

# Submission to Australia's Draft National Science and Research Priorities Consultation

29 SEPTEMBER 2023





## ABOUT THE REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES NETWORK

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to Australia's Draft National Science and Research Priorities. RUN is a national collaborative group of seven regional Australian universities: Charles Sturt University, CQUniversity Australia, Federation University Australia, Southern Cross University, University of New England, University of Southern Queensland, and University of the Sunshine Coast.

This submission reflects the positions of RUN institutions, and in doing so, also aims to represent the views of those students and communities which RUN universities serve; the one-third of Australians who live outside of metropolitan centres in Regional, Rural and Remote locations.

## OVERVIEW

RUN welcomes the draft National Science and Research Priorities, noting the clear structure as well as the multidisciplinary and multisector approach, and the resulting capacity for widespread impact. The draft priority areas and their accompanying objectives and aims have the potential to help Australia meet our most pressing challenges. RUN is supportive of the recognition of First Nations knowledge systems, and the approach of embedding First Nations knowledge across the structure of the priorities rather than as a standalone area.

As we navigate complex economic, environmental and social challenges, RUN also highlight the need to encompass the expertise and insights of regional Australians. Regional communities will bear the most acute impacts of challenges such as climate change, and be most affected by their solutions, so must be actively engaged in their development.

Beyond this, regional communities offer critical expertise that can be leveraged in meeting challenges. Regional universities, for example, are drivers of collaboration and partnership with industry and communities and can offer a model of best practice.

Beyond ensuring that all Australians are represented in engagement, activities and problem solving, RUN emphasises that it is vital that metrics of success are integrated into the structure of the Science and Research Priorities. Defining metrics of success as well as regular reporting will allow for continuous assessment of the impact of the Priorities.

For further information please contact RUN on 0408 482 736 or [execdir@run.edu.au](mailto:execdir@run.edu.au).

# HIGH LEVEL PRIORITIES

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At the highest level, RUN supports the objectives and structure of the draft National Science and Research Priorities. The priority objectives, aims, and critical research framework is clearly defined, and demonstrates clear linkages between activities and priorities. RUN does not have any comment or issue regarding proposed priorities and objectives.

RUN can see that there is the potential for the priorities and objectives to have significant impact, especially in regional Australia. When considering the future changes that will occur nationally, specifically in response to pressing global issues, regional Australia and by association regional Australians will be the most likely impacted. As such, the National Science and Research Priorities need to ensure that the benefit of these priorities are felt across Australia, and not just be focussed on metropolitan locations. What is currently lacking in the Priorities is clear acknowledgment of the role regional Australia will play in solving the economic, environmental, and social challenges of the future.

RUN appreciates the connective overlap of the Priorities and believe that this approach will help break down a siloed approach to solving challenges and will encourage innovative multidisciplinary and multi-sector activity.

## ■ RUN RECOMMENDS

*Including a clear mention in the preamble to the National Science and Research Priorities and within the priorities about the inclusion of regional Australia in achieving the priorities in full.*





# MULTIDISCIPLINARY AND MULTISECTOR APPROACH

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1. *The draft priorities intend to identify specific challenges facing the country that will require multidisciplinary and multisector efforts to address. Do they achieve this objective? How can we improve them?*

RUN support the multidisciplinary and multisector approach to the Draft Priorities. However, this approach alone will not be enough to achieve the activity required to confront the economic, environmental, and social challenges awaiting Australia. Attention must be given to regional Australia in the search for answers to climate and urban population pressures, new energy generation, and food and water scarcity and security. It will be Australia's regional institutions, communities and industries that will be vital in driving change and in embracing growing environmental and social governance demands. It would be a significant failing of the National Science and Research Priorities to undertake a multidisciplinary and multisector approach but not encompass the full breadth of Australia's expertise by focussing on metropolitan only solutions and knowledge.

Beyond the need to ensure the participation of regional Australia, and the quantum of knowledge stored within regional communities, industries, and higher education providers, a multidisciplinary and multisector approach will necessitate the creation of new initiatives to increase the amount of activity across disciplines and sectors. A good idea will not be sufficient to drive sustained engagement and collaboration. Regional universities are exemplars of best practice when it comes to collaboration and partnership with industry and communities in solving challenges, and the experience of regional universities indicate that this collaboration and partnership requires nuanced and deep understanding of differing contexts, processes, communication styles, and ways of working. These relationships are unique, complex, and built upon communication, trust, and knowledge which takes time to develop and embed.

## **■ RUN RECOMMENDS:**

*That the National Science and Research Priorities contain proposals to increase investment for industry, government, and universities to increase collaboration.*

While RUN welcome the focus on a multidisciplinary and multisector approach, we do have concerns that the critical research paths currently appear not to be multidisciplinary and multisector, rather sticking to siloed traditional view of research.

