

Using Government programs to support regional development and decentralisation

IRU Submission to the House of Representatives Select Committee on Regional Development and Decentralisation

Regional development and decentralisation will be strengthened through Government programs ensuring an intentional national distribution of resources and services. The creation of the next stage of national research infrastructure is a lead case where this approach should apply.

The IRU is the peak policy and development body for a coalition of seven comprehensive universities, located across the nation, committed to innovation and inclusive excellence in teaching, learning and research. IRU members are based in outer metropolitan and regional areas making them key partners and anchors in the growth corridors of urban spread and regional renewal.

IRU members teach 18% of all students in regional campuses across Australia and undertake a significant part of the research activity based outside Canberra and the State capital cities.

The Committee's Issues Paper focuses on the distribution of Government agencies and of corporations. In addition to this it should consider the question of how Government programs are rolled out.

In our research statement [Building Regional Research Systems Across Australia](#) (attached) we set out the case for an intentional national distribution of national research infrastructure as an example of the way in which Government can invert its traditional focus on rolling out new programs from the cities first.

The Policy Statement sets out how to ensure regional research systems are sufficiently robust to enable valuable research to be conducted throughout Australia. It outlines:

1. the challenge to ensure international level research flourishes across Australia with benefits delivered to communities and industries;
2. the advantages from a truly national research system; and
3. the steps needed to build effective research systems across Australia:
 - a. effective delivery of the university and innovation system,
 - b. evening-up the playing field, and
 - c. developing regional capability.

Effective universities across the whole of Australia

Australia needs multiple sites of research excellence and high class university education. IRU members are critical to the building of regional education and research systems across Australia. To enhance and grow regional research its systems must be robust and world-class. Enabling valuable research to be conducted throughout the nation, not just in city-centric enclaves, must be a priority commitment, not just an aspirational one.

Through our research, we contribute to the building of regional research systems across Australia. The impact on regional communities is significant where their universities have the research infrastructure to win grants and tap into research funds such as the Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF).

A challenge of Government is to develop regional capacity and ensure a truly national research system with benefits shared with industries and communities.

To maximize its investment in Australia's research system, the government needs to make sure that publicly-funded research infrastructure is accessible to all researchers and potential end users. Currently this involves digital access, where the location of the researcher is largely irrelevant to the capacity to use the resource, and use of nodes and sub-nodes to widen options for access in person.

The requirement for national access is usually interpreted as ensuring that researchers outside the main cities can access resources, but equally it means that a resource could be located anywhere capable of supporting it, with those in major city areas as able as anyone else to access resources remotely.

It is important that the host agency and the location of major nodes for the Government's response to the 2016 National Research Infrastructure Roadmap reflect a considered approach to:

- ensure the facility or service is accessible by all who could want to use it; and
- stimulate the whole Australian research system through a distributive intent, with resulting benefits for regions and potential reduction of pressure on major population centres.

Current

While there are universities across most parts of Australia, Australia's research infrastructure remains predominantly inner city-centric. [IRU mapping](#) shows that almost 80% of the currently-funded National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS) infrastructure is located in cities and inner cities.

Since the large majority of resources are based in the major cities, particularly Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra, it means that researchers from many institutions (and in the majority of cases that means researchers from younger, outer-metropolitan and non-metropolitan universities) remain the 'outsiders'.

It means that the spillover value of hosting major resources is concentrated rather than distributed. The spillover is the incentive for strong research clusters such as the Parkville precinct. The challenge is to replicate this across Australia in areas such as the Gold Coast and northern Australia. Locating research infrastructure is one crucial part in underpinning the future research base across Australia.

Future

Some resources have a natural home. Bio-security capability ought to be present where the major challenges are likely to arise, which is northern Australia. Antarctic research capability is sensibly based along the southern ocean.

Most resources have no intrinsic locational logic. These can be used to stimulate the whole Australian research system through a distributive intent, with resulting benefits for regions and potential reduction of pressure on major population centres. As long as national access requirements can be met, and the resource suitable supported and operated, they can be broadly distributed.

Geographical spread should be a key factor in determining the hosting for resources the roadmap identifies as priority, with the selection criteria specifically citing this outcome. Hence, the selection cannot be solely by the individual merit of applications but should be geared towards achieving the final outcome of NCRIS resources being based across different parts of Australia.

The IRU would be pleased to discuss our argument with the Committee should it wish to explore it further.

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