



IRU pre-election policy statement

March 2022

About the IRU

The IRU is a group of eight universities across Australia committed to inclusive education and innovative research that advances our communities. The history of our member universities goes back to the 1960s and early 1970s when, under both Liberal and Labor governments, there was an expansion of new forms of higher education and research to meet the needs of the nation. Through constructive engagement in public policy, collaboration, innovation and international engagement, the IRU enhances the impact of our universities for the future of Australia.

The 2022 Federal Election

COVID-19 casts its long shadow into 2022, with the impacts of the global pandemic still being felt. Following the 2022 election, the new government will lead Australia into a new post-pandemic future in a world that looks very different. Immediate skills and workforce crises in the wake of the pandemic are underpinned by larger social, economic, technological and geopolitical shifts.

Universities have been a key part of the COVID response – delivering front-line healthcare services, training the next generation of health workers, providing expert public health and medical advice, undertaking essential research, and supporting domestic and international students through online education and expanded counselling services. IRU universities have made significant cuts to their budgets to balance the books through this difficult period.

The new government has a unique opportunity to re-set public policy for a new phase in Australia's social and economic development. We argue that universities – bringing together education, skills, research and innovation – have a crucial role to play. Through inclusive higher education and research policy, universities are a resource for government, to help the nation move beyond recovery to a future that benefits all Australians. We set out eleven specific policy ideas below in areas of priority to the IRU, as a constructive contribution to the agenda of the next government.

Education and skills – broadening access and participation

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has led to major skills and labour shortages in critical areas of the Australian economy and society. Politicians are right to focus on this and universities play a key role in the response. One million new jobs will be created across the economy by 2025 – 90% of these will require a post-secondary education and over half will require a university-level education.

In addition, over the next five years, Australia will experience the demographic impacts of the baby boom of the early 2000s, leading to a significant increase in the number of young Australians moving from school to further study, training and work.

Meanwhile, the gains that had been made since the early 2000s in broadening access and equity in participation in higher education have stalled. The number of students from regional and remote areas attending university has been in decline. The increase in the number of students from low-
iru.edu.au

income backgrounds has flattened and the growth in participation by Indigenous students has declined.

Now is the time to commit to broadening participation in higher education and addressing unfinished business in access and equity. The IRU has long advocated for the opening up of access to all domestic students who wish to study at university. Our eight universities have a strong history of creating opportunity through education and skills – for example, 50% of our students are the first in their family to attend university.

Now is also the time to support innovation in teaching and learning, to build on what worked during the pandemic and apply new models to meet future needs. This will include new, alternative credentials (such as microcredentials), new partnerships with industry and other education providers, and the use of new technologies.

Specific policy recommendations:

1. Government should fund additional places for domestic undergraduate students to keep up with demographic growth and the skills needs of the post-COVID economy.
2. Funding for all Indigenous students should be uncapped, regardless of where they live, to contribute to the achievement of Closing the Gap goals.
3. A comprehensive review of the Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) package should be undertaken, to ensure that current policies are not adversely affecting student choice, participation and equity, and not preventing universities from effectively contributing to other government priorities.
4. The new government should bring together the various reforms of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) into a coherent whole, to provide certainty for universities to innovate and deliver new credentials, including those in partnership with industry.

Research and innovation – delivering impact for the community

The global research system has undergone massive change over the last 20 years – since 2000, total investment worldwide in research and development (R&D) has tripled to \$2.2 trillion per annum and the centre of gravity of the global system has shifted away from the traditional powers of North America and Western Europe, towards our part of the world. These trends will continue.

As we plan for the future, Australia's research and innovation capability should be a major focus. We currently lack a systematic approach to R&D and the unique role of universities within the system. Ten years have passed since the last National Research Investment Plan in 2012 and the world has changed significantly since. The \$1 billion investment in university research during the pandemic was welcome. But this was a one-off and cuts in government research funding had been made in 2019. Total investment in R&D in Australia (as a % of GDP) is declining and the system is out of balance, with less and less investment in basic research.

IRU universities are committed to high-quality research that delivers impact for the community. This includes increasing levels of collaboration with industry and we welcome the focus on improving Australia's commercialisation performance. The current government's commitment of \$2.2 billion in new funding for research commercialisation programs will make a major contribution to the translation of intellectual property developed in Australia's universities into commercial outcomes for the nation.

