

Policy submission

Review of Research Requirements: ‘Australian University Category’ Consultation Paper

Submission to: the Australian Tertiary Education
Commission

September 2026

Submission to the Research Specialisation Consultation Paper

The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (the Academy) is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that brings together the multidisciplinary expertise of our nation's leading thinkers to provide practical, evidence-based advice on important social issues facing society.

As the pre-eminent organisation in Australia representing excellence across the social science disciplines, we welcome the opportunity to respond to the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) Review of Research Requirements: 'Australian University Category' Consultation Paper (the consultation paper).

Overview

The Academy welcomes the opportunity to consider proposed reforms to the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021* to encourage universities to build greater research depth, scale and capability in areas of comparative advantage.

The Academy supports a more differentiated university system and recognises the potential benefits of research specialisation. However, reforms must be evidence-based, context-sensitive and be designed with appropriate safeguards to strengthen rather than fragment Australia's research system.

Any reform must also preserve the integrity of the Australian University category, and include an explicit expectation that universities maintain a substantial, sustainable and research-informed academic environment in which research, scholarship and research training meaningfully support teaching, curriculum renewal, higher degree research supervision and academic leadership.

The proposals set out in the consultation paper are complex and create fertile ground for unintended consequences. Designing and implementing a more specialised model where universities can demonstrate research depth, scale and sustainability is a nuanced issue. Australian universities differ substantially and specialisation will present different opportunities and risks across institutions, disciplines and communities.

This submission responds to questions 2 and 4 of the consultation paper which relate to system-level risks and safeguards associated with progressing a more specialised research model. It highlights key findings from the Academy's [Social Sciences for Australia's Future](#) report, which provides a timely evidence base for the ATEC's consideration of research specialisation and the potential implications for social science research capability.

We emphasise that potential system-wide effects need to be considered within the broader context of policy objectives, including the *Australian Universities Accord Final Report* emphasis on equity, regional participation and place-based access to tertiary education and the *Ambitious Australia Report* call for purposeful research collaboration focused on outcomes and impact.

We make six recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1:** Ensure proposals to encourage specialisation are evidence-based and informed by further consultation and case-based testing before determining whether changes to the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021* should proceed, to minimise the risk of unintended consequences.
- **Recommendation 2:** Establish a national research capability monitoring framework, in collaboration with the ARC Research Insights Capability program, to identify critical and

emerging capability across institutions and disciplines, monitor the impacts of specialisation, and inform action to maintain Australia's research breadth, depth and future capability.

- **Recommendation 3:** Establish targeted funding, infrastructure and collaboration mechanisms to enable universities to develop complementary research strengths, support interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research, and maintain access to specialist expertise, research training and emerging capabilities across the national system.
- **Recommendation 4:** Assess and monitor the impacts of research specialisation on equitable student access, particularly in regional and outer-metropolitan areas, and establish incentives and mechanisms for inter-institutional collaboration, student mobility, credit recognition and transfer.
- **Recommendation 5:** Ensure that any differentiated university system maintains sufficient scholarly and research capability across institutions to support research-informed teaching, curriculum renewal and higher degree research supervision, while allowing universities to develop areas of research strength.

Recommendation 6: Establish a national research workforce evidence base at the Field of Research level and workforce strategy to assess and monitor the impacts of research specialisation on the research workforce and HDR pipeline, including academic career pathways, researcher mobility and emerging disciplinary capability

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

Response to the Consultation Paper

An evidence-based approach to research specialisation

While the current research breath requirement can place an unnecessary burden on smaller institutions, the premise that it materially prevents universities from building scale and depth in areas of demonstrated strength has not yet been sufficiently demonstrated. An evidence-based assessment should inform changes to research specialisation settings.

Such an assessment should establish how research capability is currently distributed across Australian universities and disciplines, where existing Threshold Standards create material constraints, what forms of specialisation institutions already pursue, and whether disciplinary concentration would in fact improve excellence, scale, productivity, integration and impact.

