

ENHANCING RESEARCH OUTCOMES FROM AUSTRALIA'S REGIONAL, RURAL AND REMOTE UNIVERSITIES

30 September 2019

As the peak body representing Australia's 39 comprehensive universities, Universities Australia (UA) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA) project: *'Enhancing research outcomes from Australia's regional, rural and remote (RRR) universities'*.

This submission represents a whole-of-sector view on the issues raised in the paper and complements those submissions which may be made by individual UA member universities.

Australia's comprehensive universities are the stewards of a high-quality national research capability, recognised globally for their excellence. Investing in university research and research infrastructure across all of Australia makes good sense – and will enhance research outcomes in RRR universities.

SECTOR FINANCING

A healthy Australian sector includes sustainable settings for all universities, RRR universities, peri-urban and urban universities. Long-term investment across the sector is a high priority if Australia is to remain a world-leader in research output and productivity.

Research Block Grant Program

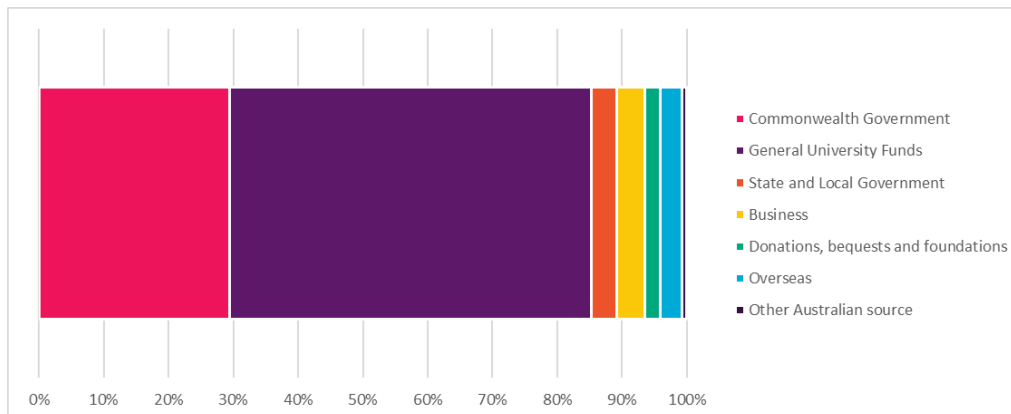
The \$328.5 million cut to the Research Block Grant Program in the 2018–19 Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO), as well as the freeze of funding from the Education Infrastructure Fund, constrains research across the sector, but perhaps most in RRR universities.

The Research Block Grant Program supports the costs of research that are not covered by national competitive grants such as Chief Investigator salaries, facility running costs and a myriad of other requirements needed to maintain Australia's research efforts. The Program also supports the research training in universities that nurtures new talent.

Reductions in Government funding over time means that the majority of university research (55.8 per cent) was funded from general university funds (2016).¹ In that year, the Commonwealth funded 29.4 per cent of higher education research, with business (4.4 per cent) and state and local government (3.9 per cent) funding a relatively small portion.

¹ Derived from Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018, *Research and Experimental Development, Higher Education Organisations, Australia, 2016*, Australian Government, Canberra.

Figure 1. Higher education expenditure on R&D, by source of funds, 2016



Source: ABS 2018, *Research and Experimental Development, Higher Education Organisations, Australia, 2016*, Cat. No. 8111.0.

The starting point for any discussion on enhancing outputs must reflect on the current levels of investment into research and development.

OPPORTUNITIES

Universities Australia encourages the Government to commit to a long-term plan for investment in research and education infrastructure.

The Government accepted most of the recommendations from the infrastructure roadmap in developing its Research Infrastructure Investment Plan. It is encouraging to see acknowledgment of both the transformational nature of cutting-edge research to the economy, and commitment to long term planning and investment.

Maintaining infrastructure

Research and educational infrastructure needs renewal to ensure that students and researchers have access to appropriate facilities. Funding constraints have led to a backlog of repairs and renewal, valued at \$4.1 billion.² Next-generation teaching and learning facilities are needed to ensure students have access to contemporary technologies and universities can keep up with changing modes of course delivery.

The Education Infrastructure Fund (EIF) has been closed to new applications since 2012, leaving funds that could be building research and teaching capacity across the country sitting inactive. Re-activating the EIF would be a fast, proven mechanism to inject funds to invest in research capacity and infrastructure to the benefit of RRR and other locations.

The EIF has contributed to rural and regional development in the past. In 2011–2012 the Government allocated \$500 million from the EIF to a Regional Priorities Round, announcing it would “give students, staff and researchers in regional Australia access to world class teaching, training and research facilities”.³ Projects funded through the round included health, engineering and science, and in locations including northern Queensland, the Hunter region and Mt Gambier.

² Department of Education and Training 2015, Higher Education Infrastructure Working Group Final Report, p. 9-10.

³ Education Investment Fund: Program Guidelines EIF Regional Priorities Round, p2

Regional development

Universities already play a significant role in civic society in their local community and provide important elements of the industrial structure. In many regions they are a major employer and play a key role in the facilitation of jobs and economic growth.

