

ACDS Statement on ‘*Ambitious Australia*: Strategic Examination of R&D Final report’

The Australian Council of Deans of Science (ACDS) welcomes the release of *Ambitious Australia* and its broad ambition to strengthen Australia’s research, development and innovation system.

At a time of intensifying global competition, technological change and national capability challenges, the report is an important contribution to discussion about how Australia can build a more coordinated, capable and confident RD&I system. ACDS supports that ambition and welcomes the opportunity it creates to place science, research and innovation firmly at the centre of Australia’s prosperity, resilience and national wellbeing.

University science is a national asset

ACDS responds to the report from the perspective of university science. As the national voice for science education and research across Australian universities, we deeply understand the contribution that university science makes to Australia’s knowledge base, STEM workforce capability, innovation performance, and long-term national strength.

University science delivers value well beyond immediate commercial or applied outcomes. It contributes to knowledge creation, public benefit, scientific capability, workforce development and national preparedness. Teaching, discovery, translation and engagement are interconnected parts of one system. Universities create knowledge, train the next generation of scientists and researchers, and help build the scientific capability on which Australia depends.

Universities are the bedrock of foundational research and enabling sciences

ACDS particularly welcomes the report’s recognition of the importance of foundational research.

Foundational research is the bedrock on which later translation, application and commercialisation depend. Australian universities do much of the heavy lifting in sustaining this core national research capacity. They also maintain strength in the enabling sciences (including mathematical sciences, physics, chemistry, earth and environmental sciences) that support mission-driven research and long-term national capability. While allowing universities to specialise in certain areas may help develop excellence, we recognise the interdependency of scientific capability, the value of maintaining breadth in the enabling sciences, and the importance of preserving opportunities for interdisciplinary research, which is often essential to solving complex national challenges.

As reform is taken forward, it will be important to maintain an appropriate balance between discovery research and more targeted priorities. Mission-led approaches are valuable and we support them, but they are built on a strong and enduring base of foundational capability. Today’s mission-led projects are built on the foundational capabilities that preceded them, and continuing to build this capability ensures we can undertake mission-led projects in future.

Universities preserve Australia’s research pipeline

ACDS underlines the importance of undergraduate and postgraduate research degrees to the broader research and innovation ecosystem.

While the SERD review appropriately focused on research and development, a strong university teaching and learning system is essential to the future research pipeline. Universities secure, nurture and develop the people, skills and scientific capability on which the wider RD&I system depends.

Research training pathways should support both industry-connected opportunities and curiosity-driven, academically focused research. Initiatives such as industry PhDs and post-doctoral fellowships are one of several important steps in this university-enabled pipeline, strengthening collaboration and pathways to impact. To ensure the system's long-term viability, it is important that industry PhDs complement, not displace, other dimensions of research training needed to sustain long-term capability.

Reform should incentivise industry to partner with universities

ACDS strongly supports increased investment in the conditions that enable excellent research to flourish. This includes support for knowledge creation, the indirect costs of research, research training, and national research infrastructure.

We also welcome recommendations that strengthen industry engagement in research. Australia has a strong research supply side, with universities producing research of the highest international quality. A longstanding challenge, however, has been the demand side: too little business investment in R&D and too little engagement with existing research capability.

Reform must incentivise industry to invest in research, partner with universities, and collaborate in translating knowledge into impact and we welcome adoption of approaches that directly encourage partnership and investment, including R&D tax incentives to for partnered activities.

Careful implementation matters

ACDS sees merit in stronger attention to outcomes, impact and system performance, provided evaluation frameworks are designed carefully and do not create narrow metrics or reporting behaviours with unwanted and unintended consequences.

Similarly, efforts to simplify or consolidate funding architecture may be beneficial where they improve coherence and reduce fragmentation, but they should not reduce overall support for research or narrow access to funding. There is also an opportunity, in the design of future funding architecture, to better incentivise collaboration and coordination across universities, rewarding complementary strengths and shared effort in areas of national importance.

As implementation proceeds, it will be important to ensure that reform strengthens capability across the whole university science system, including the enabling sciences, and avoids unintended weakening of the broader research base.

ACDS strongly welcomes the commitment in the report (Recommendation 1b) to support diversity across all Australians, including First Nations RD&I activities and supporting women in RD&I.

Working constructively to get reform right

ACDS welcomes the ambition of *Ambitious Australia* and celebrates its recognition that science, research and innovation are central to Australia's future.

As government considers its response, ACDS stands ready to work constructively with ministers, agencies and partners across the system to help ensure that reform strengthens the foundations of science, supports the next generation of researchers and graduates, and builds a stronger, more resilient, and more ambitious Australia.