Dear Dr Perkins,

Draft Guidelines, Collaborative Research Networks (CRN) program

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft guidelines for the Collaborative Research Networks (CRN) program.

It is clear from the content of the draft guidelines that the Department has listened to the feedback provided by this University and others during the consultation process. In particular we welcome the following features in the draft CRN guidelines:

• The adoption of a single application round, and a three step EoI-based process, for the initial funding round. This is a very sensible way forward. (5. Application Process)
• The changes to the eligible criteria that will allow some regional institutions with income above the $2.5m threshold to apply for funding. This will allow the program to more effectively meet its objective of facilitating collaboration between metropolitan and regional institutions. (3. Eligibility)
• The decision to allow eligible universities to submit applications that involve multiple partner institutions. (3.6 Eligibility)
• The inclusion of provisions that will allow CRN funding to flow to partner institutions under certain circumstances. (4.8 Funding and Use)

We suggest that the following would further strengthen the scheme:

• Include an explanation of the “exceptional circumstances” under which the eligibility criteria might be amended or waived to allow additional universities to apply for CRN funding as lead institutions. (3.4 Eligibility)
• Provide institutions that make it to Step 3 of the application process with small ‘seed grants’ to cover the reasonable costs incurred by participants in preparing full applications. Such a proposal is currently under consideration by the Department for the CRC program. Given that many of the challenges institutions will face in preparing CRN applications will be similar, we see great value in such seed funding
being provided. (5.10 Application Process)

• Include details of what partner institutions will need to do in order to demonstrate that their reasonable costs incurred as a result of the project “add value to the collaboration” and can therefore be supported by a CRN facilitation payment. It will be important to ensure that this issue is addressed in the application as well as the funding phase of projects. (4.8 Funding and Use)

• Remove the requirement in the selection criteria for applications to be judged by the level of cash and in-kind contributions that the participants will commit to support the collaboration. As the Government has acknowledged through the introduction of the Sustainable Research Excellence Initiative, universities are already cross-subsidising their research activities from other sources to a very large extent. In the current financial environment, any schemes that require cash and in-kind contributions from institutions serve only to place increasing pressure on them to divert already scarce resources from their core teaching and research activities. The inclusion of such a requirement is therefore likely to deter some institutions from supporting the scheme. The underlying principle should be that the CRN program fully funds all activities that it supports. (5.2 dot 4 Application Process & 6.1 dot 5 Selection Process)

• For process transparency, implement an external process to review and assess applications. This task should be undertaken by recognised experts with no conflict of interest (actual or perceived) to supplement the assessment by the Department and to inform and support the separate process proposed for priority areas identified by the Minister. The Independent Board approach used for the EIF process would appear to provide a suitable model. (9.3.2 Roles and Responsibilities)

We note the proposal to allow CRN funding to be provided “from time to time” to address priorities identified by the Minister. We suggest that this proposal might benefit from consideration of the following:

• Providing a process by which “priorities identified by the Minister” will be selected. (4.9 Funding and Use)

• Declaring how the Minister will call for proposals that align with his or her identified priorities.

• Delineating the maximum amount of available CRN funding that may be diverted in any given year, for allocation by the Minister outside the standard process. (4.9 Funding and Use)

• Provide guidelines for how applications for the Minister’s stream will be assessed and selected. Ideally, the selection criteria should be the same as for the standard stream, with an independent group of relevant experts established to conduct the assessment and advise the Minister on which projects should be supported.

We are currently exploring a number of possible partnerships that could form the basis for CRN applications. Once these ideas are more fully formed, we look forward to discussing them with the Department in advance of the compact negotiations.

Yours sincerely,

(Signature withheld for electronic publication)

Professor Jill Trewhella
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