

**INQUIRY INTO RESPONSE TO MAJOR FLOODING
ACROSS NEW SOUTH WALES IN 2022**

Organisation: Southern Cross University

Date Received: 12 May 2022



**Southern Cross
University**

Submission to the Select Committee on the Response to Major Flooding Across New South Wales in 2022

12 May 2022

Southern Cross University

Contact:

**Professor Tyrone Carlin
Vice-Chancellor and President**



Hon Walt Secord MLC (Chair)
Select Committee
Response to Major Flooding Across New South Wales in 2022
Submission via email: floods@parliament.nsw.gov.au

12 May 2022

Dear Chair,

RE: SOUTHERN CROSS UNIVERSITY SUBMISSION

Southern Cross University is pleased to have the opportunity to make this submission to the Inquiry into the Response to Major Flooding across NSW in 2022.

With our main campus in Lismore, the University and its staff have supported our local community in the immediate aftermath of the flooding, and as the community begins the long road to recovery to build a sustainable future. Our Lismore campus is the designated Evacuation Centre for all natural-disasters in the greater Lismore area. Its location, significant infrastructure and size make it the only “at scale” location near the Lismore CBD for mounting emergency response and recovery operations in the face of flood or significant fire events.

The University started 2022 with great hope that the previous two years of COVID-19 disruptions were behind us, our students would be back on campus, and our core functions of teaching and research would resume with renewed enthusiasm. This hope was dashed with the flooding in February and March. On the ground, these events have thrown up many challenges of an unprecedented nature, and we have met these with a united community focussed on supporting each other.

What became abundantly clear on the night of 28 February, was that the Lismore campus of the University was the only intact, functioning flood-free land in close proximity to Lismore City’s central business district and areas of greatest inundation and impact. Staff members responded immediately to open up the University as the Evacuation Centre, providing immediate support for those in need and for a range of other organisations as they began their work in response to the unfolding events.

The University has fulfilled this type of role numerous times since its establishment in 1994, at the request of the State Emergency Service or the Regional Emergency Operations Committee. However, the unprecedented scale of the disaster in 2022 led to the University mounting a response at a scale that it had ever before confronted or contemplated.

Because of this, the University closed its Lismore campus to normal University operations and devoted all functioning campus infrastructure and substantial human resources to supporting the evacuation effort and planning for subsequent recovery operations. At the peak of the emergency response phase, 1200 displaced people sheltered at the University (along with their pets - dogs, cats, rabbits and even snakes).

We worked closely with other organisations, notably the Red Cross, Salvation Army and NSW Government agencies to provide bedding, clothes, food, water and essential medical care. The University also supported Australian Defence Force (ADF) operations, with over 700 ADF members based at our campus as they went about their important work.

The University’s sporting oval was used as a landing zone for a large number rotary wing movements, namely for the ADF, SES and Police, with the primary focus on transferring rescued residents to the safety of the Evacuation Centre and in some cases, where the aircraft could not land at the Lismore Base Hospital, on to acute medical care.

There has been little time to adequately reflect on all that has happened and changed on the Lismore campus over the past few months. The immediate response has moved to the recovery phase: three schools and TAFENSW have relocated some, if not all, their operations and students to the campus; essential services precincts have been established, in particular, the Head to Health precinct and the Community Banking Hub; there is ongoing hosting of numerous government agencies and local members of Parliament, including the AEC and Centrelink; and on 2 May, the Lismore campus welcomed the return of our own students to a very different campus environment.

Every available space is being utilised to ensure a “home” and the provision of essential services for our own students and staff, our co-residents, and the local community. As we move beyond the initial disaster response phase, we are beginning to contemplate some of the core strategic issues and opportunities that lie ahead, and how we may work closely with the NSW Government to build a sustainable future for this region.

About Southern Cross University

The University is headquartered in Lismore, New South Wales, with campuses in each of Lismore, Coffs Harbour and the Gold Coast. It commenced operations on 1 January 1994 with the passing of the *Southern Cross University Act 1993* (NSW). The University currently has 18,817 students and 812 staff. The Lismore campus is the research and administrative hub for the University’s multi-campus operations, with the largest cohort of staff living and working in the Lismore region. In 2018, the NOUS Group calculated the University’s contribution to Regional Gross Domestic Product to be \$127 million for its Lismore operations alone.

The University’s emergency response

At least five times since 2017, the University has been called upon to stand up an Evacuation Centre as part of an emergency response. However, as noted above, none of the previous events have matched the size and scale of the 2022 flood emergency response, nor the sheer scale of loss and devastation.

