UNIVERSITIES ACCORD

Response to the Discussion Paper

April 2023

RESEARCH AUSTRALIA

CONNECTING · ENGAGING · INFLUENCING

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	The Expert Panel investigate the UK's Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers as a model for how this shared responsibility can be implemented.
	The Expert Panel further explore the existing programs that offer placements and exposure to research roles beyond universities, the opportunities to expand these programs and to introduce new programs.
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Introduction

Research Australia welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Expert Panel's Discussion Paper.

As the national peak body for Australian health and medical research and innovation, we recognise that universities are critical to our sector; in addition to training the health and medical research workforce, around half of all health and medical research is undertaken in the higher education sector.[1]

Our submission responds to two key issues identified in the Discussion Paper. The first relates to the career prospects and professional development of early and mid-career researchers. Research Australia proposes that this be a shared responsibility of research funders, universities, researcher managers and researchers. We also welcome further consideration of programs to support exposure to roles in industry and government during the completion of a higher degree by research.

The second relates to the funding for indirect research costs. We propose a new structure for the future funding of direct and indirect research costs and two distinct principles to guide the structure. We also propose that funding for National Research Infrastructure be included in these deliberations.

In each proposal we outline the case for how and why these issues should be addressed by an Accord between universities and the Commonwealth Government.

Research Australia gratefully acknowledges the contribution of our membership to this submission; particularly members of the Research Australia University Roundtable and the Research Australia Early and Mid Career Working Group.

[1] Research Australia analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics data, available at https://researchaustralia.org/category/hmr-facts/

Career prospects and professional development of early to mid career researchers in health and medical research

Research Australia is responding to questions 27 and 38 in the Discussion Paper.

Q27 How can we improve research training in Australia including improving pathways for researchers to gain experience and develop high-impact careers in government and industry?

Q38 How can the Accord support higher education providers to adopt sector-leading employment practices?

The following extract from the Discussion Paper draws attention to the scope for researchers to be supported to find roles in industry and government. These roles are essential to promoting the whole pipeline of health and medical research and innovation, to ensure we undertake the research that our community needs and that it leads to commercialisation of new products and the rapid adoption of new evidence into practice.

> 'Support for the pipeline of researchers will be necessary for the research system to continue to deliver well into the future. Building the diversity of the academic workforce and supporting early career researchers will be crucial. The Panel has heard that adequacy of research training program stipends is one factor limiting the number of people who can enter the research workforce.
>
> The value of students undertaking HDR (higher degree by research) training programs with strong connection to industry and government – for example, through improving pathways for these students to come from industry or to work in industry during or after their research program – is also being increasingly emphasised.' (Discussion Paper, page 23)

Insecure employment is also recognised as a key issue.

> 'Many stakeholders raised concerns about insecure work and underpayment in the higher education sector, particularly for casual or sessional staff. It is estimated that 50-80% of undergraduate teaching in universities is delivered by sessional staff.' (Discussion Paper, page 29)

Research Australia submits that these two issues of inadequate preparation of researchers for roles outside academia, and insecure employment, are linked.

While the quote above specifically refers to sessional staff delivering teaching in universities, there are also high levels of employment of university researchers on fixed short term contracts. Research Australia undertook a national survey of health and medical researchers in May 2020. 79.4% of all respondents were employed by a university (a further 14% were employed by a medical research institute).

65.5% of early career researchers were employed on a fixed term contract, with a further 10.5% employed casually. For mid-career researchers, 57% were employed on a fixed term contract, and 2% on a casual basis. By far the most common contract period was 12 months.[2]

In the same year, a team at the University of Melbourne and Monash surveyed early and mid-career researchers in the health and medicine faculties of their universities. The survey found that only 26.8% of respondents had either continuing employment or more than 24 months remaining on their employment contracts; 50.7% had less than 12 months employment left on their employment contract.

While the percentage of casual employees is low compared to industries like hospitality and retail, the number of respondents on fixed term contracts is far higher than the national average.[3]

One reason for this high prevalence of fixed term contracts is the way in which research in our universities is funded. University research is heavily reliant on funding from open competitive grant programs such as those administered by the National Health and Medical Research Council, the Medical Research Future Fund and the Australian Research Council.

