



AUSTRALIA'S SCIENCE AND RESEARCH PRIORITIES



SUBMISSION TO:
DEPARTMENT OF INDUSTRY, SCIENCE
AND RESOURCES

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The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia

Submission on Australia's Science and Research Priorities

The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (the Academy) welcomes the opportunity to provide input on Australia's Science and Research Priorities.

The Academy is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that draws on the expertise of over 750 Fellows to provide practical, evidence-based advice to governments, businesses, and the community on important social policy issues.

Our submission makes four recommendations aimed at ensuring the science and research priorities are an effective and inclusive mechanism for Australian researchers and research expertise to help address grand challenges for Australia.

To discuss any matters raised in this submission, please contact Andrea Verdich, Policy Manager on 0438 218 352, or andrea.verdich@socialsciences.org.au.

1. Striking a balance between basic and non-applied research and research focused on priorities.

As a country comprising less than 1% of global population, and producing around 3% of global scholarship, it is vital that Australia strikes an appropriate balance in its public research investment between basic and non-applied research, and prioritised research focused on identified national priorities.

Basic or blue-sky research and non-applied research aimed solely or largely at advancing knowledge and understanding plays an essential role in Australia. It develops our national intellectual and human capital, it ensures Australia's international positioning as a research-active nation, it enriches our cultural and social world, and over the long term it can lead to breakthrough innovation and technology that provide significant health, social, environmental and economic benefits to all Australians.

While there is a need for investment in research that has a clear line of sight to identified national challenges and priorities, there must always be commensurate investment in research activity outside of these priority areas.

2. Outcome-focused priorities that encompass multiple skillsets and perspectives, with explicit inclusion of social sciences and other disciplines.

With respect to priority-driven research, the grand challenges facing Australia and other countries are inherently complex and interconnected. Solutions are likewise necessarily complex, requiring multiple expert and technical inputs through development, implementation, evaluation and refinement phases.

To effectively tackle such challenges, research investments must be structured so as to support collaborative, large-scale efforts that transcend traditional disciplinary and organisational boundaries, and foster and promote innovative thinking and collaboration.

The Academy specifically recommends that social science research and expertise—from economics and psychology, to history, public policy, sociology and law—be explicitly included in scope for each of the final national science and research priorities.

3. Commercial and non-commercial measures of success

Short-term commercial outcomes of research are important, and are likely to be a valuable product of national research priorities. However, there are many non-commercial and longer term benefits that have equal if not greater economic importance to Australia than commercialised research patents, industry knowledge transfer and start-up activity.

These include development of and input into broad range of public goods and services – for example, effective parenting interventions, health expenditure planning models or interventions aimed at lifting educational attainment in the most disadvantaged communities.

They include public health knowledge and expertise, which was starkly apparent during the response to and management of the COVID-19 pandemic.

They include expert knowledge of human, economic and social impacts of climate change that are vital to help minimise the disruption and take advantage of opportunities that will come from mitigation and adaptation activity.

And they include the expertise and insight to understand and learn from history, and to educate and inform our populace as we collectively move forward.

For these reasons, the Academy strongly recommends that an **impact and outcome framework for assessment of research activity within the national science and research priorities include appropriate measures that span both commercial and non-commercial domains.**

4. Conceptual framework for priorities

The Academy recommends that the national science and research priorities should be developed and situated within a strategic, conceptual framework that clearly outlines the principles on which priorities have been determined, and which connects to other Government priorities and initiatives including the National Reconstruction Fund, the National Health Priority Areas, the National Critical Technologies List, and others.

The Academy also recommends that a conceptual framework should prioritise a balanced portfolio of relatively narrow and specific priorities in which Australia has a particular national interest and comparative advantage, alongside broader societal ‘grand challenges’ where a prioritised national research effort is required to benefit from and leverage international efforts.

This approach will help to ensure clarity about the purpose of the National Science and Research Priorities, and the process through which they have been derived. It may also help to avoid any perception of special interests being favoured in the process.

The Academy does not wish to provide any specific recommendations about what the priorities should be. However, we do refer to our 2021 State of the Social Sciences report that outlined seven grand challenges for Australia to which the social sciences, in particular, can contribute.

5. Clarity in application and process

Finally, the Academy notes the **importance of providing clear and transparent advice to the research community about the ways in which the priorities will be applied**. This is particularly important if the priorities necessitate a significant reallocation of resources from some areas of research to others, allowing time for consultation with and education of the research workforce during a transition and implementation phase.