ATN submission – SERD issues paper 5

Issues Paper 5 focuses on how to safeguard and strengthen foundational research. It tests proposals to rebalance competitive and systemic funding, embed research and research training in mission-based compacts, and ensure sustainable career pathways and infrastructure while keeping discovery connected to application.

Question 1: What aspects of the model would work well?

- ATN Universities are leaders in applied research, but we believe foundational research must be safeguarded to avoid hollowing out the pipeline.
- We welcome the Paper's recognition that curiosity-led research is a core pillar of the system. Protecting discovery funding alongside applied missions will ensure long-term innovation capacity. Foundational capability underwrites every translation success. Protecting and growing this capacity must remain a system priority.
- ATN Universities has previously called for CPI-indexed, long-term stability in research funding. We therefore welcome the Paper's proposal to explore GDP-linked ARC growth, which would strengthen certainty for discovery research. The Paper's focus on rebalancing competitive and systemic cost funding addresses a clear pressure point for institutions and ATN Universities supports further examination of this.
- We also support the emphasis on workforce development and mobility. Proposals to broaden PhD pathways and embed translational and entrepreneurial skills align with the ATN Frontiers program, an interdisciplinary professional development program developed specifically for PhD and research Masters students.
- Finally, we agree that simplifying grants administration would reduce unproductive transaction costs and free researcher time for higher-impact work. International comparators, such as Germany's Excellence Strategy, show that multi-year indexed funding and reduced red tape are vital to sustaining foundational research capacity.

Question 2: What could be improved and how?

1. Secure, stable, and broad-based funding is critical
    - Foundational research requires indexed, predictable funding streams across all disciplines.
    - Discovery programs should include high-risk/high-reward schemes with protected success rates and panel guidance that values risk and learning, not just outcomes.
    - Mission-based compacts should embed research and research training as core elements, backed by durable funding, and support institutional breadth and workforce pipelines.
    - Each national focus area should include explicit streams for HASS integration and cross-disciplinary collaboration, so blue-sky inquiry remains connected to application.
    - Research capacity has historically followed student demand, which does not align neatly with national priority areas. If compacts and premium indirect cost rates are tied to narrow pillars, universities risk losing breadth needed to sustain research training, workforce pathways and community-relevant scholarship.

2. Discovery and application should be connected through precincts and partnerships

- We should design pathways to link discovery and application, and frame impact broadly, encompassing social, cultural and environmental outcomes as well as commercial returns.
- Innovation precincts connect foundational research with translation, ensuring SMEs, industry and communities can access talent, infrastructure and expertise. They are also natural enablers of interdisciplinary collaboration, across STEM and HASS capabilities in universities, industry and government.
- Specialisation should be enabled through precinct-based collaboration, tied to excellence, opportunity, equity and regional strengths. This builds national capability without research being concentrated in a select few universities, which would weaken breadth and resilience.
- Exemplars: Australian Trailblazer Universities Program, US NSF Convergence Accelerators.

3. The system should work to broaden participation, recognition and coordination
    - Incentives should recognise diverse outputs e.g. data assets, open science, policy and collaboration outcomes, and support workforce mobility across academia, industry and government through scaled programs like Industry PhDs, portable fellowships and Science Policy Fellows.
    - Participation must be broad-based, supporting early-career researchers, First Nations researchers, international students, regional universities and smaller institutions
    - Targeted uplift is needed for HDR scholarships, mid-career fellowships, the technician workforce and eResearch capability.
    - NCRIS is a critical national infrastructure and must receive long-term, indexed funding and be coordinated alongside ARC, NHMRC and CSIRO, to sustain foundational capacity.
    - Strengthen talent mobility and research collaboration by building structured alumni programs for international HDRs, and leveraging transnational education and partnerships for joint PhDs, applied projects and engagement that extend Australia's innovation reach.

ATN Universities submission – SERD issues paper 6

Issues Paper 6 examines how government can act as an exemplar in the RD&I system, using its levers in procurement, regulation, publicly funded research agencies and performance measurement to drive innovation. It proposes reforms such as innovation-focused procurement, clearer PFRA roles, regulatory sandboxes, and a national RD&I performance framework to set standards and build confidence across the system.