The bulk of the funding under these programs is for a fixed period (up to five years, but often less) to undertake a specific research project. It is 'grant in aid', providing funding to meet some but not all of the costs of the research. While formally the grant is awarded to the university, typically the funding is controlled by the successful applicant, the Chief Investigator (CI) named in the grant. The CI is responsible for assembling a team of researchers to undertake the project, and for the offers of employment made to each researcher.

Individual researchers are contracted to work on a project, and often only in fractional appointments for their expertise or skill required for a specific stage of the project. In this circumstance, neither the CI nor the university typically has an ongoing commitment to the career progression or career development of the individual researcher employed as a fixed term contractor. There is certainly no incentive to support the researcher to make a progression into a role in government or industry, and in general CI's and other team leaders don't have the experience or connections to facilitate the transition to a position in government or industry.

Even if a CI is supportive of professional development for their team, there are no funds in the project's budget for professional development activities like further training or attending conferences or participating in mentoring programs. In the case of the NHMRC, with the exception of People Support Programs (e.g. Fellowships), research project funding cannot be used for professional development activities.[4]

Some universities are now investing in professional development and career support for some early and mid-career researchers from other funding sources, but the amount of funding made available, the nature of the programs and the eligibility requirements vary widely.

In summary, many early to mid-career researchers are employed on short term contracts to perform a particular role in a specific research project in circumstances where there are no resources to support their career and professional development and no incentive for the university

[2] Research Australia, 2020, *The impact of COVID-19 on health and medical researchers*

[3] G, Gilfillan, Trends in use of non-standard forms of employment, December 2018, Australian Parliamentary Library

[4] Australian Government, NHMRC, 2019, Direct Research Costs Guidelines

or the CI (their immediate employer) to support them. This is having a detrimental impact on the health and wellbeing of researchers and the effectiveness for the research system.

This situation is not unique to Australia. Very similar circumstances were the motivation for the creation in the UK of 'The Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers'.[5]

The Concordat has been in place in the UK since 2008 and was revised in 2019. A key aspect of the Concordat is that it recognises responsibility for supporting the career development of researchers is shared between research funders, research organisations, researcher managers and researchers. (A researcher managers is a researchers' direct supervisor or manager.) Improving the job security and working conditions of researchers has been a key goal. The Concordat also recognises that better support for the career progression and professional development of researchers has benefits beyond the individual, promoting more effective workplaces and supporting better science. Better support for researchers will help retain researchers in the sector and will also support their involvement in other parts of the research and innovation pipeline beyond universities. The Concordat provides a mix of funding, policy frameworks, guidelines and infrastructure to systematically support the career progression and professional development of researchers.

Research Australia proposes that the Expert Panel identify the job security, career progression and professional development of early and mid-career researchers as an area of focus of the Accord and recommend it be addressed as a shared responsibility of research funders, universities, researcher managers and researchers.

We further propose that the Expert Panel investigate the UK's Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers as a model for how this shared responsibility can be implemented.

Exposure to the breadth of research careers during research training

While the focus above is on early and mid career researchers, there is an opportunity to provide greater exposure to the breadth of research careers at an earlier stage, during research training. This is far more common internationally than in Australia, with a range of different programs well established in many countries.[6]

The Australian Research Council is now offering the National Industry PhD program, starting with 65 candidates initially and rising to 150 per annum when it is fully established. The current program is focused on industry, and excludes government as an eligible partner/employer.[7] The NHMRC offers the postgraduate scholarship to health and medical graduates early in their career who want

[5] Available at https://researcherdevelopmentconcordat.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Researcher-Development-Concordat_Sept2019-1.pdf

[6] For example, the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry reported that in 2021 there were 601 PhD studentships with pharmaceutical industry links in the UK. https://www.abpi.org.uk/facts-figures-and-industry-data/industry-and-academia-links-survey-2022/phd-collaborations-studentships/

[7] See para 2.9.1 of the National Industry PhD Program Guidelines, Department of Education

to undertake a PhD. It funded 62 scholarships in 2023.[8] One of the aims of the program is to foster the development of clinician researchers, a vital role in supporting the contribution of research to better health outcomes and a more effective health system.