This approach would support better identification of existing and emerging areas of opportunity, comparative advantage and national need, while reducing the risk of unintended consequences from premature regulatory change. The assessment should form the basis of further consultation, and a more detailed consideration of the diversity of impacts across the sector.

Recommendation 1: Ensure proposals to encourage specialisation are evidence-based and informed by further consultation and case-based testing before determining whether changes to the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021* should proceed, to minimise the risk of unintended consequences.

Build system-level capability, collaboration and adaptability

National research capability depends not only on the depth of capability within individual institutions, but also on how complementary capabilities are distributed and connected across the system.

The consultation paper appropriately recognises that strong incentives currently exist for institutions to compete rather than cooperate and that this presents several system-level risks.

Safeguard and steward national capability

The risk that voluntary specialisation could produce gaps in national research capability is a key concern for the Academy. Institutional research capability cannot be rapidly rebuilt once lost.

Universities will understandably be drawn to fields that offer strong student demand, substantial research funding, international recruitment opportunities, industry partnerships or prospects for large-scale infrastructure investment. However, the cumulative effect of these incentives may be a progressive concentration of research capability in fields with the strongest immediate economic, funding or market incentives, potentially reducing the breadth and diversity of Australia's overall research capability.

The *Social Sciences for Australia's Future Report* highlights existing vulnerabilities in Australia's national capability, with some foundational disciplines facing increasing pressures. Research expenditure has declined particularly sharply in fields including Language, communication and culture (-27%), Education (-15%) and Law and legal studies (-14%). This means, for example, Australia's education research base is contracting as education and training become increasingly important to national productivity, while declining linguistic, cultural and regional expertise risks weakening the knowledge base needed for engagement with Asia at a time of growing economic, security and strategic interdependence.

Any new model for research specialisation should both enable and have oversight of national knowledge capability and establish a process for maintaining it.

Establish incentives and infrastructure to encourage interdisciplinary research

One key risk of increased specialisation is the potential for it to inadvertently undermine interdisciplinary research. Many of Australia's most important policy and societal challenges do not fit neatly within individual disciplines or a small number of Fields of Research. Addressing complex challenges requires the integration of different forms of knowledge and expertise, and it should not be assumed that collaboration will emerge organically through institutional partnerships.

A TEC should assess whether the proposed model could inadvertently reinforce disciplinary silos and make interdisciplinary collaboration more difficult, particularly where collaboration already faces significant institutional and funding barriers. Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary capability should be recognised as a component of research depth and institutional strength.

System-level incentives and infrastructure will be required if institutions are expected to maintain interdisciplinary capability across a more differentiated system. Programs such as the Collaborative Research Networks demonstrated the potential for smaller and regional universities to build research capability through structured collaboration with other institutions and external partners.

A TEC should consider whether similar mechanisms could support complementary institutional strengths, shared research training and interdisciplinary capability, particularly where individual institutions lack the scale to sustain specialist expertise independently.

Allow flexibility for emerging fields and innovative teaching and research programs

A research system should not only concentrate existing areas of strength. It should also be adaptive and provide opportunities for new fields, emerging capabilities and future areas of national importance to develop.

A TEC should consider how the proposed model will support research areas that are emerging or strategically important but do not yet have a long history of high research output. This is particularly important as research priorities and methods change in response to developments such as artificial intelligence, new forms of knowledge creation and changing national and global challenges.

The model should also recognise opportunities for innovation in teaching and research methods, including through genuine engagement with First Nations Knowledge Systems. Allowing different knowledge systems, methodologies and approaches to knowledge creation to emerge may require different measures of quality and impact from those applied to established disciplines, and should not be constrained by requirements designed primarily around existing institutional strengths.

Recommendation 2: Establish a national research capability monitoring framework, in collaboration with the ARC Research Insights Capability program, to identify critical and emerging capability across institutions and disciplines, monitor the impacts of specialisation, and inform action to maintain Australia's research breadth, depth and future capability.

