

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY AUSTRALIA

POLICY SUBMISSION

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Strategic Examination of R&D

Issues paper 5 – Foundational research: creating knowledge

Science & Technology Australia (STA) thanks the Strategic Examination of R&D (SERD) Panel for the opportunity to respond to the SERD targeted issues papers.

STA is the peak body for the nation's science and technology sectors, representing nearly 150 member organisations and more than 235,000 scientists and technologists. We connect science and technology with governments, business and the community to advance science's role in solving some of humanity's greatest challenges.

Question 1 - Which of our proposals work well?

The proposal to simplify grant application and management processes is welcome. Significant productivity losses are incurred through wasted researcher hours spent on writing grant applications and other grant administration processes.

The proposal to include a Commissioner for Research within the Australian Tertiary Education Commission is sensible – this will ensure ATEC has an eye to **both** the major roles of universities: **teaching AND research**. However, this must be implemented effectively with appropriate resourcing within ATEC.

The point that indirect costs (through Research Block Grants (RBG)) have not kept up with funding for competitive grants is well made and the proposal to increase indirect costs funding whenever competitive funding increases is warmly welcomed. This did not occur with the introduction of the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF). Both universities and medical research institutes (with the latter not having access to RBG) are facing significantly increased challenges with indirect costs. This has been compounded by costs also increasing faster than the indexation applied to RBG, which is less than CPI. Funding increases to address indirect costs must not result from a redirection in competitive grant funding.

STA strongly backs the proposal to support the research workforce by 'improving pathways for individuals with research training to transition to board and corporate leadership such as through bench to boardroom programs.'

The paper proposes to 'ensure long-term ongoing funding for NCRIS'. This is indeed welcomed, but the paper is silent on where this funding would be sourced. It must be new Commonwealth funding, not reallocated from other foundational funding streams. Similarly, the proposal to 'invest in next-generation high-performance compute and data' is also strongly welcomed. Again, this must be in the form of new Government investments, not cannibalising other support for discovery research infrastructure.

Question 2 - What could be improved and how?

This paper purportedly covers 'sustainability of operations', 'secure infrastructure' and 'training and career pathways'. It does not deliver certainty on any of these.

The paper notes that funding for competitive R&D grants has increased 157% since 2001. It is very unclear how this figure was calculated, and is likely distorted by the introduction of the MRFF creation in 2015 (first funds disbursed 2016–17).

Virtually every other proposed initiative in the paper would result in greater support for translational research but would do nothing to ‘protect and strengthen foundational research’.

The National Coordination paper also fails to explain how research infrastructure would be supported through the focus area structure. While it notes the importance of readily accessible ‘science toolkit’, it does not account for the cross-cutting nature of research infrastructure and how different research focus areas would likely require the same infrastructure capabilities. This infrastructure needs to be considered discretely from research disciplines and RD&I focus areas – with long-term funding delivered with security and certainty, not contingent on “piecemeal” contributions from other (focus area) funding streams.

A National IP Library seems entirely superfluous. IP Australia maintains a register of Australian IP – if this is not fit for purpose with respect to discoverability, then it would be more sensible to add additional features rather than create an entirely new library, with questionable utility.

STA supports the diversification and modernisation of research metrics to reduce reliance on publication metrics as a primary measure for career progression, support more diverse career pathways and enhance researcher mobility. University compacts provide a vehicle for leveraging cultural change.

It is entirely sensible that there should be accountability for public funding invested in research. For translational research it is fair to expect a greater level of translational, commercial, or societal impact.

However, for discovery research, **field-weighted journal citations are a legitimate measure of impact** and this should not be completely devalued. Journal publications represent the development of new knowledge, peer-reviewed at the highest level of scrutiny. This is the medium through which scientific knowledge is generated, disseminated, then built upon to progress global understandings of critical areas.

STA strongly cautions against further measures to skew Australia’s research effort towards purely translational work. This would severely jeopardise the discovery research capability that delivers new knowledge, and drives all subsequent RD&I.

Discovery research funding must be protected to safeguard the foundational research that underpins all subsequent RD&I. Current programs supporting discovery research – the ARC, and NHMRC – must be excluded from the proposed focus area structure.

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