

*Submission by*

**THE AUSTRALIAN COLLABORATION**

*To*

**DEST - EVALUATION OF THE KNOWLEDGE  
AND INNOVATION REFORMS REVIEW**

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## **THE BACKGROUND**

This short submission is made by the Australian Collaboration, a collaboration of leading national community organizations. The organizations participating in the Collaboration are:

- Australian Council of Social Service;
- Australian Conservation Foundation;
- Australian Consumers Association;
- Australian Council for Overseas Aid;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission;
- Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia;
- National Council of Churches in Australia; and
- Trust for Young Australians.

The Australian Collaboration is carrying out a project ‘Long Term Strategic Issues: Can we do better?’. Long term strategic research is an important component of this project. It is on this account that the Australian Collaboration wishes to make a submission to the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) Evaluation of Knowledge and Innovation Reforms Review.

The Australian Collaboration has already made a submission to the DEST Research Collaboration Review. This submission includes those aspects of the previous submission relevant to the review of Australia’s Block Research Funding Schemes. The full Australian Collaboration submission to the Research Collaboration Review is available from the DEST Collaboration Review Secretariat. This submission also makes additional comments and recommendations beyond those included in the previous submission

## **THE SUBMISSION**

### **General**

- While essential short to medium term needs have to be met, the Collaboration believes that a general axiom should be that governments should aim to spend the maximum amount possible in the main areas of long term potential. Research is one of the most important of these areas. There are many other immediate reasons for research investment. An example is the action required to expand and develop Australia’s knowledge economy to enable Australia to compete effectively in international trade.
- Australia’s research needs should be looked at comprehensively. It is of great importance that there is a balance of: outstanding basic research; applied scientific and technological research and development leading to commercialization (to support a strong and competitive economy); applied research with other significant potential social and environmental benefits; and social science and humanities research needed for the development of an equitable, humane and culturally rich society. These different forms of research, moreover, strongly support each other. Social science research is, for example, a crucial component of the successful social and commercial application of applied research. None of Australia’s economic, environmental and social goals can be achieved without social, environmental and economic integration. No one of these different forms of research should therefore be carried out at the expense of the others.

- There is a strong case for a plurality of research funding approaches: competitive, national and institutional goal oriented and independently funded.

### **Principles of public funding**

- There is a need for an additional principle focusing on the financial support, career paths and research opportunities needed to ensure that the most outstanding young Australian researchers are encouraged to stay in Australia or return to Australia after research experience overseas. This principle might have the heading:
- *‘Support for outstanding young Australian researchers’*
- This additional principle is needed because the loss of talented young Australian researchers is of such potential significance to the nation’s research performance.

### **Full cost funding for ARC and NHMRC funded research**

- The highest quality research will only be consistently achieved in Australian universities if full cost infrastructure funding is made available to outstanding research centres and groupings as it is in other countries (eg USA, Finland and Denmark); if these infrastructure grants are paid at the time the research grants are made; and if the number of postgraduate scholarships is substantially increased. Prominent researchers spend much too much of their time raising money rather than researching or running research programs.
- If these requirements are not met, it will be very difficult to maintain the highest quality research and it will also be very difficult to attract and retain the ablest young researchers since their working conditions and professional prospects will compare so unfavourably to those in other countries.
- It is the Collaboration’s view that the Australian Research Council (ARC) and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) should progressively be given responsibility for all the direct costs associated with their grants. It is recommended that:
  - Responsibility for funding of the costs of project specific infrastructure should be given to the ARC and NHMRC immediately for distribution to universities and research applicants together with the grants. Project specific research infrastructure funding should be increased from the current 20 cents in the dollar to match real costs and made available to universities for the successful research applications at the same time that the research grants are made as occurs in the UK and USA.
  - Later, the inclusion of Chief Investigator salaries in the grants, as in the USA, should be carefully examined. This would be desirable because it would consolidate payment of full costs for the research project with grants and thereby achieve greater responsibility, transparency and efficiency. However, this second step would involve some difficulties and considerable changes and so needs careful investigation.

### **Support for outstanding young Australian researchers**

In support of the additional principle proposed in this submission for the funding of higher education research and training (above):

- The number of post-graduate and post-doctoral scholarships available under the Research Training Scheme should be greatly increased.
- A thorough review should take place of the needs and motivations of talented young Australian researchers.

### **Research assessment of Australian universities**

The many benefits of individual peer review assessments of the overall research excellence of each university such as the UK Research Assessment Exercise have been identified in the Evaluation of Knowledge and Innovation Reforms Issue Paper. The Collaboration therefore recommends that such reviews should progressively take place of all Australian universities. The reviews should not, however, be used as a basis for block funding of universities but rather to assist universities to improve their research performance. In this way, costs of such a scheme would be significantly reduced since the individual reviews could be staggered over a reasonable period. The focus of the reviews would also change from judgemental to supportive.

### **Public access, information and debate**

Public awareness of Australia's comparative research performance and research support arrangements should be treated as a matter of the greatest significance.

Only if public awareness is high and the nation's research performance and needs are continuously debated, will research be given the attention it requires. Misunderstandings, public apathy or a sense that it is all too difficult to understand could easily undermine public and political support for research.

Under the Knowledge and Innovation Reforms and the passage of the *Australian Research Council Act 2001* the primary responsibility for reporting on comparative international and national performance and for improving public awareness of the value of research has been given to the Australian Research Council (ARC). The ARC should take this responsibility very seriously.

Regular ARC reviews should include discussions of key national research issues. There should be opportunities for comment and debate about these issues.