A summary of activities undertaken by the University and its staff are set out below, many of which have been mentioned above. Setting out the response in list form gives some idea of the scale of the response. However, the list does not provide a true picture of the enormous effort and selflessness that was necessary for each to be realised in the urgent, challenging environment of crisis support.

If pictures can paint a thousand words, perhaps the few photos taken of staff in Appendix A help crystallise the enormous and extraordinary effort. Personally, the wet and muddy photo of my own Director of the Office of Vice Chancellor, Nicholas Hyde is a true reminder of the hands-on approach undertaken by so many in those few days at the end of February 2022 and again in late March.

In summary, the University led, supported, facilitated activities, including the following:

- The Evacuation Centre, set up on campus, initially with the support of a number of staff members. At its peak, it housed 1200 residents, operating for 6 weeks and incorporated all frontline agencies, including meal provision by the Salvation Army. Our support covered essential services for its operations: security, cleaning, laundry, donations, food, waste, COVID management, childcare, bedding, internet and electricity from generators hired by the University;
- Accommodation and launchpad for ADF operations, with over 700 ADF members and significant transport and engineering equipment brought onto our campuses to support the emergency response efforts in the region;
- After week 2, location of the Emergency Operations Centre, that transitioned into the Regional Recovery Operations Centre;
- Location of the Richmond Police Command and a mobile policing unit to support additional requirements for safety and security on campus;
- Supported Resilience NSW and Resilience Lismore to establish the Recovery Centre for all public facing recovery support services, including technology support;

- In partnership with Business NSW, established a Business Recovery Hub as a one-stop destination for all business-related support, including provision of meeting rooms, co-working space, financial counselling and dedicated business support experts;
- Established a Community Banking Hub with the five mutuals in the Region to ensure access to cash and transaction services;
- Established multiyear arrangements for the three Lismore secondary schools to enable minimal disruption to school for approximately 2,000 students;
- Integrated TAFENSW Lismore Campus operations into the University's timetabling to enable TAFENSW to return to operation immediately;
- Established a dedicated health precinct ('Head to Health') to provide critical medical services, pharmacy and pathology services in partnership with Healthy North Coast;
- Management of donations of goods for Lismore and the subsequent establishment of a food and clothing distribution network into flood impacted towns until Lismore City Council was able to stand up facilities;
- Ongoing hosting and event support for numerous government agencies and key members of Parliament and staff, including the hosting of the NSW Flood Inquiry hearings and public forum; and
- Provision of five research boats to support public rescues on Monday 28 February.

As the Vice-Chancellor, I am enormously proud of the University staff who selflessly provided whatever support was required for the initial emergency response. As a University, we were wholly committed and focussed on prioritising the emergency and local community members in need, which included our own staff and students who were directly impacted (60 staff and 120 students).

Building for a sustainable future

In considering how to strengthen the emergency response and recovery in the region, there are three overarching themes that emerge from our experience:

1. strengthening the resilience of the campus to provide support in emergencies;
2. clarity of roles and responsibilities in a multiagency context; and
3. recognition of the University's role as a key part of the region's recovery.

Strengthening the resilience of the campus to provide support in emergencies

The University has a deep sense of purpose to serve our local communities. As a regional university we are integrated into the life of the communities in which we are located - Lismore, Coffs Harbour and the Gold Coast - in many ways both tangible and intangible. Our students and staff are members of these communities and are active and involved in many different aspects of regional life, as are our many partners in research, industry, government, health and education.

We were a part of this emergency response, as we have been for past emergencies - and we will be a part of future responses. We will support the lead agencies in each and every event as they arise, as we did from the night of 28 February when our staff opened the University to set up and commence the operations of the Evacuation Centre. From an operational perspective, the University and our staff were critical to a quick and effective response to a complex, if not chaotic and evolving situation.

Notwithstanding that our commitment is unwavering, the question is how do we, as a university, best support and improve our responsiveness in supporting key agencies and community organisations with their work in response to future natural disaster events in the region. This may seem theoretical in nature, but in fact goes to the heart of improving the seamlessness and effectiveness of the immediate response by all to future emergencies, given the critical role we foresee for our campus lands, built infrastructure and human capital.

The *Southern Cross University Act 1993* (NSW), establishing the University, sets out the University's objective to promote "*scholarship, research, free inquiry, the interaction of research and teaching, and academic excellence*". The Act sets out the core functions, including the "*provision of facilities for education and research of university standard, having particular regard to the needs of the north coast region of the State.*" In essence, the legislative framework sets out the University's objective, core functions and primary responsibilities for education and research, and our campuses have been designed with this purpose in mind.

