

15 June 2010

Dr Caroline Perkins

General Manager

Compacts & Coordination Branch, Research Division

Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research

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Dear Dr Perkins

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on the draft Guidelines for the Collaborative Research Networks (CRN) program.

In broad terms, Innovative Research Universities (IRU) supports the draft Guidelines. We are pleased to note that a number of issues raised in our response to the earlier Discussion Paper have been addressed. In particular, we note that the Guidelines:

- Clarify the definition of eligible institutions
- Specify program objectives to
 - Focus research activities in areas of existing or emerging strengths (as indicated in our prior submission, we believe that CRN projects should be built around specific fields of research or research themes)
 - Meet local and regional priorities
- Stress the importance of the sustainability of collaborative relationships beyond the life of the CRN program
- Require a focus on collaboration between two or more Australian higher education providers (versus international collaborations)
- Specify a funding cap for CRN projects
- Indicate that eligible institutions will act as lead institutions
- Outline a competitive application and selection process for CRN projects.

We continue to hold concerns that the longer term objectives of the CRN program may not be achievable given the modest amount of funding available and the one-off nature of project funding. The structural adjustments and collaborative relationships envisaged will require a sustained funding commitment over an extended period of time.

In addition, we continue to hold the view that eligible institutions should be permitted to submit up to three Expressions of Interest for CRN funding. This would provide institutions with the opportunity to explore more than one area of research excellence and allied partnerships. Steps 2 and 3 of the EOI process, as outlined in the draft Program Guidelines, could then ensure that the proposals demonstrating best fit with the Program objectives and the highest probability of success are supported.

Our response to the CRN Discussion Paper recorded our opposition to the proposed Lighthouse Projects. Our view was that the quantum of funding available for the CRN Program was insufficient to provide for a number of projects of this scale without reducing the impact of the CRN Program more broadly. For the same reasons, we do not support discretionary use of the CRN funds by the Minister. If this component of the CRN Program were to remain, the priorities identified by the Minister need to be stipulated in the program Guidelines to ensure that all eligible institutions are in a position to be strategic and submit general CRN proposals that are likely to attract future Ministerial funding.

We note that the selection criteria include 'the support, both cash and in-kind to be provided by the participating institutions'. Given that the core objective of the CRN program is to build research capacity in less research-intensive smaller institutions, the commitment of existing cash and in-kind contributions by participating institutions should not be required to strengthen proposals and influence the allocation of CRN funding. This is especially the case given that increased funding for the indirect costs of research will only be partially phased in over the timeframe of the first round of the CRN program.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you require any clarification in relation to our above comments.

Yours sincerely



Lenore Cooper
Director