

Expanding University Engagement for Sustainable Development

Submission to the Expert Panel on Australia's International Development Policy

Background to the Submission

This submission has been prepared by the [Institute for Global Development \(IGD\)](#) on behalf of the University of New South Wales. It is based on consultation across several Faculty and development-related Institutes at UNSW. The IGD spearheads an ambitious UNSW strategy to tackle significant local and global challenges. It works in partnership with local and global institutions to ensure that high quality research and education activities translate into impacts that promote social justice and sustainable development. Development related Institutes at or affiliated with UNSW include the [Kirby Institute](#), the [George Institute for Global Health](#), the [Global Water Institute](#), [Australian Human Rights Institute](#), while the University also supports a number of Centres and initiatives addressing contemporary global challenges.

Summary of recommendations

- 1. The IDP explicitly references the university sector as a key stakeholder group, alongside NGO, the private sector and multilateral organisations, recognising universities as an important contributor to Australia's global development efforts, innovation and thought leadership.**
- 2. The IDP includes reference to a Research for Development Strategy to produce evidence which underpins Australia's aid policy and programs.**
- 3. Appropriate mechanisms are designed to fund and deliver on the research strategy and to support the use of research findings.**
- 4. A dedicated forum and other mechanisms are established for regular engagement between DFAT and the university and wider research sector.**
- 5. Reference to education in the IDP includes a focus on tertiary sector development and university-university partnerships.**

Our submission is based on the premise that there is considerable opportunity for DFAT to engage the Australian university sector more strategically as a key partner in informing and implementing its development policy. As knowledge producers and educators, universities have a key role and shared responsibility for achieving sustainable and inclusive development. They collaborate with universities and other institutions in development partner countries, co-producing research, training educators and working to ensure that development policy and practice is grounded in the best available and relevant evidence, including incorporating local and Indigenous knowledge. They also contribute to the promotion of Australia's interests and reputation abroad.

In the context of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, there has been a step up in the commitment of universities to seeking solutions and more actively sharing knowledge that contributes to global development goals. There is also greater emphasis on understanding and measuring the impact of research, and universities are increasingly exploring new forms of institutional partnership, student engagement and research collaboration in order to strengthen their impact.

In this context, the current Expert Panel Consultation provides an opportunity to articulate how the contributions of universities to Australia's development activities can be strengthened and more strategically facilitated under a new International Development Policy.

Greater Recognition of Universities as Strategic Development Partners

Recommendation 1: The IDP explicitly references the university sector as a key stakeholder group, recognising universities as an important contributor to Australia's global development efforts, innovation and thought leadership.

UNSW and the wider Australian university sector already make a significant contribution to Australia's global development efforts through research, education, policy advice and capacity building partnerships. Many Australian universities have developed enduring and mutually beneficial relationships globally, including within Australia's priority regions for development assistance. Australian universities have been long-term partners in advancing international development, with a long tradition as active partners of Australia's international development program, delivering contract research and evaluations, and building capacity through excellence in education.

Australian universities produce research and innovations which address critical societal challenges, shape public policies and improve lives. Their research plays a crucial role in shaping development thinking, guiding policy and building the frameworks for innovation in approaches or models of international development. Australian universities also play an important role in building the capacity of future development practitioners and leaders; for example, through teaching international students; offering short courses for international delegates, facilitating Australian student experiences abroad, and contributing to curriculum development and course teaching in universities in development partner countries.

"Science, research and academic communities test new ideas that can accelerate development transformation. Advances in science, research and technology in every country will need to be leveraged to enable evidence-based implementation of the SDGs."
- UN Sustainable Development Group¹

Despite the important contribution of research and education activities for achieving global development outcomes, which has been acknowledged in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, the university sector is not visibly acknowledged as a key stakeholder or partner in key documents. Australia's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper highlights 'NGOs, the private sector and multilateral organisations' as key partners in helping to 'magnify the impact of Australia's development assistance program' while the words 'research' or 'universities' do not appear within the current International Development Policy.

Explicit recognition in the new policy of universities and research institutions as key partners and stakeholders that contribute to Australia's global development activities, innovation and thought leadership would be an important step in facilitating the sustained communication and engagement required to maximise the contribution of Australia's universities to the aid program.

Develop a Comprehensive 'Research for Development' Strategy and related Mechanisms for Funding

Recommendation 2: A comprehensive Research for Development Strategy is developed as an essential underpinning for a new International Development Policy.

