EVALUATION OF THE AUSTRALIA-INDIA STRATEGIC RESEARCH FUND

FEBRUARY 2013

- Indo-Australian Fund for Scientific and Technological Cooperation (Indo-Australian S&T Fund)
- Indo-Australian Fund for Scientific and Technological Cooperation in Biotechnology (Indo-Australian Biotechnology Fund)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Australia-India Strategic Research Fund (AISRF) is a relatively small, but strategically important, program. It supports Australia’s ability to drive productivity growth through a broad knowledge partnership with a growing research and innovation power and enhances Australia’s broader bilateral relationship with India.

As stated in the Australia in the Asian Century White Paper\(^1\), the Australian Government aims to lift Australia’s gross domestic product (GDP) per person into the world’s top 10 by 2025. To achieve this goal, Australia will need to engage more deeply with Asia and increase its productivity through an enhanced research and innovation capability. Accordingly, the White Paper identified supporting Australian researchers to broaden and strengthen their partnerships with the region as a key policy pathway to achieve Australia’s national objectives.

Modern research requires multidisciplinary teams, with access to the best data and analytical tools and the capacity to translate research into national benefit. The scale and complexity of leading-edge scientific research means that in order to stay globally competitive, Australia must leverage its domestic investment in research by accessing knowledge, expertise and facilities from other countries.

India has already displaced Australia within the global top ten countries by number of scientific publications and is set to continue the rapid growth seen over the past decade. It will be an increasingly important player in global research efforts. But Australia’s links with India in this field remain comparatively underdeveloped: Australia still produces more co-authored scientific papers with the Netherlands, Sweden or Singapore than with India.

The Prime Minister indicated during her 2012 visit to India that Australia wished to strengthen its knowledge partnership with India, placing a commitment to education, research and innovation at the heart of our bilateral economic and social ties\(^2\).

There is a continuing need for the Australian Government to operate a dedicated, bilateral fund to support research collaboration with India. As other countries expand their own joint science initiatives with India, Australian scientists will increasingly have to compete for the attention of India’s most capable researchers. A range of Australian organisations support engagement with Indian researchers and research institutions but it is beyond the scope of their individual missions to build a coordinated and comprehensive strategic research and innovation partnership between Australia and India at the national level. A dedicated Australian Government program is required to develop such a partnership, ideally one that encompasses all elements of the national research fabric articulated in the National Research Investment Plan (ie publicly funded research, workforce, infrastructure, collaboration and business research) while addressing research concerns that are national priorities for Australia and India.\(^3\) The AISRF should be renewed and extended to meet this need.

Projects funded to date under the AISRF have been highly effective in achieving the program objectives of increasing collaboration between Australian and Indian researchers and enhancing longer-term alliances between Australian and Indian research organisations. The funded research projects have attracted substantial contributions from the Australian and Indian research partners, produced significant numbers of publications, patents and prototypes, and have resulted in the Australian and Indian researchers collaborating on further research projects.

Reflecting its success in supporting quality research, the AISRF has become an important plank in the broader diplomatic relationship with India. It is considered by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to be a flagship program in the bilateral relationship.

However, to support a more comprehensive knowledge partnership with India that encompasses all aspects of the research fabric, the AISRF should in future place increased emphasis on proposals of a greater scope than individual research projects. AISRF investments should aim to establish lasting institutional and researcher relationships that enhance research expertise and provide additional facilities so as to increase the quality, scale and duration of effort applied to solving Australian and Indian research priorities.

The selection and design of projects that will be effective in building a knowledge partnership and enhancing Australia’s research fabric should often be based on a strategic assessment by experts of national research need and delivery options. Such an approach is likely to result in outcomes that better align with government policy objectives than would occur via a purely competitive funding allocation process.

\(^1\) Australian Government (2012), Australia in the Asian Century White Paper
\(^2\) Prime Minister The Hon Julia Gillard MP (2012), Australia and India: Old Friends, New Partners, Speech to Indian Business Chambers Lunch, New Delhi, 17 October
\(^3\) DIISRTE (2012b), 2012 National Research Investment Plan
A very high proportion of Australian grant recipients are satisfied with the AISRF application process, their engagement with DIISRTE and their experience with the AISRF as a whole. DIISRTE should, however, continue to seek ways of improving the transparency and feedback to applicants participating in AISRF competitive funding rounds.

The AISRF represents value for money given the additional costs involved in running a program on a bilateral basis and given the relatively small scale of the program. It is important that DIISRTE continues to monitor the administrative arrangements associated with the various program components to ensure they are cost effective.