Recommendation 3: Establish targeted funding, infrastructure and collaboration mechanisms to enable universities to develop complementary research strengths, support interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research, and maintain access to specialist expertise, research training and emerging capabilities across the national system.

Safeguard student choice, mobility and equitable access

ATEC should assess the consequences of specialisation for students whose disciplines are not available at their local university, particularly students in regional and outer-metropolitan areas.

Differentiation can create risks for student mobility, disciplinary choice and equitable access to research opportunities, particularly where research capability becomes concentrated in a small number of institutions. This could particularly disadvantage students who are unable to relocate because of family and caring responsibilities, financial circumstances, employment or other constraints.

Any differentiated system should include incentives and mechanisms that make it easy for students to move between institutions and access subjects and research opportunities across institutional boundaries. Simplified credit recognition and transfer arrangements should be considered as part of the reform, rather than treated as a separate issue. Joint degrees, pathway programs, shared teaching and other collaborative models could help distribute educational opportunities more equitably across metropolitan, outer-metropolitan and regional areas, while enabling institutions to maintain specialist expertise.

Recommendation 4: Assess and monitor the impacts of research specialisation on equitable student access, particularly in regional and outer-metropolitan areas, and establish incentives and mechanisms for inter-institutional collaboration, student mobility, credit recognition and transfer.

Keep research connected to teaching and researcher training

Research-teaching nexus

The consultation paper rightly identifies the relationship between research and teaching as a significant issue. Ensuring teaching is informed by current research and evidence does not require universities to maintain identical research profiles, but requires that academic roles involve ongoing engagement with research and scholarship and are not limited to the delivery of teaching.

Institutional autonomy should allow universities to concentrate research investment in areas of strength while maintaining sufficient scholarly capability across their broader teaching profile to support research-informed curricula, curriculum renewal and higher degree research supervision. **This is particularly important for regional universities and social science professions such as teaching, law and social work, where professional education is closely connected to local communities, institutions, policy settings and workforce development.**

Recommendation 5: Ensure that any differentiated university system maintains sufficient scholarly and research capability across institutions to support research-informed teaching, curriculum renewal and higher degree research supervision, while allowing universities to develop areas of research strength.

Research workforce

Research specialisation should be considered alongside Australia's need to maintain and strengthen the research workforce and higher degree research (HDR) pipeline. Institutional decisions about research strengths will affect the availability of research training, supervision and career pathways across disciplines.

ATEC should therefore assess how the proposed model will affect HDR enrolments and completions, early career researchers, academic mobility and progression, and the development of future disciplinary capability. For example, early career academics who begin their careers at less research-intensive institutions may have fewer opportunities to build research profiles, access research funding or maintain active research networks, potentially affecting their ability to compete for research-intensive positions elsewhere in the system.

These considerations are particularly important for disciplines already experiencing pressure in their research and HDR pipelines. The *Social Sciences for Australia's Future* report confirmed an overall decline in HDR enrolments in the social sciences since 2015, largely driven by a 14 per cent decline in domestic enrolments. It highlights broad early career research concerns about job insecurity. New models of HDR programs need to be considered for social science PhDs, with better industry and community connected programs that enhance opportunities for future employment outside academia.

A transition to specialisation reinforces the need for a national research workforce strategy, as called for in the *Social Sciences for Australia's Future* report. This should be underpinned by longitudinal data collection either through the ARC Research Insights Capability program or the ATEC *State of the Sector* reports at the Field of Research (FoR) level. This will enable governments and the sector to monitor workforce capacity, identify emerging capability gaps, and understand career pathways and researcher mobility. This baseline should be established ahead of any research specialisation reform process.

Recommendation 6: Establish a national research workforce evidence base at the Field of Research level and workforce strategy to assess and monitor the impacts of research specialisation on the research workforce and HDR pipeline, including academic career pathways, researcher mobility and emerging disciplinary capability.