Given that the former 'AusAID Research Strategy 2012-16' is now outdated, this Expert Panel review provides an opportunity to consider a comprehensive Research for Development Strategy

¹ <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-01/UNSDG-SDG-primer-companion-piece.pdf>



and Engagement Framework to complement the Australian IDP. Such a strategy should be developed in collaboration with representatives of university or other research institutions, both from Australia and development partner countries.

One element of the former AusAID Research Strategy, which is reflected in DFAT's current approach to research funding, is the highly decentralised commissioning of research through country programs. While user-led and implementation-focused research has an important place, we propose a broader conceptualisation of research for development within Australia's Overseas Development Assistance program. Such an approach should encompass different types of research as well as research at different *levels* of the development program. It should enable comparative or cross-context and longer-term research agendas and encompass research that takes place at disciplinary intersections to address significant global development challenges. The former ADRAS was the last mechanism that supported research and its discontinuation has left a void in the research funding landscape.

A research for development strategy would enable the identification of key themes, including knowledge gaps, neglected issues or emerging challenges linked to the priorities of Australia's aid program and the needs of development partner countries. While priority themes would need to be identified in a consultative process, the UNSW consultation for this paper has identified several strategic areas or importance. These include issues of long-standing concern as well as new and emerging issues, many of which are already reflected in the SDGs: Gender equity and inclusion in programming; food and income security; the food, water and energy nexus; climate change and mitigation; development practice and aid delivery; rapid urbanisation; mining and development; humanitarian engineering; water and management of oceans; waste and recycling; peace and conflict prevention, and governance and human rights.

An expanded research for development portfolio would bring a wide range of benefits for the Australian development program and international relations/foreign policy. It can facilitate a wider and deeper evidence base to inform current and future development policy and programs, contribute to major evaluations and reviews, and foster a stronger and more diverse Australian development research community, which would position Australia as a thought leader in a wider variety of areas. Investing in research (and relatedly tertiary education sector capacity building) provides an effective means for the Australian community to develop and retain critical networks within and *beyond* the Asia Pacific (including countries and regions not currently prioritised for ODA), ensures Australia is informed about emerging trends and development issues affecting other regions, including those that may impact Australia's future.

Recommendation 3: Appropriate mechanisms are designed to fund and deliver on the research strategy and to support the use of research findings.

Australian government funding is critical in supporting Australian university-led research and global engagement for development outcomes, including related education and training activities through programs such as the Australia Awards short course delivery programs, the Endeavor and New Colombo Plan scholarship programs. At present,

“Long-term financing of research in the areas of foreign, security and development policy is a prerequisite for the production of relevant, high-quality new knowledge... The development of strong specialist institutions takes time, and predictable financing is a prerequisite for their maintenance. Similarly, long-term programmes are needed to achieve the aim of improving capacity among research institutions in developing countries.”
- NORAD²

research funding is made available through several different departments and budgets, including as part of overseas development assistance, and through a range of funding mechanisms. These include competitive research council funding (such as the ARC and NHMRC); specialist research or institutional support in high priority areas (such as ACIAR and the Centre for Indo-Pacific Health Security) and commercial tender-based contracting of research, evaluation and advisory services linked to country level programs.



Substantive research, as well as effective overseas partner university research and institutional capacity building and tertiary sector development, requires both time and predictability of resources. The discontinuation of the Australian Development Research Awards Scheme (ADRAS) has left a crucial gap that needs filling. There is no obvious mechanism to support research that cuts across a wide diversity of development-related themes and engages a variety of academic disciplines, institutions and geographies.

A new strategy would better support policy-oriented and practice-relevant research focussing on issues of concern to the Aid program while also encouraging stronger links with policy makers, practitioners and other end-users to maximise potential impact. It would provide a mechanism for reducing the fragmentation among different funding pathways, and potentially encourage greater collective efforts among researchers from different disciplines and institutions to address common problems.

Committed funding linked to a comprehensive research strategy would facilitate longer term planning and investments in institutional partnerships, increasing the long-term developmental impacts of the activities. Models of funding arrangements that link development agency priorities with research councils or which focus on building networks and partnerships to ensure joint knowledge production and its application are found in several OECD countries. Examples include the ESRC-DFID [‘Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research’](#), the [Swedish Research Links ‘Network Grants’](#) and USAID’s [‘The Higher Education Solutions Network’](#) and [‘Partnerships for Enhanced Engagement in Research’](#) programs, all of which, importantly, incorporate an explicit north-south research partnership approach.