There is also the opportunity to offer placements in industry, government and not for profits while undertaking a higher degree for research. The greatest current barrier to this is the time period for which an individual is funded to complete their qualification. A specific funding extension to cover the period of the internship could help address this issue.

Research Australia supports the Expert Panel further exploring the existing programs that offer placements and exposure to research roles beyond universities, the opportunities to expand these programs and to introduce new programs. (Research Australia has proposed to the Government a new Clinician Researcher Fellowship to be provided to existing health care professionals who either already have or are undertaking a PhD.)

Funding Indirect Research Costs and Research Infrastructure

Research Australia is responding to question 47 in the Discussion Paper.

Q47 What structure of Commonwealth funding is needed for the higher education sector for the system to be sustainable over the next two decades?

Research Australia notes the focus of this question is the structure of Commonwealth funding rather than the quantum. The following extracts from the Discussion Paper are relevant.

> 'One issue frequently raised with the Panel is funding for the full spectrum of university activities, many of which are not directly funded but are nonetheless essential to university operations. How universities fund research and manage infrastructure costs, including research infrastructure, is a challenge. Another concern is the increase in cross-subsidisation within institutions, largely from international student revenue to research, highlighting calls for full funding of research. It was pointed out that universities with lower revenue from international students are also less able to invest in innovation and other priorities such as infrastructure.' …
>
> 'In 2023, the Australian Government is providing around $19.8 billion to the higher education system through the Education portfolio, predominantly paid to the 39 Table A providers.
>
> The Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS) and student contributions (deferred through the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP)) make up most of this expenditure ($12.7 billion in 2023) and, collectively, are based on an assessment of costs of teaching and scholarship by discipline (the basis for which is widely queried in the higher education sector).

[8] https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/funding/find-funding/postgraduate-scholarships

> The Commonwealth contributes to university research through a dual funding system of competitive grants and research block grants (RBGs). In 2023, $3.0 billion will be provided through these streams.' (Page 34)

Research Australia is one of those groups calling for full funding of research, and we note the statement above that 'The Commonwealth contributes to university research through a dual funding system of competitive grants and research block grants (RBGs).'

The relationship between competitive grants and research block grants has been subject to multiple reviews and modification in the last two decades. In 2008 and 2009, the Australian Government commissioned an investigation into research funding by the Allen Consulting Group. The background to the investigation was the recognition that:

> 'The Commonwealth Government funds university research through block grants, competitive grants programs and contract research. The major sources of competitive research grants are the Australian Research Council (ARC) and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC). …
>
> Over the past decade, funding from competitive grants has grown considerably and is now the most significant source of research funding for some Australian universities. However, competitive research grants meet only a proportion of the total costs associated with undertaking that research. This is because competitive grants are limited in what they can pay for, and generally do not make a contribution to many of the services and facilities which are used by researchers to undertake their work – that is, funding regimes do not adequately cover the indirect (or overhead) costs associated with research.
>
> Universities have long expressed concerns about the sustainability of these funding arrangements and about the need for funding reform.'[9]

The two reports by Allen Consulting Group sought to identify the size of the shortfall between the funding provided by competitive grants and the total cost of undertaking the research. It found that while there was a large variation across universities in the ratio of indirect research costs to competitive grant income; the mean was 94.9%, i.e. the indirect costs associated with research funded by Australian competitive grants was almost equivalent to the value of the grants. Grants were only funding a little more than half of the total costs of the research.[10]

At the same time the Government commissioned the Allen Consulting Group to undertake this review of research costs it also commissioned the (Bradley) Review of Australian Higher Education.

