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CRICOS Provider Number 00121B

27<sup>th</sup> June 2018

Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training

c/o

PO Box 6021

Parliament House

CANBERRA

Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Mr Laming and members of the Standing Committee,

**RE: SUBMISSION TO THE STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND TRAINING:  
INQUIRY INTO FUNDING AUSTRALIA'S RESEARCH**

The University of South Australia (UniSA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the House of Representatives' Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training on the Inquiry into Funding Australia's Research.

**About UniSA**

The University of South Australia is an enterprising and dynamic, outward-looking institution established in 1991, but built on more than 150 years of teaching, learning and research excellence of our antecedent institutions. We are South Australia's largest university, and continue to enjoy a strong upward trajectory across a number of key indicators and global rankings - we are ranked amongst the top 3% of universities worldwide and in the top 25 international universities under 50 years of age.

Known for our strong and engaged research and our experientially-based teaching and learning, all activities are conducted in close collaboration with business, industry, government and the professions. The University of South Australia prides itself on educating individuals to the highest standards, investing in the very best teachers and researchers, as well as state-of-the-art physical and virtual infrastructure; creating and disseminating knowledge so that our communities and societies are better able to understand and address the crucial challenges of our time.

We offer a wide range of educational choices across our four academic divisions – business; education, arts and social sciences; health sciences; and information technology, engineering and the environment. We are also home to a range of dedicated research institutes and centres, as well as co-operative research centres that - in collaboration with industry, government, university and research partners - are focused on helping to deliver practical and enduring solutions to real-world problems.

## Australia's Research Environment

Whilst acknowledging that the primary focus of this inquiry is on ways to improve the administration of Australia's research funding; it would be remiss to not emphasise the national importance of Australia having strong research and development (R&D) activities. These points have been raised in previous inquiries and in submissions to this Inquiry from Universities Australia (UA) and the Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN) – both of which UniSA endorses.

In particular we appreciate the opportunity to remind the Committee that *R&D is a significant contributor to the Australian economy*; for example, advanced research in just the sciences underpins more than a quarter of GDP. This research provides the basis of innovation; driving the success and future development of Australian businesses.

*Australia is known as a global leader in research quality and productivity.* As demonstrated by the results of previous rounds of Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), Australia's research is of high quality by world standards. Australian researchers are highly productive and contribute disproportionately to the stock of knowledge

*Higher education is the bedrock of Australia's research system.* Research is at the core of what universities do – create and transmit knowledge, train researchers who are valued by both academia and industry, use research to educate students, translate discovery to application. Higher Education R&D activity has held steady in recent years; picking up the slack from declines in R&D spend within government and Businesses. However, we should note that Australian government investment in higher education research is increasingly eclipsed by competitor economies. To maintain levels of activity, Australian universities increasingly fund research from other sources, including industry, philanthropy and general university funds.

Alongside the rest of the sector, in recent years UniSA has adapted to significant changes in the research funding system, including:

- The structural review of the NHMRC's grant schemes;
- The implementation of the Australian Council of Learned Academies Review of Research Training;
- The Watt review of research funding; and
- The introduction of the National Science and Innovation agenda.

The outputs of these changes have, importantly, emphasised some *key principles for investing in Australian research*. These can be summarised as ensuring mechanisms are in place to safeguard the value and merit inherent in Australia's research – key aspects include:

- Long-term prosperity requires long-term planning.
- Investigator-driven research is the foundation of knowledge discovery.
- Funding frameworks must promote integrity and excellence.
- Flexible funding mechanisms are important.
- Accountability, transparency and efficiency are vital and must be supported.
- Australia's place in the global research enterprise must be recognised and enhanced.

## Recommendations

It is within this context that UniSA makes the following observations and recommendations for ways to streamline and simplify application and assessment processes:

### A. Fragmentation of research funding opportunities

The national research funding system is fragmented across Commonwealth, State and Territory, Local Government, industry and community schemes. This fragmentation is inefficient and leads to confusion on the part of researchers and industry and requires deep expertise to negotiate the funding landscape.

