UNIVERSITIES AUSTRALIA

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Universities Australia's response to the 2026 National Research Infrastructure Roadmap Exposure Draft Consultation

Universities Australia (UA) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the 2026 National Research Infrastructure Roadmap Exposure Draft. UA is pleased to see that the Exposure Draft reflects its previous advocacy around Indigenous knowledge and data, workforce, humanities and social sciences infrastructure, translation and lifecycle funding. However, the absence of a dedicated funding pathway for university-owned institutional infrastructure remains a significant gap.

While the Exposure Draft provides a strong foundation, further work is needed to ensure the final Roadmap delivers a coordinated, sustainable and internationally competitive national research infrastructure system.

To strengthen the final Roadmap, UA calls for:

- Stronger national coordination across research infrastructure and the wider R&D funding system, with clear roles and responsibilities for government, funding agencies and research institutions.
- Recognition of universities as strategic partners in the planning, investment and governance of national research infrastructure, including consideration of a dedicated funding pathway for university-owned institutional infrastructure.
- A coordinated approach to research infrastructure workforce development, aligned with broader national research workforce planning and supporting sustainable career pathways for specialist and technical staff.

A coordinated national research infrastructure system

UA welcomes the Exposure Draft's emphasis on enhanced system-wide coordination and strategic planning. This is consistent with UA's longstanding advocacy for greater coordination across Australia's research and innovation system.

As identified in the *Ambitious Australia* report, research investment in Australia is distributed across numerous funding programs operating at different scales and over different timeframes. Stronger

national-level coordination, planning and prioritisation would improve the effectiveness of the NRI system.

While the Exposure Draft identifies opportunities to reduce duplication and improve coordination across Australia's wider R&D funding landscape, the final Roadmap should set out how this will be achieved in practice, including the respective roles of governments, funding agencies, research institutions and other partners.

Improved strategic coordination should extend beyond individual infrastructure facilities to the funding programs that support the research system. Fragmented funding arrangements can make it difficult to plan for infrastructure needs over the long term. Greater alignment between infrastructure planning and broader research funding settings would support more efficient investment and ensure that capital investment is accompanied by funding for workforce, maintenance, upgrades and other whole-of-life costs.

Universities are core partners underpinning the system

The Exposure Draft recognises universities as important contributors to our national research infrastructure system, as locations and providers of national research infrastructure and as participants in co-investment and planning. Universities are, however, more than hosts and co-investors. They are core partners in its delivery and sustainability. Their institutional capability underpins the national system through facilities, specialist research and technical workforces, co-investment and the research environments through which nationally significant infrastructure delivers impact.

The final Roadmap should reflect this contribution by embedding universities as strategic partners in future planning, investment and governance arrangements. This recognition should be accompanied by consideration of a dedicated funding pathway for university-owned institutional infrastructure, which is essential to supporting and sustaining Australia's national research infrastructure capability.

Artificial intelligence and digital research infrastructure

UA welcomes the Exposure Draft's recognition of the growing importance of artificial intelligence (AI). AI should be treated as a cross-cutting capability embedded across the research ecosystem, rather than a standalone priority, with planning that integrates digital and physical infrastructure, secure data systems and specialist expertise.

Universities must be central partners in AI infrastructure planning, given their role in research, infrastructure provision and workforce development. The final Roadmap should recognise the importance of sovereign AI capabilities, robust data governance and cyber security, and sustainable funding to support their effective integration across the research system.

Workforce and skills are part of infrastructure

UA welcomes the practical measures proposed in the Exposure Draft to strengthen the NRI workforce. In particular, its focus on professional development, workforce stability and retention, and international collaboration and mobility responds to issues raised in UA's earlier submission. However, delivering these measures will require a coordinated approach to implementation.

UA has previously argued that research infrastructure workforce planning should form part of a broader, whole-of-government approach to Australia's research workforce. This should include a robust workforce evidence base, clear roles and responsibilities across government, universities, research organisations and industry, and mechanisms to coordinate skills development, career pathways, workforce mobility and the attraction and retention of specialist talent.

Consideration should also be given to the distinctive career structures required for the technical and specialist workforce underpinning research infrastructure. These roles do not always fit neatly within traditional academic and professional career structures, and stronger recognition and clearer career pathways will be important for attracting and retaining this capability.

UA's earlier submission proposed consideration of a third employment stream for technical and specialist staff alongside traditional academic and professional classifications. The final Roadmap provides an opportunity to further explore this model, alongside other approaches to creating attractive, recognised and sustainable career pathways for Australia's specialist research infrastructure workforce.

UA welcomes the direction of the Exposure Draft and looks forward to working with government to ensure the final Roadmap supports a coordinated, sustainable and internationally competitive research infrastructure system.