The global pandemic has also focused attention on sovereign capabilities and critical technologies. The IRU welcomes government support for key areas of emerging science and technology. This must now be balanced with a commitment to advancing the humanities, arts and social sciences, that are equally important for Australia's future. As we grapple with social, technological and geopolitical change, the most successful innovation will draw on the widest possible range of expertise. Deep understanding of the countries, cultures and languages of our region will be a crucial sovereign capability for Australia in the 21st century and a source of comparative advantage.

Overall, what is needed is a systematic approach to research and innovation policy, that allows the different parts of the system to play to their strengths. The IRU supports increasing focus on research translation and impact, but this should not undermine the systems that we have for basic or blue-sky research, which is critical for generating new knowledge and long-term prosperity. And university-industry collaboration should also be balanced with a commitment to engagement with partners in the government, not-for-profit and community sectors, to maximise impact across Australian society.

Specific policy recommendations:

5. The new government should reverse the decline in funding for basic research, with a systematic and sustainable long-term plan to support all disciplines.
6. Government should commit to an Australian version of the UK's Haldane Principle, which legislates that funding decisions about basic research projects should be protected from political interference.
7. The focus on commercialisation and industry should be broadened to incentivise engagement and translation by universities in all sectors and disciplines, to maximise the impacts deriving from public investments in research right across Australian society.

International education and research – Australia's place in a changed world

Prior to the pandemic, Australia had the most internationalised university system in the world, developed over decades and delivering huge benefits to the nation. Post-COVID, international education and research collaboration will be just as important, but will need to work in new ways.

IRU universities have a long-standing commitment to international education and research. We have a distinct international profile, with lower levels of concentration from key source countries for international students and a higher proportion of students studying offshore. The United States remains our largest partner for international research collaboration. Many of our universities have a commitment from their founding to contribute to a better understanding of, and closer engagement with, our neighbours in the Indo-Pacific.

Geopolitical shifts and tensions bring new risks for universities in international engagement, but we must not shy away from the world. The IRU is committed to working closely with government to manage the risks and capture the benefits of international education and research for Australia. We will need a coordinated, long-term approach to new opportunities and new modes of delivery. The *Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030* provides a starting point for ongoing collaboration on diversification and new models of international education.

Skills shortages and demographic shifts into the future will also mean that the connection between international education and migration needs continuing focus. Australia should make it easier for

graduates with relevant skills (in particular skills for new high-tech industries) to stay and work, with a pathway to residency. This needs to be balanced with a commitment to capacity-building with partners in our region and the important role of education, research and innovation in their societies.

Specific policy recommendations:

8. The new government should work collaboratively with universities on a detailed plan for implementing new models of high-quality, diversified international education post-COVID.
9. Government should build upon the successful collaborative approach of the University Foreign Interference Taskforce to develop a coordinated, positive agenda for the role of education and research in strengthening diplomatic and strategic partnerships across the Indo-Pacific.

Innovation for the future

The COVID-19 pandemic and underlying global changes have led to major policy challenges for government and major shifts in university operations. Changes in the operating environment have led to a wide range of new regulations and reporting requirements, some of which may prove unnecessary as we move into a new phase. During the term of the next government, there will be an opportunity to take stock, work together and ensure policy settings are right to support innovation in education and research to drive greater prosperity and wellbeing for all Australians.

Much university infrastructure in Australia was built during the 1970s and is in need of renewal. The report of the 2015 Higher Education Infrastructure Working Group found that government funding for infrastructure was vital for internationally competitive universities and that regional and outer-suburban institutions were facing particular difficulties. There is currently no systematic and long-term national approach to capital investment in universities. COVID-19 taught us that new, hybrid models of education are possible, but these now need to be carefully evaluated and the best parts mainstreamed into new models of teaching and learning.

Specific policy recommendations:

10. The new government should create an Innovation and Infrastructure Fund to support universities to develop proposals for new physical and digital infrastructure, to use new technologies and drive new approaches in both domestic and international education. This would turn the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic into a positive inflection point for the next generation.
11. Universities and the new government should work in partnership to review and remove red tape, and free up as much room as possible for innovation.

Conclusion

Across the IRU, our 16,500 staff teach over 237,000 students (51,000 of them international students) at 34 locations in every mainland State and Territory. Our eight universities are representative of the nation and provide excellent partners for piloting and trialling new approaches. As the new government leads Australia into the future, the IRU is ready to work collaboratively and constructively on major policy challenges facing the nation.

Charles Darwin University // Flinders University // Griffith University // James Cook University // La Trobe University // Murdoch University // University of Canberra // Western Sydney University