. The initiative is perceived as potentially vague, with doubts about its impact on community connections and workforce challenges. Overall, while there is interest in its potential, there are significant reservations about its focus and execution."

[2] Other settings were: temperature 0.5; RAG retrieval count, 10; and instructions to accept both positive and negative comments.

In brief, the NVF program involved several sub-projects, managed by an Executive Manager, and controlled financially within the project systems of the University of Melbourne. Strategic input and governance oversight were provided by an internal, University project control board. NVF had a specific aim of enhancing innovation through improved engagement between a research-intensive University and selected companies, as well as more general goals of building *cluster-like* connections among engaged companies. The largest of the sub-projects placed groups of post-graduate students into companies for more than 100 hours of company-directed, applied research work. Other sub-projects supported higher degree by research, post-graduate students, and also convened knowledge exchange events among participants in the regional agrifood sector.

For the postgraduate research and internship sub-projects, companies were invited by public advertisement to put forward innovation challenge ideas. The ideas and the companies that proffered them, were selected based on criteria of likely innovation impact in the context of their business, and the degree of technical uncertainty. The Victorian government as keystone investor was able to veto involvement of any company, though they did not exercise that right. There were no restrictions on companies being involved in the knowledge exchange events.

The inputs and outputs of NVF are summarized in Table 1.

From a contractual perspective and following the definition of the Australian Bureau of Statistics, each internship was counted as a *job* (ABS, 2025). From the perspective of an impact evaluation, we will consider these to be fractional employments. Each intern was required to spend at least 100 hours on that employment, including a written report and an oral presentation to the host company. The time they spent in other jobs was not available for this case study and has been disregarded. This suggests the total fractional engagement leveraged by NVF was 3.9 FTE spread across the total number of 13 companies. The VHESIF funding itself offset the total expenses of the NVF team, which amounted to approximately 1.1 FTE over the term.

Each cohort of interns was given training to prepare them for the internship so that they could be safe at the workplaces, have a rudimentary understanding of the businesses they were visiting, and some awareness of life in the Hume region of Victoria. The aptitude of the students presenting to NVF for internship, varied widely due to factors outside the control of the NVF team.

The NVF grants-in-aid were available to many students within the Faculty of Science and its predecessor Faculty (Veterinary and Agricultural Sciences). The grants were allocated by an expert panel and with the advice of experienced research academic staff. At the time of writing this case study, the grants have contributed to the community's stock of knowledge through publications, but not yet to economically assessable impacts.

Any knowledge or know-how generated through the work of the interns in a company, was owned by the Victorian government as the ultimate funder, but that company had a broad license to commercialise, and the University had rights to use it in research and for teaching. No registrable IP was generated directly the groups of interns. There was one package of registrable IP generated by a research post-graduate under a grant-in-aid, but details were not available for this case study.

From interviews with companies who were most enthusiastic about NVF, we are confident that at least four new products, product extensions or new services are being developed further because of the work of a group of interns. Details are covered by confidentiality.

Table 1. Inputs and outputs of the NorVicFoods program

Key characteristics	Scope and scale indicators	Commentary
Time of program operation	02/06/2021 to 31/07/2025	As part of the broader VHESIF portfolio of grants
Resources invested in-kind by the project partners prior to receiving government funding	$0	These were written off as sunk costs
Income (all sources)		
• Focused in-kind effort on a predecessor project proposal[1]	$127,000[1]	Provided from the University's accounts
• Victorian State Government VHESIF grant	$2,700,000	As in the public domain
• Interest earned on the grant funds to Sept 2025	$66,044	Relates to the timing of payment tranches to the University
• In-kind contributions from the intern host organisations[1]	$176,000	Estimated by time committed and reasonable industry pay rates at the time
• In-kind contributions from the University during the NVF program	$1,000,000	Financial reconciliations presented to the University
Total	$4,069,044	
Expenditure (all cash accounts)		Details not made available for this case study, and not considered relevant
Total	$4,069,044	
Activities		
Students trained		
• Company-based interns	63	
• University-based interns	5	focussed on NVF projects
• Higher degree by research candidates supported to completion as a grant-in-aid	13	
Independent organisations engaged	13	
Events convened		
9	301 attendees, including many repeat attendees	Average of 41% female attendance

[1]Estimated using internal costing/pricing frameworks and normalized to 2024 $A using calculators on https://www.abs.gov.au. An allowance for on-costs and overheads as set at 1.4 for all organisations.

We are aware also of another of the companies working with one of the PhD students, who has modified an existing product range because of the work of that student and their supporting R&D team. Again, that company wishes to hold this information confidential for their own reasons.

Those are positive indicators of impact.

Other observations from the collated input/output data that support broader impacts of NVF:

- Many young women have been influenced by and are likely to profit from their engagement with NVF as an intern, a post graduate student or an event attendee. Fifty eight of the 81 interns or post graduate students are regarded by the NVF team to be female i.e. attendees were not required to declare their gender status.
- The NVF events attracted 301 people over nine occasions. While there were many repeat attendees, the diversity of event topics attracted a significant proportion of new attendees each time. The NVF events were well attended by females. The lowest proportion of the crowd that was female was 26 per cent, the highest 52 per cent, and the average 41 per cent.
- Time series analysis of the attendee cohort data suggested that there was no significant effect of time (start to finish of NVF) on the proportion of females attending the events. Content rather that maturity of NVF as a convenor, was more likely to be a significant motivator for females to attend the events (data not shown).

