

ACDS Submission: ATEC Review of Research Requirements: 'Australian University Category'

Introduction

The Australian Council of Deans of Science (ACDS), the voice of Australian university science in, welcomes the opportunity to contribute to ATEC's review of research requirements for the Australian University category.

ACDS brings together Deans of Science (or equivalent) from most Australian universities. Our members lead science education and research across a broad range of disciplines and institutions, including research-intensive and teaching-focused universities, regional and metropolitan campuses, and dual-sector universities.

ACDS considers that the opportunity for research specialisation should be available to all universities, while respecting institutional autonomy, rather than being prescribed by government or regulatory authorities. We support an enabling regulatory framework that allows universities to specialise, if they choose, by building on their distinctive strengths and missions over the long term, while safeguarding research-led and -informed education, and Australia's overall scientific capability. National priorities should principally be advanced through incentives, investment and collaboration and not prescription and regulation.

Our submission responds to the consultation questions in, *Review of Research Requirements: 'Australian University Category' - Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards)**

Question 1.

How should research depth, scale and sustainability be demonstrated under a more specialised model, including in relation to staffing, infrastructure, governance, research training, research integrity and research security?

Research depth, scale and sustainability should be demonstrated through institutional capability—including people, infrastructure, investment and research pipelines—not simply current research performance.

For university science, sustainability is fundamentally about the long-term continuity of research capability. Individual grants, projects and partnerships change over time. Sustainable specialisation therefore requires an underlying base of people and expertise, infrastructure, institutional investment, research programs and training pipelines capable of supporting enduring strengths and emerging opportunities.

Workforce is central. Sustainable research strength depends on attracting and retaining researchers, including HDR candidates and early- and mid-career researchers. Research capability takes years to establish and develop.

* Available at <https://www.atec.gov.au/consultations/have-your-say-research-specialisation>

Assessment should therefore take a sufficiently long-term view and recognise sustained institutional commitment rather than performance at a point in time. It should also accommodate broad, interdisciplinary and mission-oriented strengths and avoid focussing narrowly on four-digit For classifications.

Question 2.

What safeguards are needed to ensure a more specialised research model continues to support research quality, scholarship, teaching and learning, student outcomes and institutional maturity?

Safeguards should maintain the research–teaching nexus while allowing universities to teach more broadly than the areas in which they specialise in research.

A strong connection between active research, contemporary scholarship and university science education is fundamental. Greater research specialisation should not separate research and teaching in ways that weaken research-led and research-informed education or opportunities for researchers to develop teaching expertise.

At the same time, the breadth of a university’s teaching portfolio should not be required to mirror its research specialisations. Universities need to provide coherent and sufficiently broad science education appropriate to their students, disciplines and graduate destinations.

The appropriate safeguard is therefore a strong expectation of research-led and -informed education, rather than recreating the existing requirement for breadth of research across the fields in which a university teaches.

Question 3.

How should regulatory settings be designed to enable greater research specialisation while maintaining confidence in the Australian University category?

Regulatory settings should preserve university autonomy in setting research priorities or specialisation, using principles and incentives.

Specialisation should be enabled rather than prescribed. Universities should retain responsibility for deciding whether, where and how they specialise, informed by their strengths, expertise, mission and institutional and regional context.

This flexibility may be particularly important for regional universities. Their role as a primary source of higher education and workforce development for local communities can require them to maintain relatively broad teaching portfolios. Under current requirements, universities must undertake benchmark-quality research in at least 50 per cent (or at least three, whichever is greater) of the broad Fields of Education in which they teach. This can require regional universities to spread research resources across a wider range of fields, limiting their capacity to concentrate on investment in areas of distinctive research strength. A more flexible framework should recognise these different institutional missions and circumstances.

ATEC should establish broad, principles-based expectations for research depth and quality while leaving detailed research choices to institutions. In particular, regulatory settings should avoid using four-digit For classifications in ways that effectively prescribe or steer institutional research priorities.

Where governments wish to strengthen areas of national importance, they should principally use incentives and enabling mechanisms—such as funding, infrastructure, industry partnerships and undergraduate and HDR pathways—rather than regulatory direction. This would allow institutional research profiles to evolve deliberately over time and avoid repeatedly pivoting in response to short-term policy, political or funding priorities.

Question 4.

What institutional, regulatory or system-level risks could arise during implementation, and how could these be mitigated through regulatory design, transition arrangements, guidance or monitoring?

System risks from excessive concentration or loss of capability should be mitigated through incentives to collaborate, share infrastructure and monitoring of distributed national and regional capability.

Greater specialisation may bring benefits from concentrating expertise and resources, but excessive concentration could weaken Australia's distributed scientific capability, including regional expertise, infrastructure and workforce pipelines.

Specialisation should therefore encourage collaboration rather than simply concentration. Hub-and-spoke approaches could allow major infrastructure or expertise to be concentrated while maintaining wider access through research networks, shared facilities and institutional partnerships.

ATEC should monitor the cumulative effects of institutional choices, loss of important research capability and workforce pipelines. The objective should be to ensure specialisation strengthens Australia's collective and distinctive science capability, societal and environmental priorities.

Question 5.

What transition arrangements, implementation timeframes and grandfathering provisions, if any, should apply to existing Australian Universities, Australian Universities with a specialised focus, prospective applicants and providers currently progressing under existing transitional arrangements?

Implementation should allow sufficient time and stability for universities to adapt without unnecessarily disrupting established research capability, careers or student pathways.

Research teams, expertise, infrastructure, collaborations and training pipelines take years to establish and cannot readily be redirected. Implementation should therefore provide realistic timeframes, clear guidance and adequate lead times before new requirements have regulatory consequences.

Transition arrangements should avoid encouraging universities to prematurely abandon established capability simply to comply with a new framework. A phased and predictable transition should minimise disruption to students and researchers while providing the stability needed for long-term institutional planning and sustainable research careers.

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