

In support of a national strategy: IRU response to the University Precincts Issues Paper

The Innovative Research Universities (IRU) supports the development of a national universities precincts' strategy that encourages local level stimulation of existing and new businesses through better industry-research collaboration.

The paper sets out the broad concept of a 'precinct', rightly keeping this general against the aim of being a means to bring together the innovative players in a region to strengthen the potential for better outcomes. The paper also sets out effectively the potential value to communities, universities, businesses and potential businesses.

The IRU response targets the importance of precincts for Australia's regions and the elements of a Strategy that could support this.

Precincts role in stimulating regional development

Precincts are not new. However, their success in Australia and the focus internationally tends to be on the renewal of previously industrial areas of major cities. That is one legitimate use. For Australia we need to test properly the value precincts can bring to redressing the problems from the over concentration of Australia's population in a few major cities.

There is an urgent need to make better use of the potential from the breadth of the country, for example from its northern regions, to reduce the pressure on the major cities and create positive outcomes for all current and future Australians.

Successful innovation systems across Australia are part of the solution to how future Australians can draw sustainably on Australia's physical resources and continue to live in prosperity.

The Government's National Innovation and Science Agenda (NISA) seeks to create a significant change in the extent and effectiveness of innovation in Australia, drawing on our world standard fundamental research base in Australia's universities and other research institutions.

It is crucial to the success of NISA to stimulate innovation across all regions of Australia. This requires each region to have an effective research system capable of supporting research, linking it to industry and other users through research. A precinct is one potential means to highlight local opportunities and harness the capacity that does exist in a region.

The challenge is to generate the positive spiral from the interacting factors. If regions are able to drive knowledge-based economic growth, they will be able to attract more innovative industry, altering the balance of population growth within Australia.

A framework to support the operations of precincts

The nature of a precinct in the regional context remains open for development. Hence it is important that a National Strategy focus on enabling their development without being over prescriptive about what they should look like and the operational detail.

Rather the strategy should focus on:

- detailing the potential value, to make the case to each region to support creation of a precinct;
- setting the key outcomes desired and the way to measure how well they are being achieved; and
- setting out the mechanisms across all players to bring them about.

Key features of a national strategy could include:

- building and enshrining collaborative, cooperative and networked capabilities within the three tiers of Government;
- creating more inter-departmental activity to work through precincts once established;
- rolling-out strategic support to regional precincts first, as a priority, and a way of inverting the traditional model of Government metropolitan centrality;
- deepening support and focus research funding that has translational and commercial application;
- ensuring precincts target all groups within a region, opening up innovative potential that currently struggles to get established; and
- coordinating, and complementing initiatives already underway such as City Deals (Townsville, Launceston and under negotiation for Western Sydney), various local, state and federal Entrepreneurial programs, and Cooperative Research Centres.

The various levels of Government should all be involved in supporting precincts across each major region of Australia. Their involvement should involve support for the planning, assisting find suitable local infrastructure around which to base a precinct and use of the precinct for relevant Government operations.

Government agencies have important roles to support local economies in carrying through their activities. The challenge of being innovative applies to them as much as any organisation. Having an ongoing level of Government driven activity will provide a useful base for a precinct with other participants more subject to the ebb and flow of business success and economic cycles.

The strategy should involve clarity for universities about the support they will receive for taking a lead role in establishing and supporting a precinct.

Conclusion

Universities are well placed to act as industry, research and community connectors, as they are hubs of innovation and research, with a concentration of diverse, multi-disciplined and expert staff. They have deep connections and knowledge of their communities but have a local, national and global focus.

We need to test the capacity of a well based regional precinct built around university research and innovation to significantly heighten business and community development.

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