Each individual event attendee was categorised for declared job type and then de-identified for analysis. The categories were: University of Melbourne staff (academic or professional) or students; staff of another University (academic or professional); employees of companies in the agrifood sector (technical or support jobs); employees of companies in the agrifood sector (leadership or ownership jobs); employees of companies or organisations that support the agrifood sector (e.g. consultants or sector support, for profit or otherwise); public sector employee (relatively senior); government workers including public servants of any rank, as well as elected representatives of any level of government).

From this analysis we conclude that:

- There was a diverse range of jobs represented at every NVF event.
- There were many relatively senior agrifood industry participants present at several events; presumably based on the topic of that event, and their confidence that the event convenors would not waste their time through poor topic or speaker choices.
- There were many industry service providers present at all events, again presumably because of the topic of the events and their confidence in the event convenors.
- In all but one case, more than 50 per cent of the audience was either a senior agrifood industry participant or an industry service provider. The event that broke the trend was the final, close-down event for NVF, which unsurprisingly had a larger proportion of UoM attendees.
- In general, the events were not dominated by University of Melbourne employees, whether in academic or professional jobs, or indeed by students.

The event convenors did a reasonable job in attracting non-academic community members to all the events.

These data are all consistent with NVF providing value to the companies that engaged with it, as well as to the students whose studies involved some time with NVF. Anecdotal data suggested the NVF team's facilitation of some new company to company connections or new collaborative arrangements.

Discussion

The NVF program was designed and funded at a time when the Victorian State government was concerned about the financial challenges facing Universities, and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions. State Treasury created the Victorian Higher Education State Investment Fund and

more than $344M was invested across 10 institutions (VHESI, 2021) with an objective of current support but also of capability development for the future. While many projects have the potential to contribute to Australian agribusiness, seven will be worth monitoring.

NVF was funded with two overarching concepts in mind. Firstly, that targeted interventions could help stimulate innovation in companies at various points in the agrifood value chains operating in a region – the base hypothesis. Secondly, that targeted interventions could facilitate increased connectedness among the actors in the region, and that these could add value jointly to several actors in those value chains – the concept at the heart of a *cluster.* We have adopted the definition of clustering provided by Delgardo et al. (2013), i.e. a geographically proximate group of interconnected companies, suppliers, service providers and associated institutions in a particular field, linked by externalities of various types. As the VHESIF-funded projects have ended, information about each project is becoming available publicly and particularly in relation to the various impacts of those publicly funded projects. This case study is presented to add to the information available to the public about this significant agribusiness investment initiative.

We have presented performance data consistent with NVF being successful in terms of the first concept. Multiple companies proffered project ideas that embodied innovative challenges. These ideas and challenges were approached by more than 81 students, and viable alternatives were generated for those companies. Some of the companies were sufficiently pleased with the process and the results to engage with NVF repeatedly, with one company accepting 6 cohorts of interns. Given that that company needed to invest in-kind to the support of the students prior to, during and after the face-to-face engagements, that is a measure of their confidence in the approach. In this case study we have placed the value $176,000 on this in-kind support, or 4 per cent of the total available resources. A total of about 68 regional jobs were created through the activities of NVF.

Acceptance of contractual performance measures by government, positive feedback from host companies, and presentation of research manuscripts for publication (in progress), are all recognised measures of project performance, and NVF achieved these.

Performance against the measures of cluster-like improvements has been harder to establish.

The Hume region, and the Goulburn Valley region particularly have been known for their agricultural production and processing industries since the colonial development of industries in the 19th century. For example, the Dookie Agricultural College was established in 1886 and the Shepparton Preserving Company was established as a grower cooperative in 1917. The importance of the fruit and dairy industries has been recognised in many regional and State government development plans.

NVF was envisaged through a limited co-design process involving various Hume regional stakeholders, including the Committee for Greater Shepparton, Sensand Technologies Australia, and Regional Development Victoria, and taking note of the many regional strategies and implementation plans available publicly in 2020. Indeed, the existence of the Committee for Greater Shepparton at the start of the NVF funding, is evidence for pre-existing cultures, structures and agreements supporting collective action across the community, including innovation. Soon after it was funded and established as a project within the University of Melbourne, the NVF team undertook a qualitative *ex ante* analysis using independent consultants (December 2021). The outputs from that work are not in the public domain, but some common attitudes expressed by local stakeholders were noted by the consultants and summarised by Spark AI, and include:

- *"Scepticism that the University of Melbourne through its staff would engage sincerely with the objectives of local agri-food businesses.*
- *Pessimism that funding (all types) would be maintained for a sufficient duration for impacts to be achieved.*
- *Frustration that there had been many previous strategic initiatives and yet the impact of those were not clear to the stakeholders."*