However, long-term Government investment in regional infrastructure, industry and tourism is needed to attract and retain skilled researchers to the regions, as well as supporting the economic and social ecosystem of the communities. The regions must be attractive both professionally and in terms of lifestyle—regardless of whether you are attracting students, academics, health professionals, teachers or skilled workers.

Recognising the importance of local research impacts

Research impacts at the local level have the ability to address real issues and transform communities. We must learn to value and recognise these research impacts, particularly in light of some of the unique environmental challenges that Australia and in particular regional Australia is facing.

The Engagement and Impact exercise as part of the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) was conducted for the first time in 2018, after a pilot in 2017. This exercise has been useful for helping universities focus on how they engage with their communities and articulating how research has led to impact. It would be timely to assess whether there are more efficient and effective methods of demonstrating and explaining how research conducted in universities benefits our society with special focus on local community impact.

BARRIERS

As outlined above, barriers to attracting and retaining skilled workers to the regions are not confined to universities. However, many of these issues directly and indirectly impact the advancement of high-quality research and development in regional universities. It is crucial that barriers are lowered to attract and retain high-quality staff and postgraduate students, as well as dissuade talented local staff from leaving.

Housing/accommodation

Suitable accommodation options play an important part in any decision to relocate to the regions. This means more than just the availability of vacant accommodation but also goes to the development and planning of the local region. If relocating from metropolitan areas to regional areas means doing so without giving up essential and leisure/lifestyle services in (relative) close proximity to accommodation, then making the move becomes a more viable option.

The decision to permanently or temporarily relocate to the regions is also affected by capital growth. Researchers who have an existing property in a metropolitan area may view relocating as a long-term financial risk if this involves selling a metropolitan property in order to afford housing in the regional location.

Considerations such as these limit the mobility potential of research staff. Even short-term mobility opportunities can make a difference to research outputs – and can also lead to permanent opportunities if the researcher has a positive experience and forms connections to the local community.

Services

Access to world-class medical, schooling and related services are also essential. Governments continuously offer programs and incentives to health professionals, teachers and other in-demand occupations – and this must remain an ongoing priority to support the local RRR ecosystem.

Career opportunities for spouses is another important aspect. Workforce developments in one discipline or sector can have a flow on impact on workforce requirements in another.

Delivering access to 21st century internet services is also crucial to improving educational and research opportunities and outcomes for RRR universities.

Travel

Access to transport infrastructure is a further barrier that RRR universities face. There are additional costs associated with going to and from cities or campuses, alongside extended travel times. This makes it more difficult, for example, to attend conferences or other professional development opportunities where important knowledge is gained, or research networks are formed. These costs can take a direct and indirect toll on the efficiency and quality of research outcomes.

ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER RESEARCH

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Knowledge contributes to Australia's intellectual and cultural capacity. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research undertaken across Australia's universities includes research on languages and cultural expression, education and health, social justice, native title and traditional ownership, governance and public policy.

Academic pipeline

The UA Indigenous Strategy 2017-20 (the UA strategy) is a sector-wide initiative. It brings all member universities together to achieve common goals to advance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation and success in higher education. One specific requirement under the UA strategy is for members to develop and implement Indigenous Research Strategies at their institution.

UA's First Report⁴ (First Report) on progress against the UA strategy highlighted focus areas of research strategies across the sector. This included the following initiatives aimed at building pathways into academic careers:

- identifying high potential Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in their early years of candidature. These students would be encouraged to follow a research track through the university with opportunities for PHD scholarships being available upon completion of undergraduate degree,
- strong mentoring arrangements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students throughout their postgraduate research journey,
- encouraging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to explore varied areas of research, including research relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities but not exclusively, and
- building Indigenous community research capacity, which includes the recognition of Indigenous knowledge and knowledge holders, enabling culturally determined research and establishing accredited research training that builds community research.

The first report provides further detail on the strategic actions that sit underneath some of the key focus areas, and also provides case study examples at two leading universities.

Research engagement

The starting principle for better engagement by universities in RRR areas with local Indigenous communities through research must be respect, for the local culture and protocols, and for non-western ideologies more broadly.

⁴ <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/20190304-Final-Indigenous-Strategy-Report-v2-2.pdf> - from pg 72.

The First Report highlights that developing connections with local communities and Elders in the first instance can lead to increased positive engagement at the institutional level – which might then later lead to increased research opportunities. There were several examples cited in the First Report of positive engagement with local communities leading to increased buy-in across the university for engagement with Reconciliation initiatives and Indigenous higher education objectives.

All universities should also ensure they have processes in place, including through professional development opportunities, that enable it to adhere to the *Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Guidelines* when conducting research. Professional development means more than just cultural competency training, but an appreciation of local and broader Indigenous Knowledges and ethos that leads to successful engagement on Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander initiatives.

UA recommends:

- a review of the current levels of Commonwealth investment into R&D to ensure the Commonwealth provides long-term, predictable funding to support research;
- the EIF be re-opened to invest in 21st century infrastructure across the Australian education sector, including the regions;
- a review of the Engagement and Impact exercise as part of ERA – with a special consideration of how local community impacts could be better recognised;
- an exploration of housing/accommodation solutions for research staff that are interested in short-term mobility programs; and
- further consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders and universities on initiatives to increase the academic pipeline and research opportunities for indigenous Australians.