[9] Allen Consulting Group 2009, *The indirect costs associated with research funded through Australian Competitive Grants*, July 2009, page 10

[10] The UK has invested significant time and effort in calculating the cost of higher education activities including research. It introduced TRAC in 2000 and has used it since 2005 for the 'full economic costing' of research projects. https://www.trac.ac.uk/about/

The Bradley Review drew on the work of the Allen Consulting Group to recommend an increase in funding for the indirect costs of research:

> '**Recommendation 8**
>
> That the Australian Government increase the total funding allocation for the Research Infrastructure Block Grants program by about $300 million per year. This represents an increase from about 20 cents to 50 cents in the dollar for each dollar provided through competitive grants.[11]'

In responding to the Bradley Review in 2009, the Government committed to a major new investment in higher education from the 2010 Budget forward, including in research.

> 'Sustainable Investment for Research: ending historic funding cross-subsidisation by increasing funding for the full cost of university research, and enabling universities to strive for research excellence in areas of strength'….
>
> (Delivering on this commitment) '…will see an increase in funding for the indirect costs of research, currently funded through the Research Infrastructure Block Grants (RIBGs). Additional funding through this initiative will take total support provided to universities by the Australian Government to meet the indirect costs of competitive research grants from about 20 cents in the competitive research dollar in 2009, to about 30 cents in 2011, and over time to approach 50 cents in the competitive dollar. In return for extra funding universities will become more accountable and funding will better reflect performance. This will ensure resources are allocated rationally and used efficiently.'[12]

The ambition of approaching 50 cents in the dollar for Australian Government competitive grants has not been achieved, and in the decade following this commitment by the Government the emphasis shifted from the Commonwealth funding the cost of its own research to using the Research Block Grants to influence university behaviour.

The Watt Review in 2015 examined Government funding for research with a different lens.

> 'The overarching objective of the review was to identify opportunities for the reform of research policy and funding arrangements within the Education and Training portfolio, and to deliver on the Australian Government's Agenda for Action under the Boosting the Commercial Returns from Research Strategy.'[13]

In the Government's response to the Review, it accepted the Review's recommendation that the three schemes which provide research support be combined; and 50 per cent of the funding to be based on Category 1 research income, and 50% on Categories 2-4.[14]

In April 2022, the Department of Education, Skills and Employment published a consultation paper, 'Research Block Grant Reform to Boost Incentives for Greater University and Industry

[11] Australian Government 2008 Review of Australian Higher Education, Final report, December 2008
[12] Australian Government, 2009, *Transforming Australia's Higher Education System*
[13] Australian Government, 2015, *Report of the Review of Research Policy and Funding Arrangements*, Letter of Transmission
[14] Australian Government, 2016, *Turnbull Government Response Review of Research Policy and Funding Arrangements*

Collaboration'[15]. The paper proposed a further change the formulae for the allocation of Research Block Grants to give a greater weighting to industry funded research at the expense of Category 1 research funded by the Government. To date, the Department has not responded to the consultation or implemented the proposed reallocation of Research Block Grant funding.

Research Australia is of the opinion that that the proposed change to the formulae for the allocation of Research Block Grants can only increase universities' industry funded research in the future by reducing their capacity to effectively undertake other research, including that funded by the Commonwealth. If more of the same pool of funding is directed to supporting industry funded research this can only come at the cost of support for publicly funded university research.

While the Research Block Grants are vitally important to the capacity of universities to undertake research, the decline in the value of the Research Block Grants over time relative to other research expenditure, means that universities' capacity to increase the volume of research is being exhausted, and that increases in one area, such as business funded research, must come at the cost of a reduction in research in other areas, including discovery research and other public good research. The pandemic has shown that relying on universities to fill the gap with revenue from international students, as they have done for most of the last decade, is a high-risk strategy.

Trends in university research

The latest ABS data on university research expenditure shows a dramatic change in types of research being undertaken at universities. The most significant change in the context of changes to Research Block Grant funds to incentivise business engagement is that business expenditure on R&D at universities increased by 15.5% between 2018 and 2020, to $603 million.[16] This is greater than the overall increase in funding for university R&D between 2018 and 2020, which was $510 million.[17] This evidence of greater engagement with industry is positive, showing university-based researchers *can* meet the needs of industry.

