



Innovative
Research
Universities

Our Submission

Collaborative Research Networks Program

Discussion Paper

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Charles Darwin University
Flinders University
Griffith University
James Cook University
La Trobe University
Murdoch University
The University of Newcastle

Introduction

Innovative Research Universities (IRU) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Department's Discussion Paper on the Collaborative Research Networks (CRN) Program.

Eligibility

IRU supports the Discussion Paper's proposal to make CRN funding available to universities with competitive grant income below an agreed level. We believe that the \$2.5 million competitive grant income threshold used in the *Sustainable Research Excellence* initiative would also represent an appropriate threshold for determining eligibility for CRN funding.

Given the short-term nature of CRN funding and the relatively modest pool of funding available, opening eligibility up to a larger number of institutions would only serve to spread the funding so thinly that its impact would be significantly reduced.

Allocation mechanism

We support the government's intention of the less research-intensive university being the lead institution in the proposed network and receiving the funding as the managing institution.

IRU strongly favours a *competitive* allocation mechanism, with appropriate selection criteria. In our view, the selection criteria should address the following factors.

Fields of research or research themes

The government is urging universities to identify and build selected areas of research strength to achieve excellence in the quality and impact of their research.

Consistent with this objective, we are strongly of the view that CRN funding should be directed to building research networks with a discipline or thematic focus. Such networks may bring together a group of universities, including a number of less research-intensive universities and one or more research-intensive universities.

The funding of bilateral, or even multilateral, partnerships which seek to build research capacity at a broad institutional level would not represent an optimal use of the available funding.

Capacity building will be most effective when it is focused at the level of discipline or research theme.

Institutional compatibility and sustainability of the network

The CRN selection criteria also need to give careful consideration to the compatibility of the network partners and the sustainability of the network over the longer term, especially after the CRN funding stops flowing.

Factors such as the ease of mobility of staff and research students across the network and compatibility in terms of the contexts within which research is undertaken and applied should be taken into account.

For example, the Discussion Paper emphasises that the research mission of less research-intensive regional and outer metropolitan universities is often strongly connected to regional and local needs and priorities. Universities which have a proven track record in undertaking regionally based research in cognate research fields or research themes may offer better prospects for long term research collaboration than institutions which operate in quite different contexts.

Up to three proposals per eligible institution

Within the competitive process, eligible institutions will ideally be able to submit up to three separate proposals. This will allow them to pursue collaborative networks in more than one of their identified areas of research priority and will also encourage a diversity of proposals for consideration by government.

It would be desirable to set an upper limit on the funding to be allocated to each CRN project to ensure that a range of networks can be supported.

Scope of Program

With limited funding available, IRU proposes that the scope of the CRN Program should be focused on building academic research capacity rather than capacity in support or administrative systems. The government will ideally not be overly prescriptive about how CRN funding should be spent, however, activities supported might include: academic staff and research student exchanges; development of joint grant applications;

joint research student or staff development arrangements; shared research infrastructure; and, visiting fellowships.

The CRN Program should not support collaboration with international partners. Domestic research networks are far more likely to be sustainable over the longer term. Given the rationale for the Program, we also believe the focus should be on building collaboration and research capacity within Australia.

For some universities, it may be appropriate for CRN funding to be directed to partnerships with CSIRO or other research agencies, particularly where research facilities are in close proximity or where there is a clear alignment in terms of the specific field(s) of research or research theme(s) outlined in the funding proposal.

Lighthouse projects

IRU does not support the proposal for lighthouse projects. The quantum of funding available for the CRN Program is insufficient to provide for a number of projects of this scale without reducing the impact of the CRN Program more broadly.

If the government were to proceed with the lighthouse projects proposal, IRU would strongly oppose the suggestion that specific universities, or groups of universities, be invited to submit proposals. They should be awarded only on the basis of a fully open and competitive process.

IRU readiness to participate in the CRN Program

As universities with strongly established research profiles, current indications are that the IRU members will not be eligible to apply for CRN funding.

As a network, we nevertheless strongly support the objectives of the Program and welcome opportunities to partner with less research intensive universities for mutual benefit and for the benefit of the national research and innovation system.

The IRU members have identified four areas of collective research strength across the network:

- Climate change, energy, water and the environment
- Social inclusion and Indigenous research

- Health, particularly public health, Aboriginal health; remote area health and tropical health
- Biomedical application of molecular science.

Our seven members also cover the length and breadth of Australia, operating in over 35 locations nationally including capital cities, outer-metropolitan areas, regional cities and centres and remote locations.

We believe that IRU has the research capability and national reach to make a valuable contribution to the CRN Program by partnering with less research-intensive universities interested in aligned research topics.

We look forward to working with the government in the implementation of the CRN Program.

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