Emergency response is not formally designed into the mission nor the resourcing framework of universities. However, there is a clear role, and need for Southern Cross University - and if I may add other regional universities - to form part of the planned emergency response and be recognised for and supported in this role. We have the scale of infrastructure that is necessary for large groups of people to gather, be housed and fed and have their other immediate needs met. And in Lismore, vitally, our location is above the foreseeable flood inundation zone.

Thus arises a paradox. It is clear that on the one hand, the University is critical for emergency responses of this scale, but on the other hand, we do not by habit or mission live and breathe these issues, nor planning for the next crisis (beyond our core business continuity planning), since emergency response is not part of our core objectives or resourcing.

Although we are not defined solely by our legislative objectives and funding for education and research, needless to point out, when a university campus is switched to an emergency response facility, there will be gaps. The University campus was not designed nor built with a crisis response at the front of mind.

Identifying these gaps now is critical to support our responsiveness and that of all other organisations involved in response work in the future.

In making this submission, it is important to note that we are clear that our role is to support Government agencies and community organisations in their leadership of future emergency responses. We seek to improve our critical infrastructure to support a more seamless, timely and effective response capacity in the future.

We have learnt lessons about our own preparedness that affects your responsiveness. For example, the lack of power in the early part of the flood crisis was a critical risk to opening and effective functioning of the Evacuation Centre and at the height of the crisis our staff scrambled to find generators so that very basic needs could be met. The community effort to support each other during this time was quite extraordinary and uplifting, but we do not want to rely on goodwill as a future management plan.

To future proof the capacity of the University to support the Evacuation Centre and emergency operations, the University has undertaken its own review and identified the following needs:

- Energy: on campus emergency generation, fuel bunkering, backup electricity storage and solar generation – no power was available initially during the flood event.
- Transport: dedicated helipad for military and civil rescue aircraft, apron, loading bay – the football ground was used as the primary landing area, but the muddy field posed additional difficulties.
- Communications: satellite communications link to provide redundancy, radio transmission and receiving network – communication became nearly impossible during the emergency.
- Water: storage, pump, filtration and mobile distribution capacity – clean water supplies were compromised in the floods.
- Equipment: bedding, secure storage, public address system, mobile charging, privacy screens – basics for an Evacuation Centre.

Our review recommends that the strengthening the above infrastructure will address the immediate known capacity gaps and effectively act as an insurance mechanism for inevitable future events.

Clarity of roles and responsibilities in a multiagency context

As emphasised above, the University was able to mobilise quickly in the recent flood events due to its location and staff living locally who could access the site. In planning for a future event, we can be relied upon to step up, again and again. However, for us to direct our resources more effectively, we would value a government agency counterparty with the capacity and authority for decision making and for interfacing with the whole of government as a presence from the beginning of any future event.

As stated above, we will support the Government agencies leading the emergency response. Our efforts will be magnified with clarity of communication channels, decision and coordination channels.

Recognition of the University's role as a key part of the region's recovery

Looking forward, the University is keen to support the development of an approach to renewal that could provide a genuine boost and real impetus for more innovative models of planning, infrastructure investment, commercial and research and education integration. Given the scale of damage to local infrastructure, we believe there is a clear need to plan carefully, both to avoid duplication in the capital investment rebuilding phase, and to ensure the lessons learnt from the latest flooding events are taken into consideration.

The University is canvassing how we can best support the broader community in these current conversations. We are open to conversations about harnessing our estate, which has the benefits of being on higher ground, close to the Lismore central business district, with undeveloped land in a busy education and research precinct with food, health, communications and transport infrastructure.

We see real opportunities to work towards the facilitation of a vision for the future of Lismore and the long-term renewal of the region, returning its vibrancy and sustainability. We seek to be part of the solution. For the University, our vision brings us even closer to the community. Through considered planning of land for purpose-built infrastructure, the vision for Lismore could include the development of a unique precinct integrating key enterprises, businesses, government agencies, schools, TAFENSW and the University.

The Lismore campus could become a unique, world class regional education hub, servicing secondary and post-secondary education and training, along with services for the local community. A campus that could easily and effectively turn to supporting an emergency response and emergency management operations when required.

We appreciate the opportunity to work closely with the Inquiry and the NSW Government and its agencies to support the community to build its resilience, a stronger and sustainable future, and preparedness for any future emergencies.

I would be pleased to provide any additional information for the Inquiry, or will make myself available if the Inquiry would like to hear directly from me about our experiences in the emergency response phase and our continuing work in supporting the recovery phase of the devastating 2022 floods in the Northern Rivers region of NSW.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Tyrone Carlin
Vice Chancellor and President
Southern Cross University

Appendix A – Southern Cross University emergency response contributions