Business funded research has increased

This increase in business funding is reflected in an increase in expenditure on applied research, up by 14% ($824 million) over the same period, to $6.7 billion, somewhat offset by a 6% ($80 million) decline in experimental development.[18] At the same time, expenditure on what the ABS categorises as Pure Basic research (discovery research) declined by 11.3% ($314 million) to $2.5 billion, partly offset by a $79 million increase in Strategic Basic research.[19]

Business expenditure on university research is most likely to be in the later stages of applied research and experimental development, which collectively grew by $744 million over two years.[20] On the other hand, discovery research and applied basic research are most likely to be publicly funded by government, as public good research.

[15] https://www.education.gov.au/research-block-grants/resources/research-block-grant-reform-boost-incentives-greater-university-and-industry-collaboration
[16] Australian Government, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Research and Experimental Development, Higher Education Organisations, Australia, 2020, released 6 May 2022, HERD by type of activity, accessed 25 May at https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/industry/technology-and-innovation/research-and-experimental-development-higher-education-organisations-australia/2020
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.

We want businesses to fund more research at universities, but what is the right balance between business-driven research and public good research, and between discovery research and applied research?

Do we want more business funded research at universities if it will displace public good research rather than expanding the total volume of research at universities, and is this what is already happening?

Discovery research has declined

From 2010, discovery research has declined from 25% of total university research expenditure to 22.7% in 2018.[21][22][23] What is significant about the decline between 2018 and 2020 is not just the size of the further decline, to 19.4%, but that **the dollar value of discovery research declined for the first time, from $2.8 billion to $2.5 billion.**[24] **This decline has significant implications not just for discovery research but in the longer term for the pipeline of strategic and applied research which is reliant on new discoveries. Simply put, if you don't fill the pipeline at one end (fundamental or discovery research), there will be little or nothing (translatable and commercial) to come out the other end.**

The impact of the Watt Review's recommendations, which have only just been fully implemented, are only now making their effects felt in the university research system, and we do not yet have data to fully understand what impact they are having.

We can see, however, the increase in business funded research in our universities in 2020 and the decline in discovery research.

Research Australia submits that the Universities Accord provides an opportunity to rethink the role of Research Block Grants, and more broadly, of Government funding for research.

While Research Block Grants continue to contribute towards the indirect costs of research, the focus has changed over the last decade. Originally directed primarily towards meeting the indirect costs of Commonwealth Government funded (Category 1) research, they have been used more recently by Government as a tool to drive industry engagement and diversification of university research. In effect an increasing proportion of the Research Block Grants has become a subsidy to industry, reducing the cost to industry of its research, while at the same time reducing the level of support from Government for its own research.

Public Interest research

There is a clear role for the Government to fund research that is in the public interest and serves the Government's policy objectives for the kind of society and economy we want.

Research Australia submits that the Expert Panel should, in considering the structure of future research funding, give the highest priority to ensuring Commonwealth sponsored

[21]Australian Government, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 81110DO001_2014 Research and Experimental Development, Higher Education Organisations, Australia, 2014, Table 1 Higher education resources devoted to R&D, summary statistics - 1992 to 2014
[22]Australian Government, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 81110DO001_2016 Research and Experimental Development, Higher Education Organisations, Australia, 2016
[23]Australian Government, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 81110DO001_2018 Research and Experimental Development, Higher Education Organisations, Australia, 2018
[24]Australian Government, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 81110DO001_2020 Research and Experimental Development, Higher Education Organisations, Australia, 2020, Table 1 Higher education expenditure on R&D, by location, by type of activity, 2020

research is funded adequately. This requires the Commonwealth to provide sufficient levels of funding for the direct costs of the research it funds as well as meeting its fair share of the indirect costs of this research.

The Universities Accord provides the opportunity for the Commonwealth to reach an agreement with universities about the level of support it will provide for both the direct and indirect costs of Commonwealth funded university research. The ratio of indirect cost funding to direct Commonwealth research funding should be determined by what is necessary to enable the research to be undertaken effectively and should be used to determine the annual allocation of funding for the indirect costs of Government funded research.

