

## La Trobe University response to the Boosting the Commercial Returns from Research Discussion Paper

La Trobe University's Vision for innovation and commercialisation is to 'transform La Trobe research discoveries into successful innovations and products that benefit society, industry and the economy'. We therefore agree that there is a clear need to boost the commercial returns from research.

As an institution that is deeply committed to contributing to local, regional and national communities, the transfer of knowledge to useful outcomes is critical to fulfilling La Trobe's mission.

La Trobe has traditionally worked very closely with communities to improve the impact of our research. Our aim is to pursue a systematic and 'whole of institution' strategy. We aim to embed our work with communities and partners and improve our performance on key innovation and commercial development indicators.

### Introduction

La Trobe University welcomes the potential changes to current initiatives discussed in the paper, with the expectation that wide consultation and a stepped change approach will be taken. Any new initiatives will need to be flexible and responsive.

In summary:

- We emphasise the need for a broad and inclusive definitions of 'industry' and 'commercial'; many of the direct and indirect benefits delivered by research to society and the economy are difficult to capture and measure. Examples include the impact of research on health and wellbeing, disability, ageing and community resilience.
- We urge greater recognition of public good research, and we urge careful thought about the appropriate definitions of definitions of 'industry' and 'commercial'.
- We support review of Australia's national research priorities and anticipate that they will be aligned with the Industry Growth Centres.
- We emphasise the need for deep reflection on the value of the humanities and social sciences disciplines in understanding how to translate research into practice. A number of authors have noted that many of society's problems have an existing technical solution, but founder on the need for societal acceptance.
- La Trobe would like to see a greater emphasis on translating existing research. For example, the Medical Research Future Fund could fund capacity building as well as 'bench-to-bedside' research and the commercial returns that result.
- We support the establishment of the Commonwealth Science Council to 'advise the Government on areas of national strength, current and future capability and on ways to improve connections between Government, research organisations, universities and business', and look forward to engaging with the Council in the future.

## **Research–industry engagement and collaboration**

La Trobe University welcomes increased support for engagement between industry and research organisations, including the (potentially modified) CRC Program, the EIP Research Connect Program, the R&D Tax Incentive, and Industry Growth Centres.

We recognise that there are different barriers to entry — different scales of interaction, skills sets, projects and outputs, speeds of change and so on between industry (particularly SMEs) and research institutions. We support approaches that address these barriers.

We note that Australia is, in large part, a branch office economy for many industries. This creates particular challenges for the nation’s innovators and for the engagement of SMEs with the research sector. Any strategies must recognise this difference and that it is, in large part, a fundamental characteristic that needs to be considered; strategies that work in the USA and Europe may simply not work in Australia.

We support schemes that incorporate matched funding from the research sector, government and industry, and are administratively fast and agile. In addition, we argue that specialist staff are critical for support of industry.

Appropriate new initiatives will provide better access to funding for collaboration than can the ARC and NHMRC.

## **Capacity-building for research and industry**

Universities are well-placed to sustain long-term relationships with industry, retain an equity position in commercialisation, and, crucially, educate industry and researchers about ways to interact to mutual benefit.

Research–industry interactions can provide alternative career paths for PhD graduates and postdoctoral career development. A culture change from both industry and the research sector will improve the mobility of researchers between industry and universities. The benefits of PhDs in industry are that PhDs are trained to be innovative and can enable industry to take calculated risks. We emphasise that this applies equally to researchers who are not engaged in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) disciplines.

Research training that also benefits industry directly might include research–industry activities such as placements. Direct capacity-building to enable industry to understand the benefits of research–industry collaborations is also valuable. Any such programs could, as they do in other countries, drive culture change such that industry is keen to work with the research sector and vice versa. There are clear benefits to researchers through associated career opportunities, improvements in their own technical knowledge and expertise, and opportunities for hands-on translation of research into industry.

## **Easy access IP**

There is no point in generating IP that is not used. We therefore support schemes such as Easy Access IP, as implemented by, for example, the University of New South Wales.

In concert with the Easy Access IP approach, La Trobe strongly supports the timely evaluation and use of IP, particularly the forms of IP that do not have straightforward pathways to market, and may be at an early stage and therefore hold higher risk.

We would like to be involved in initiatives that encourage an active commercialisation ecosystem in Australia that has less red tape, is fast and agile, provides rapid delivery of knowledge and innovation to industry, is competitive and sustainable, and ultimately leads to the creation of new jobs.

## **Measuring and funding research excellence**

La Trobe University recommends that any measures of excellence should include assessment of research–industry activities, where industry is broadly defined to include benefits to industry (like the health-care industry) beyond simply commercial returns; to fail to do this would, we believe, drive research activities in inappropriate directions.

We encourage the development of both qualitative and quantitative indicators from different stages along the path to commercialisation for meaningful assessment. Such indicators might capture productive relationships and the exchange of knowledge and people, and should recognise industry experience of researchers who are academics. Metrics around patents, licencing and spinoffs cannot be the sole basis for meaningful measures of excellence and are too easily ‘gamed’.

Measuring knowledge translation to industry could be an effective driver of funding restructure for creating incentives to drive culture change.

Care should be taken to ensure that the administrative burden is minimised and that no perverse incentives are introduced.