## **■ RUN RECOMMENDS:**

*Not viewing research paths through a siloed view, rather ensuring they embrace a multidisciplinary and multisector approach.*

# EMBEDDING FIRST NATIONS KNOWLEDGE

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*2. Feedback stressed the need to work in partnership with First Nations people to embed First Nations knowledge and knowledge systems in the way we address national challenges. How might governments and the science and research sector best work with First Nations people to achieve this objective?*

RUN is strongly supportive of embedding First Nations knowledge systems and perspectives as integral aspects in addressing the National Science and Research Priorities. Better recognising and embracing the scientific value of First Nations knowledge in approaching these Priorities will lead to more effective research and solutions which work for more Australians.

The science and research ecosystem must be broadened and reimagined to encourage seeking out First Nations knowledge and perspectives, and create avenues to incorporate this at every level, from research design and methodology to data interpretation and policy recommendations. In undertaking genuine engagement with First Nations communities there also must be recognition that the experiences of different communities are distinct. For example, regional, rural, and remote First Nations communities offer different perspectives than metropolitan-based communities, and it is critical that this diversity is recognised in engagement.

In addition, there must be a defined effort to encourage and retain First Nations Australians within research careers. Increased representation in science and industry of people with both lived experience and research expertise will not only provide richer perspectives in problem solving but also encourage avenues for knowledge transfer.



## 'Storied landscapes' at UniSQ

The University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ) has adopted a 'storied landscapes' approach, which aims to overlay the Indigenous lens to conducting research and developing knowledge to better understand our past and future potential. This approach involves working in partnership with First Nations communities to protect traditional knowledge and historical stories to highlight the cultural and historical landscape behind every community.



## REFINEMENT OF RESEARCH PATHS

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*3. The draft priorities provide a range of critical research paths. How could we refine these research paths, for example, to address immediate challenges?*

At present the critical research paths feel too siloed to address the challenges, both short and long term that Australia is facing. The research paths should ensure that they have a true multidisciplinary and multisector approach to solving Australia's societal, economic, and environmental challenges. The critical research paths would also benefit from further refinement that ensures these research paths have clearly signposted opportunities for regional Australia to participate in the solving of these vital challenges. This will require challenges to be solved in the regions, utilising the expertise, and industry connections established by regional universities. This will require a shift from the traditional model of regional science and research providers having to collaborate with metropolitan providers in metropolitan environments. Finally, the challenges the National Science and Research Priorities are designed to solve are not uniquely Australian challenges, and it is unclear how international expertise and international collaboration will be encouraged and facilitated through the critical research paths.

## IMPLEMENTATION OF RESEARCH PRIORITIES

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*4. How would you implement the priorities in your organisation or setting? What mechanisms would support implementation?*

RUN in and of itself is not a body that directly conducts, or funds research. However, one of the aspects of our role as a peak body for regional universities is to ensure that there are opportunities for member led collaboration across the full span of university activities, including research, and international collaborations. RUN's Manna Institute, led by the University of New England, is an exemplary collaborative initiative that is targeting to improve mental health and wellbeing in rural, remote, and regional Australia. A team of university researchers, industry and community partners collaborate with service providers and agencies, First Nations peoples, and those with lived experience of mental illness, to meet the needs of priority populations across Australia. RUN would look to encourage member collaboration on funded projects and initiatives if they were available.

### **I RUN RECOMMENDS:**

*The establishment of a National Science and Research Priorities implementation fund for joint collaborative research undertakings aligned to the proposed priorities.*

# SUPPORTING THE NATIONAL SCIENCE STATEMENT

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5. *The National Science Statement will explain the role our science systems will play in delivering the priorities and maximising the benefits from science for Australia. How can the following best support the priorities:*

- a. *Science agencies*
- b. *Science infrastructure*
- c. *Australian government science programs*
- d. *Domestic and international science relationships*

While supporting the National Science Statement is important, action will matter most in combating the challenges the National Science and Research Priorities are trying to solve. Without a dedicated focus from agencies, programs, infrastructure owners and drivers of relationship on the Priorities there is considerable risk that the focus will be fragmented, and the Priorities will be deprioritised at the expense of individual organisational priority. There will need to be clear alignment between all players and the Priorities to best ensure they are achieved.

First, there will need to be concentrated linkages between the agencies, programs, relationships, and infrastructure to ensure they are focussing their initiatives on the Priorities and the Statement. This will require dedicated adequate funding allocations to enable the Priorities. Second, there will need to be ample encouragement, support, and incentives to spur on collaboration and focus on the Priorities.

## MEASURING PRIORITIES & IMPACT

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To best enable the National Science and Research Priorities to succeed, it is vital that metrics of success are built into the design of the research paths, the aims, and the objectives of the Priorities and how they will interact with Australia's science and research ecosystem. Without clearly thought-out metrics of success, it will be difficult to measure the impact of the Priorities both in the short and long term. For example, what was the impact of the previous Priorities on Australia's science and research ecosystem and how have the lessons from the previous Priorities been incorporated into the design of the proposed National Science and Research Priorities?

### **I RUN RECOMMENDS:**

*Setting out the metrics of success for the National Science and Research Priorities early to enable monitoring and frequent reporting on how the Priorities are impacting Australia's science and research ecosystem.*