This will require coordination with the other Government Departments, such as the Department of Health and Ageing, which fund university research in addition to the Department of Education. This funding could be administered as a separate program, as it is now, or funded as a loading on each eligible research grant. This new arrangement would reverse the decline in Government support for the university research it funds and provide certainty to universities about the level of funding available for Government funded research when applying for grants.

Industry-funded research

Supporting universities to undertake research funded by industry and other sources, including at universities' own initiative, should be a distinct and separate priority for Government, with its own policy rationale (supporting business, driving exports, creating secure well paid jobs). This support should not be provided to the detriment of meeting the direct and indirect costs of Commonwealth funded research. **The Universities Accord provides the opportunity for the Commonwealth to separately reach an agreement with universities about the level of support it will provide for the indirect costs of research conducted by universities where the Commonwealth is not the primary funder of the research.**

When it comes to the structure of future research funding, Research Australia proposes that Commonwealth support for the indirect cost of university research that is not primarily funded by the Commonwealth (e.g. industry research) should come from a separate pool. As the level of non-Government funded university research is beyond the control of the Government, it is not reasonable to expect the Government to commit to subsidising this research at a fixed ratio, although a notional ratio could be used to guide the allocation. This approach would support universities when negotiating with other parties about funding for the direct and indirect costs of research.

National Collaborative Research Infrastructure

The question about the right balance between business-driven research and public good research, and between discovery research and applied research is equally applicable to the funding provided under the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy.

The most recent National Research Infrastructure Roadmap (2021), while acknowledging the importance of National Research Infrastructure to the entire research pipeline, has placed a new emphasis on making infrastructure available to industry, and emphasised its links to the previous Government's *Modern Manufacturing Strategy* and its *University Research Commercialisation*

Scheme.[25] The Government has yet to provide its response to the Roadmap in the form of the new Research Infrastructure Investment Plan.

While research infrastructure provided under the National Research Infrastructure Strategy is not solely the province of universities, it is funded from the Education portfolio. **Research Australia submits the Universities Accord provides the opportunity to explicitly consider how the balance between support for public good research and industry driven research should be struck in the Commonwealth's future funding for research infrastructure.**

Conclusion

It is undeniable that universities play a vital role in Australia's economy and society. Universities are the training ground for our researchers as well as undertaking a large proportion of our research. They are also an essential pool of talent and research for the rest of Australia, and we need to ensure researchers can transition successfully into a range of roles in government, industry and broader society where their skills and expertise are increasingly required and tremendously valued.

Supporting researchers to be as effective as possible in their careers within and outside universities is critical. Research Australia believes this needs to be a shared endeavour, and a subject of the Universities Accord.

The Commonwealth and universities also have shared responsibility for the funding of research; both the direct and indirect costs. There needs to be a clear understanding of the drivers for Government participation, with at least two separate principles for Government involvement articulated: the first is the effective funding of the direct and indirect costs of Commonwealth funded research; the second is the rationale for the Commonwealth contributing to the indirect costs of research funded by universities themselves and others, including industry. The future structure for Commonwealth funding needs to adequately address both these principles and the Accord provides the opportunity to achieve this.

If you have any questions regarding this submission or require further information, please contact Greg Mullins, Head of Policy, at greg.mullins@researchaustralia.org

[25] Australian Government, *National Research Infrastructure Roadmap 2021*

ABOUT RESEARCH AUSTRALIA

Our vision: Health and prosperity through Australian research and innovation.

Our mission: Use our unique convening power to maximise the impact of all stages of health and medical research and innovation.

Our role:

Engage

Australia in a conversation about the health benefits and economic value of its investment in health and medical research.

Connect

Researchers, funders, healthcare providers and consumers to increase investment in health and medical research from all sources.

Influence

government policies that support effective health and medical research and its routine translation into evidence-based practices and better health outcomes.

Established with the assistance of the Federal Government in 2002, Research Australia is the national alliance representing the entire health and medical research (HMR) pipeline, from the laboratory to the patient and the marketplace. Research Australia works to position Australian HMR as a significant driver of a healthy population and a healthy economy.

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