“A university system is an important part of the development of a country. It allows a country to research into topics of relevance to its population, provides competent personnel to the public and private sector, helps the government base its policies on evidence, provides higher education with teachers, and helps generate innovations that can help the economy. In high income countries, private and public research support is self-evident. By supporting the university system, we put the low income countries in the driver’s seat”.
- SIDA³

4. Establish Clear Communications Channels with the Research Community

Recommendation 4: A dedicated forum and mechanisms for regular engagement between DFAT and the university and wider research sector are established.

Universities and research institutes are the main knowledge producers and important actors on global development issues. They bring considerable expertise to support Australian development initiatives to remain innovative, informed and responsive in a rapidly changing world, a potential which is not being fully utilised. The mutual benefits of closer engagement between the research and academic development community and DFAT would include evidence-based advice and guidance in identifying and shaping program and policy priorities and their implementation on the one hand, and ensuring that research is responsive to the concerns and priorities of the aid program and development partner countries.

To facilitate closer university-DFAT engagement, we propose the establishment of clear mechanisms of engagement such as an identified DFAT university focal point, and/or a DFAT-University engagement office, and regular forums or opportunities to promote two-way sharing of expertise and experience. Such forums could provide space for reflective conversations about the aid program and amplify the contribution of research and academic discourse to aid programming. Such a communication channel does not need to be overly formal or onerous; it could for example involve an annual DFAT-university sector meeting adjacent to annual Australian Aid Conference, the biannual Research for Development Impact (RDI) Conference, or the more recently established Development Studies Association of Australia conferences. The IGD and researchers from the UNSW community would be enthusiastic to participate in such a forum.

³ <https://www.sida.se/English/partners/Resources-for-specific-partner-groups/research-cooperation/about-sida-research-cooperation/>



Increase Support for Tertiary Education Institutions in Development Partner Countries

Recommendation 5: The Australian aid program includes a stronger focus on tertiary sector development and university-university partnerships.

Australia's future IDP and related research strategy should include the goal of strengthening partner country tertiary education and research institutions.

The importance of a strong university sector in achieving a range of development outcomes is widely

“Higher education institutions train the teachers, doctors, nurses, engineers and other professionals that contribute knowledge and advanced skills - which drives economic growth and productivity - as well as basic competencies and research.”

-USAID, “The What, Why and How of USAID Higher Education Programs” (06/09/2018)⁴

recognised. The Sustainable Development Goals, for example, include a target for more equitable access to tertiary education (Target 4.3), while strengthening the sector will be a precondition for maintaining progress on many of the SDGs. The sector is critical for development of a skilled workforce which in turn provides essential services, from health care and basic education to infrastructure development, entrepreneurship and innovation. Strong local research capacity facilitates

locally driven research agendas, which in turn support effective local development strategies and outcomes.

In most developing countries, tertiary education institutions suffer severe deficits in human and institutional resources and capacities. They lack qualified educators, researchers, facilities and infrastructure. UNSW, like many Australian universities, invests in long-term research and education partnerships aiming to share knowledge and expertise with partners in developing countries, but resources for investing over the long term are scarce. Development assistance has a role in facilitating such partnerships, including through incentivising joint research and promoting exchange activities at institutional as well as individual levels.

As noted earlier, DFAT already invests in initiatives such as the Australia Indonesia Centre, PAIR, and Partnership with the University of the South Pacific. There is an opportunity to further leverage the expertise of Australia's university sector, supporting such institutional capacity strengthening partnerships or collaborations in ways which directly contribute to the goals and priorities of Australia's development program.

Concluding comments

Acknowledging the importance of research and capacity building to an effective aid program and the need to resource it adequately, the aid program as a whole needs to be better resourced to be effective and meet Australia's international commitments. We highlight the recommendation included in the 2019 parliamentary committee inquiry on aid effectiveness of a commitment to an interim allocation 0.5% GNI, increasing to 0.7% within 10 years.

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this consultation and would be pleased to engage further with the Expert Panel and with DFAT as this process continues.

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⁴ <https://www.edu-links.org/learning/what-why-and-how-usaid-higher-education-programs>

