Submission

2016 National Research Infrastructure Roadmap Capability Issues Paper

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Question 1: Are there other capability areas that should be considered?

Australia's Cooperative Research Centres (CRCs) are significant users of major infrastructure such as the CSIRO Investigator, the Australian Synchrotron, and the Opal Research Reactor. By and large, feedback from CRCs is that access to these major infrastructure facilities works very well.

CRCs are also significant users of NCRIS Facilities but there is clearly room for greater use of the facilities by CRCs. The small operating budgets for CRCs have sometimes meant that they are unable to access desirable facilities.

CRCs experience gaps at the more "mundane" level of research infrastructure. For example, accessing animal research facilities is becoming more difficult with closure of many State Government as well as some CSIRO and university facilities. There is a case for the collaborative nature of the NCRIS program to be applied at a lower level to encourage greater sharing and access of more "everyday" equipment and infrastructure to ensure very widespread access to not only public researchers but to industry-based researchers as well.

Question 2: Are these governance characteristics appropriate and are there other factors that should be considered for optimal governance for national research infrastructure.

The CRC Association believes the NCRIS process was far superior to the Major National Research Facilities that preceded it. However, we do believe there is room for strengthening governance arrangements in several ways:

A permanent Advisory Committee. We are unaware of any oversight committee for the NCRIS program and suggest that one should exist on a similar basis to the CRC Advisory Committee that reports through the Innovation and Science Australia Board. The NCRIS Advisory Committee would review annual reports and ensure appropriate independent reviews are conducted of each NCRIS. Because of the fast moving and competitive nature of research, we believe the performance and relevance of each NCRIS Facility should be regularly tested. For example, the cost and ease of both genomics and cloud computing have changed at a far greater rate than could possibly have been predicted at the time of set up of most of the NCRIS Facilities.

Greater scrutiny of original business plans. We believe the NCRIS process was too reliant on the views and experience of the Facilitator appointed to develop the Business Plan for each NCRIS Facility. Because Commonwealth awarding of an NCRIS Facility in an area can effectively create a monopoly in that area for a number of years, we believe greater independent scrutiny of the Business Plans would improve the process.

More outward looking Boards. It is our experience that more of the NCRIS Facilities could have more outward-looking Boards to encourage management to seek new users and increase participation by existing users. As a general comment, the experience of CRCs is that some NCRIS Facilities are quite naïve of the needs of end users in their particular sector. The use of an NCRIS Facility is a means to end, not an end in itself. We therefore suggest more independent end users be part of the governing structure.

Question 3: Should national research infrastructure investment assist with access to international facilities?

Yes, most definitely. We believe that a capacity to buy into International Research Infrastructure (with sufficient operational funds to fully participate) should be a feature of Australian National Research Infrastructure capability.

Question 4: What are the conditions or scenarios where access to international facilities should be prioritised over developing national facilities?

If high quality, high impact research can be achieved in an international facility cheaper than in an Australian facility, we should take that opportunity. Prestige and impact come from the results of the research, not from owning infrastructure. The obvious exception would be where national security might be put at stake.

Question 8: What principles should be applied for access to national research infrastructure, and are there situations when these should not apply?

In general Research Infrastructure should integrated with existing institutions, including private companies where appropriate, and programs. We have seen that the Synchrotron was set up on an unsustainable basis by Victoria and its transfer to Australian Government ownership has caused considerable pain. The CRC Association believes appropriate mechanisms can be put in place for CRCs and similar organisations to access infrastructure when it is held and managed by institutions – we do not see it as critical for research infrastructure to be “free standing” in order for it to be widely available.

For the Australian Government to fund research infrastructure, we suggest there has to be a significant and demonstrated demand that cannot be fulfilled by other means. The demand should be highly scrutinized and be characterized by the production of high impact, high quality research.

The CRC Association has not addressed the specific infrastructure questions, but we expect individual CRCs will do so, or direct comments via one or more of their participants.