A mid-term evaluation of progress was carried out again by independent consultants (Spiegare), and a similar qualitative assessment was made through stakeholder interviews (December 2023). In this case some common attitudes were summarised by the consultants themselves, as:

- "NorVicFoods is performing well in linking The University of Melbourne School of Agriculture, Food and Ecosystem Science Masters' students with industry in the Hume region.
- The student interns are providing resources that are otherwise not present to research potential leads to solve host business challenges.
- It would be more advantageous for host businesses of NorVicFoods' interns if potential solutions to challenges could be developed inside the business to greater maturity, requiring further time and resources, and likely a source of external funding to act as a primer to incentivise host business to persist with the developing the solution to a stage where it can be implemented.
- Expanding the NVF program to encompass a broader spectrum of businesses, regions, and faculties within the University of Melbourne could be beneficial. Nevertheless, certain challenges in scaling the program may need to be addressed through necessary adjustments.
- Enduring impact will take time to build and requires long term funding.
- Establishing metrics to understand outputs and impact will provide evidence of value created and enable NVF to compare itself with other Australian regional agri-food innovation systems."

These external insights support our view that NVF made progress against the first of its conceptual objectives. However, there is little objective evidence for the development of increased connectedness between local organisations, above what already existed at the time of NVF initiation.

The VHESIF investments focussed on supporting Universities and vocational educational facilities, and approximately $230 million of the total of $344 million was invested into initiatives that were framed as precincts, clusters, hubs, centres, nodes or facilities. Each of these terms implies human and technological aggregations of various scales and operating arrangements. The focus of this funding mechanism was not discovery research or early-stage technological development. In this context then, the outputs of the NVF program can be viewed as positive and consistent. It is yet to be seen through broader release, how the achievements of all of the VHESIF investments compare, and hopefully accumulate benefits for the community and nation.

Given the operating rhythm of NVF and the types of intervention that were employed, we regard it as an example of a *club good* initiative, or in value chain terminology, a *chain good* (Fleming et al., 2018, and references therein). The government of Victoria supported and leveraged resources from the University of Melbourne to offer options for increasing the efficiency of agrifood value chains operating in the region. The University offered both access to talented students and partially developed new technologies and know-how. The companies approached NVF voluntarily, presumably seeking solutions to their innovation challenges. The outputs and benefits generated were neither clearly public goods, nor private goods. Some benefits accrued to the companies who hosted the intern groups, suggesting a private good, and the students themselves captured benefits from targeted training and workplace exposure, again suggesting private goods. The knowledge of the

research postgraduates can be expected with confidence, to be dispersed to the public, through open publication, subsequent employment or through new products and services being made available by other companies who subsequently employ them. The benefits were not purely public goods from the outset, because companies have been able to restrict the results of the students' work so that they might have first commercialisation opportunities. We think the adjective *club* applies in this context, because not all companies or groups in the region had the opportunity to contribute, and those who did, did so voluntarily, having to commit some in-kind resources to support the interns. Engagement with NVF required the proffering of an innovation challenge to be worked on. Something akin to a nascent value chain club was created.

Likewise, we don't think a cluster-like arrangement in a pure sense, has been built any more than already existed at the outset of NVF, because no new inter-dependencies have been created among the actors in this agri-food value chain. It is worth noting that the NVF team was invited to collaborate in a bid for government support for one of the companies, but there is not a result from that application at this time. In late 2025, the University of Melbourne decided against continuing NVF alone, without significant support from other co-investors, which had not been secured.

There have been several earlier initiatives to stimulate regional agrifood innovation clusters through funding from the Commonwealth or State governments, or both. To some extent, all agrifood-system focussed Cooperative Research Centres have contributed to the development of *club goods* and clustered resources and the development of the Meat Standards Australia beef grading system is a great example (Griffith et al., 2009). A second example of scale was Food Innovation Australia Ltd (FIAL), created under the Commonwealth government's Industry Growth Centres initiative that ended in June 2022 (Australian Government, 2022). FIAL presented an assessment of impact in 2023 (FIAL, 2023), and it is interesting to compare the scope and scale of NVF achievements, with those of the FIAL programs, which was at least 11-fold larger. For example, with 9,000 participants, and an estimated economic contribution of $231.7 million, it seems that the FIAL Centre was able to capture some economies of scale, relative to the smaller, shorter-lived, NVF, per million dollars of investment. To some extent, it is likely that the economic impact of FIAL continues to grow through some of the regional networks it spawned, eg. Food & Agribusiness Network (https://foodagribusiness.org.au/) and fermentHQ (https://www.fermenthq.com.au/thefermentationplayground). Information about their respective outputs is included in their annual reports.

It will be valuable to reassess the impacts of NVF when more time has elapsed, and other public and private investments have been made in the agrifood sector in the important Hume region.

In terms of future initiatives, these will depend on the Australian government's response to the *Strategic Examination of Research and Development* expected in March 2026 (Australian Government, 2025), which is likely to reset policy around training in innovative thinking, entra- and intrapreneurial processes. The authors recommend continued and sustained initiatives to enhance the innovation capability of interns or the company networks they work within, particularly in regional Australia, because these young scientists will be a key component of the future science capacity.

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