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NRIC Secretariat  
Research Infrastructure and Science Policy Branch  
Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research  
GPO Box 9839  
CANBERRA ACT 2600  
e. [nruc@innovation.gov.au](mailto:nruc@innovation.gov.au)

## IRU submission: Strategic Framework for Research Infrastructure Investment

The IRU supports the direction of the National Research Infrastructure Council's discussion paper *A Strategic Framework for Research Infrastructure Investment*. To assist the Council finalise its approach we outline below areas in which further development would strengthen the approach proposed in relation to depreciation and to the implications of a long term focus on high priority areas alone.

The IRU agrees that it is essential to have an ongoing, long term program of investment in research infrastructure that provides both reasonable certainty of investment for the medium to longer term and access for all researchers to the funded infrastructure.

Consequently the IRU endorses many of the principles and proposals set out in the discussion paper:

- the definition of research infrastructure, which provides a viable base for current and future programs;
- continuity of funding to provide certainty that future needs have a reasonable chance of being met and that current infrastructure can remain operational;
- holistic funding, such that infrastructure programs should cover project planning and running costs. However, the IRU considers that the question of depreciation requires further thought, an issue on which we elaborate below;
- review of infrastructure investments that measures the actual outcomes against those intended;
- collaboration in the establishment and operation of major infrastructure, without necessarily requiring that all research undertaken be collaborative in design;
- a careful approach to co-investment, to ensure that infrastructure is developed as most needed while making effective use of other potential sources of investment;

- access to infrastructure based on merit and need with pricing set to ensure reasonable contribution to costs but not to be prohibitive to researchers; and
- the creation of roadmaps for future investment which are renewed at regular periods.

There are two issues the Council needs to consider further.

The first is the matter of depreciation. The success of the various programs described in the first section of the paper means that there is now significant infrastructure that in formal accounting terms is depreciating with consequent pressure on the budget of the administering institution, and which in actual research terms will over time risk losing its effectiveness as new technologies come on line.

Hence, in providing for major elements of research infrastructure it is crucial that there are effective arrangements to maintain and ultimately replace them. This involves understanding both the accounting and research implications of the depreciating infrastructure such that we get the best value from the investments of the past decade and that institutions are in a position to replace standard essential equipment.

Charges for use will not always match the investment required, without discouraging users through very high charges that would act against the principles for fair access for researchers. Rather, we need to look at a longer term funding option that provides for suitable renewal of infrastructure created, including potentially through the funding of depreciation.

The second issue which the IRU considers needs greater consideration is the long term impact of funding projects tied to national priority areas only. The focus has been important to the success of the various funding programs of the past decade such that Australia has been able to improve research in many key areas of existing or potential strength.

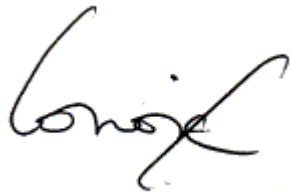
However, the paper rightly points to the need to 'keep thinking beyond the needs of today'. Now that there has been major investment in infrastructure most directly tied to the national priorities, a longer term question is how to ensure that there is an effective infrastructure base across all major international areas of research?

Maintaining the breadth of capacity is important to ensuring Australia has the opportunity to pursue areas which become the focus for future growth in ways we cannot perceive now. This suggests the need for an additional priority category of ensuring there is an effective base of infrastructure across a wide range of research areas. The road mapping exercises should take this issue into account.

The issue in part links to the discussion of access to international research infrastructure. It is sensible to consider investments in infrastructure beyond Australia that will be of value to Australian research. It is less clear that the

infrastructure programs should extend to supporting researcher access to such facilities in ways that would not be supported by those programs for access to Australian facilities. For researchers at Australia's more remote institutions this could create strange incentives.

The IRU looks forward to our participation in the new road-mapping exercise which should provide the base for deciding funding priorities for the next rounds of funding.



Conor King  
Executive Director