**Recommendation 1:** That the Commonwealth investigates the opportunity to better articulate the funding landscape through the consolidation of the purposes and public benefit of research funding schemes, utilising technological platforms to support visibility and transparency.

**Recommendation 2:** That the Commonwealth consider the potential for reducing the number of small, ad hoc schemes that may reduce duplication of research funding and administration.

### B. Administrative burden

UniSA, like the majority of the sector, operates end-to-end processes for the administration of research funding applications, from the provision of grant development assistance to researchers and industry partners through to contracting, post-award milestone management and reporting to funders and the Commonwealth. Many research organisations, including UniSA, undertake internal EOI or “pitch” processes in order to maximise positive outcomes, while simultaneously attending to the compliance requirements of individual schemes, which have increased in scale and complexity. In addition, over recent years there have been falling success rates across a range of research funding schemes.

**Recommendation 3:** That the Commonwealth considers a two-stage “gate process,” comprising an EOI (Gate 1) and full proposal and budget (Gate 2) to minimise wasted effort and to optimise alignment with the public benefit. Only those proposals that pass through peer review at Gate 1 would be required to develop a full proposal and budget. UniSA points to staged processes for the Cooperative Research Centres and internationally to European Commission and other national funding bodies as examples of best practice.

**Recommendation 4:** That contracting arrangements for multi-partner schemes, such as ARC Linkage Projects and the Industrial Transformation Research Program are investigated with a view to streamlining and leveraging the use of agreed templates where possible – including consideration of allowing institutions more autonomy in how to structure agreements appropriately (in line with Funding Agreements).

**Recommendation 5:** That consideration is given to greater standardisation of administrative processes across different funding schemes. In particular, attention could be given to opportunities for common grant submission and post-award management processes – including working with the university sector to identify activities and responsibilities that could be devolved to the funding recipient.

**Recommendation 6:** That standardised definitions of researcher track record are used across major schemes (e.g. ARC, CRC and Innovation Connections). Researchers should be enabled to maintain a single central profile for research outputs (and other elements of a CV) that can be used when submitting all applications, to reduce the effort required to re-format similar documents. Ideally, this profile would link to ORCID for automatic updating of publication records. Integration with Expert Connect would allow this

information to be searchable by anyone – supporting collaboration across the sector and between industry and academia

**Recommendation 7:** That grant submission and peer review timelines could be reduced by limiting the length of grant applications (project proposal) to be commensurate with the level of funding being sought. Applications should be limited to a research project proposal, a budget and the CV's of the investigators (updated annually on a central repository (see Recommendation 6), plus any ROPE justification as necessary). Expert peer reviewers (not panel members) should only be asked to provide feedback on the research proposal – reducing turnaround time.

### **C. Systems inefficiencies**

Commonwealth funding bodies each retain bespoke application and management systems which are not integrated. This leads to the double handling of information and opportunities for increased processing errors.

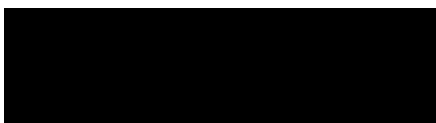
**Recommendation 8:** that the Commonwealth investigates the integration of research application and management systems, in order to increase efficiency and transparency and reduce the administrative burden within the research funding landscape.

### **Conclusion**

In addition to the specific points above; I feel that it is important to emphasise the university's belief that it is absolutely essential that a scheme continues that not only provides direct funding for the research project and personnel but also continues to provide infrastructure funding to the research organisations to make that research project possible and to make an institution's research endeavours in their entirety viable.

The observations and recommendations made by UniSA reflect the experiences of leading researchers and research managers, who operate across a wide range of aspects of the research funding system on a daily basis. UniSA appreciates this opportunity to contribute to this important Inquiry that aims to inform a more coherent research funding system – we stand ready to engage with government agencies in any follow on activity to develop optimised processes. I look forward to hearing the outcomes of this Inquiry.

Yours sincerely

A large black rectangular redaction box covering the signature of Professor Tanya Monro.

**Professor Tanya Monro**  
Deputy Vice Chancellor: Research and Innovation  
University of South Australia