Question 1: What aspects of the model would work well?

- ATN Universities welcome the Paper's recognition that government must lead by example in building a stronger RD&I system. Government procurement, regulation, and performance frameworks are powerful levers that can accelerate innovation and set national standards.
- The proposals to expand the role of procurement as a first customer for innovation are well placed. Introducing innovation weightings, challenge-based procurement, and pre-approved supplier models would open opportunities for SMEs, startups and university spinouts to prove their value in local markets. These mechanisms must be designed to ensure smaller institutions, regional partners and diverse businesses can participate fully, reinforcing equity across the system.
- We also support the call to better integrate publicly funded research agencies (PFRAs) such as CSIRO into national focus areas. Clearer role definition and stronger partnership mandates can help avoid duplication and unlock their facilities and capabilities for system-wide benefit.
- The Paper's emphasis on reducing regulatory complexity and administrative burden is consistent with ATN Universities' longstanding advocacy for more efficient, proportionate processes. Initiatives such as regulatory sandboxes and streamlined grant applications can foster experimentation and reduce costs.
- Finally, the proposal for a national RD&I performance framework that measures outcomes and impacts, not just inputs, is a critical reform. ATN Universities is ready to work with government to co-design measures that capture economic, social, cultural and environmental value. As we emphasised in earlier Issues Papers, precincts and partnerships provide the strongest delivery vehicles for such reforms, connecting institutions, industry and communities.

Question 2: What could be improved and how?

1. Design procurement as an on-ramp for innovation
    - Structure procurement so research organisations, SMEs, startups and university spinouts can access opportunities on fair terms, with simpler processes scaled to risk and value.
    - Increase transparency and entry points to supplier panels so smaller providers are not locked out.
    - Reward collaboration with universities in procurement criteria, helping to grow skills pipelines through early-career researcher engagement.
    - Provide practical support to Australian businesses and research organisations to be procurement-ready.

2. Recast publicly funded research agencies as partners

- Agencies such as CSIRO, ANSTO and Geoscience Australia should act as anchor tenants in national precincts, opening their infrastructure and expertise to universities, industry and communities.
- PFRAs can play a critical role in bridging the 'valley of death' by providing facilities, testbeds and long-term mission programs that help de-risk early adoption. Their role should be to support universities and industry in scaling discovery into application, particularly in areas of sovereign capability, not to compete for translational funding.
- However, their facilities and expertise should remain accessible to universities and industry partners pursuing complementary or emerging areas of research, to avoid creating silos and to maintain the flow of ideas across the system.
- Like NCRIS, PFRAs should be provided with stable, indexed funding so they can serve as enduring partners.

3. Strengthen global positioning through talent, workforce development and system accountability
    - Australian universities attract large numbers of international HDR students and researchers. Australia should build visa pathways, re-engagement schemes and alumni programs to keep this talent connected to the national system.
    - Extensive transnational education partnerships are an under-used RD&I platform. Leveraging international locations and transnational education (TNE) partnerships for joint PhDs, applied projects and offshore industry engagement would extend Australia's innovation reach [see: RMIT-Europe, Curtin-Malaysia, UTS-China, Deakin-Indonesia and Newcastle-Singapore]
    - Boosting Australia's RD&I reputation internationally should not rely on Austrade alone. States already have strong investment and engagement arms (e.g. Global Victoria, Invest Victoria, Invest and Trade WA, Investment NSW etc.). These should be coordinated nationally, aligning state strengths with national priority areas, and tied to precincts where global investors and partners can see capability in action.
    - The national performance framework should measure government's own exemplar role, tracking how procurement, regulation and infrastructure are used to drive innovation, alongside the contributions of universities and industry.
    - Digitisation of procurement and grant reporting will give real-time visibility of outcomes and allowing quicker adjustments where policies are not delivering as intended. A single grants management system for whole of government is strongly supported.