AISRF performance monitoring arrangements are effective in managing the compliance of Australian grant recipients with the terms of their funding agreements. However, the AISRF performance assessment framework should be documented and should include more comprehensive arrangements for monitoring program outcomes and impact.

**KEY FINDINGS OF THE EVALUATION**

**Strategic Policy Alignment**

3.1 The AISRF is well aligned with Australian Government policy. The AISRF:

- supports the overall intent and several of the individual objectives identified in the Australia in the Asian Century White Paper;
- contributes directly to Australia’s goal of developing our knowledge partnership with India during the next phase of the bilateral relationship;
- establishes the people-to-people links in research that are seen as essential to Australia’s strategic agenda for education and training engagement with India; and
- strengthens Australia’s national research fabric by linking with Indian research skills, expertise and networks.

**Appropriateness**

4.1 To maximise the economic, social and environmental benefit of research to Australia and other countries, Australian researchers must share knowledge, research expertise and infrastructure with researchers in our partner countries.

4.2 If Australia wishes to derive sustained benefit from being part of the Asian Century, then it must continue building its knowledge partnership with India.

4.3 Australia requires a dedicated, bilateral program to develop further its knowledge partnership with India. Such a program should:

- reflect Australia’s national objectives as set out in the Australia in the Asian Century White Paper;
- consistent with the National Research Investment Plan, contribute in a coordinated way to the development of Australia’s research fabric across all sectors including business;
- focus generally on initiatives that are not able to be progressed by individual research organisations; and
- avoid duplication and focus on complementarity with other Australian Government programs.

**Effectiveness**

5.1 Projects supported by the competitive components of the AISRF have been highly effective in achieving the objectives of increasing collaboration between Australian and Indian researchers and enhancing longer-term alliances between Australian and Indian research organisations.

5.2 The effectiveness of the AISRF could be enhanced by placing greater emphasis on projects that strengthen Australia’s national research fabric and build a more integrated knowledge partnership with the Indian research community. The selection and design of such projects should often occur via a strategic assessment of options rather than via a purely competitive funding allocation process.
**Efficiency**

6.1 For the AISRF components administered by DIISRTE, the level of running costs incurred represents value for money given the nature and scale of the program.

6.2 A very high proportion of Australian AISRF grant recipients are satisfied with the application process, their engagement with DIISRTE and their experience with the AISRF as a whole.

6.3 DIISRTE should continue to identify ways of improving the efficiency and transparency of competitive funding allocation under the AISRF. DIISRTE should allocate funding via strategic and entitlement mechanisms where that would increase efficiency and/or effectiveness.

6.4 DIISRTE should monitor the cost-effectiveness with which each AISRF component is delivered and ensure the administration of each component represents value for money.

**Integration**

7.1 The AISRF is appropriately integrated with other initiatives:

- AISRF objectives are consistent with related Australian Government programs;
- AISRF activities complement other government support for research collaboration with India; and
- the National Research Investment Planning process provides a mechanism for strategic coordination of international research collaboration.

**Performance Assessment**

8.1 Performance monitoring arrangements for the AISRF are effective in managing compliance by Australian grant recipients with their funding agreements, however more comprehensive arrangements should be introduced for monitoring program outcomes and impact.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Consistent with the Australia in the Asian Century White Paper and Australia’s objective of developing a deeper knowledge partnership with India, the AISRF program should be renewed and extended.

2. Consistent with the objectives of the National Research Investment Plan, the AISRF should in future seek to develop Australia’s research fabric across all sectors including business.

3. The AISRF should in future place an increased emphasis on establishing ongoing institutional collaboration that provides Australian researchers with increased access to research expertise, skilled staff and research infrastructure.

4. DIISRTE should, where appropriate, select and design proposals for major AISRF projects using a strategic assessment of Australia’s research needs and delivery options rather than via a purely competitive allocation of funds.

5. The AISRF should complement other Australian Government research funding programs by placing an emphasis on support for initiatives that are beyond the scope of other government funding mechanisms and that are generally not able to be progressed by individual research organisations.

6. The AISRF should be delivered by DIISRTE, consistent with the National Research Investment Planning process.

7. In managing the program, DIISRTE should ensure that all components of the program are delivered in a manner that is cost-effective for the department and program participants.

8. DIISRTE should keep the AISRF’s competitive allocation processes under regular review to ensure an appropriate level of transparency and that the costs incurred by applicants are as low as possible.

9. The Australian Government should maintain a dedicated position at the Australian High Commission in New Delhi to support the efficient running of the AISRF program.

10. The AISRF performance assessment framework should be documented and should include: relevant performance indicators, the information needed to report on those indicators and a process for capturing and recording the information.