

SUBMISSION TO THE DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE TO INFORM NEGOTIATIONS ON THE AUSTRALIA–UK FREE TRADE AGREEMENT

19 November 2020

Universities Australia welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to inform and assist DFAT’s negotiations on the proposed Australia–UK Free Trade Agreement.

Universities Australia is the peak body for the university sector, representing Australia’s 39 comprehensive universities. Universities Australia’s members educate more than 1.4 million students and conduct research and development on behalf of the nation. Now, more than ever, Australia’s universities are central to our welfare and prosperity, as they help guide our response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH IN AUSTRALIA AND THE UK

The higher education sectors in Australia and the UK have much in common. Both countries possess world-class teaching and research capabilities, with a strong focus on innovation and learning.

The Australia–UK Free Trade Agreement (FTA) offers the opportunity to strengthen the education and academic relationship between our two countries.

Table 1. Simple comparison of Australia and UK higher education sectors.

	Australia	UK
Number of universities	40	169
Number of students	~1.4 million	~2.4 million
Number of staff	~132,000	~360,000
Jobs supported by university sector	259,100	~950,000
Contribution to economy	\$41 billion	>£95 billion (\$165 billion)

SUPPORTING AUSTRALIA–UK RESEARCH COLLABORATION

As the challenges facing our societies become increasingly global in their scale, so has the research endeavour that seeks to address them. An international focus is critical to both Australia’s and the UK’s academic and research pursuits, and the two countries have benefited from ongoing research collaboration.

According to Scopus citation data for research publications, for the decade 2010–19, the UK is second only to the United States regarding co-authored research publications (Table 1) with Australia. Australia is sixth on the list for the UK’s collaborating/co-publishing countries (Table 2). This data spans all science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) and humanities and social sciences (HASS) disciplines, but due to the nature of academic and scientific publishing, may not capture the full extent of collaboration within HASS disciplines.

Table 2. Top ten countries for co-authored publications with Australia, 2010–19.

	Country	Co- authored publications	Citations	Citations per Publication	Field-Weighted Citation Impact
1	United States	128,082	4,430,488	34.6	2.97
2	United Kingdom	91,738	3,080,917	33.6	3.05
3	China	82,736	1,957,628	23.7	2.33
4	Germany	45,283	1,925,991	42.5	3.67
5	Canada	39,546	1,679,914	42.5	3.9
6	France	31,311	1,491,707	47.6	4.18
7	Netherlands	26,294	1,290,406	49.1	4.39
8	Italy	24,135	12,40,877	51.4	4.62
9	New Zealand	22660	621,560	27.4	2.71
10	Japan	21,052	907,740	43.1	3.81

Table 3. Top ten countries for co-authored publications with the UK, 2010–19.

	Country	Co-authored publications	Citations	Citations per Publication	Field-Weighted Citation Impact
1	United States	274,730	9,350,943	34	2.83
2	Germany	142,888	5,039,429	35.3	2.9
3	France	101,755	3,892,054	38.2	3.12
4	Italy	98,295	3,368,026	34.3	3
5	China	96,784	2,278,551	23.5	2.28
6	Australia	91,738	3,080,917	33.6	3.05
7	Netherlands	81,551	3,266,766	40.1	3.34
8	Spain	78,308	2,799,081	35.7	3.02
9	Canada	70,517	2,959,708	42	3.64
10	Switzerland	57,271	2,441,422	42.6	3.58

Co-authored publications produced by our two nations have grown by 137 per cent since 2010, and it is clear that research collaboration produces high-quality results. While the average field-weighted citation impact for Australian publications is 1.57, for the UK it is 1.56, and for Australia–UK co-authored publications it is 3.05.

Table 4. Summary of metrics of Australian and UK publications (2010–2019).

	Australia (total output)	Co-authored publications	United Kingdom (total output)
Publications	927,710	91,738	1,999,712
Publications (growth %)	60.2	136.7	24.9
Citations	1,524,7426	3,080,917	32,701,223
Citations per Publication	16.4	33.6	16.4
Field-Weighted Citation Impact	1.57	3.05	1.56

Within the Scopus citations, the predominant areas of collaboration between Australia and the UK during 2010–19 were:

- medicine (34,620 co-authored publications);
- biochemistry genetics and molecular biology (12,685 co-authored publications);
- physics and astronomy (10,750 co-authored publications);
- agricultural and biological sciences (9,711 co-authored publications);
- Earth and planetary sciences (9,294 co-authored publications); and
- social sciences (9,096 co-authored publications).

BI-LATERAL RESEARCH FUNDING

The FTA offers the opportunity to establish a bi-lateral research fund that would support targeted, mission-based research collaborations, consolidating and building upon this robust foundation of research partnerships across both STEM and HASS disciplines.

Previous engagement between the UK and Australian university sectors identified three key priority areas for deeper research engagement with the UK:

- cyber security;
- biomedical research (e.g. antimicrobial resistance); and
- sustainable energy (e.g. solar, wind and tidal power).

These are areas of critical global urgency, and targeted funding to support Australia–UK research collaborations would position our respective research sectors in optimal positions to lead work addressing these challenges.

A second tier of critical research areas has also been identified by the Australian university sector. These areas are also worthy of support through a mission-based bi-lateral research fund, in line with government priorities. These include:

- data management and software development;
- climate change;
- food security, agriculture and agri-tech;
- global health; and
- social change.

To a certain extent, these research topics reflect the areas of established collaborations. However, a certain amount of divergence also highlights areas where existing collaborations may not be as strongly established, and in which further support would be beneficial to nurture new research linkages.

We note that the Australian Government has recently specified a set of National Manufacturing Priorities that will support the manufacturing and broader post-COVID-19 economic recovery in Australia, namely:

- food and beverage manufacturing;
- resources tech and critical minerals processing;
- clean energy and recycling;
- space industry;
- defence industry; and
- medical products

Targeted funding to support collaborative research in these areas of identified national interest would also be of benefit and could generate valuable contributions to Government priorities.

The Australia–India fund is an excellent example of a bilateral funding agreement that has enabled in-depth collaboration and leveraged further funding for world-class research in areas of mutual benefit to both Australia and India.

Another relevant example of targeted research funding that supports both high-quality research and enables early- and mid-career researcher mobility is the Australia–Germany Joint Research Cooperation Scheme, whereby Australian universities support their researchers to collaborate with partners at German institutions in projects that involve two-way research stays for each partner. This scheme has been highly successful, and its only limitation is the requirement for funding to come from the Australian researchers' university, which ultimately means the scheme lacks long-term certainty. Funding from the German side is provided by the German Academic Exchange Office (DAAD). The DAAD is an independent association of German institutions of higher education that provides funding for international exchanges for both students and academics. The majority of the funding it distributes comes from public sources¹—namely the German Government and the European Union (EU).

Bilateral research funding could also be directed to support joint Australia–UK Centres of Excellence within specific discipline areas, again with a focus on research identified to be a shared national priority for both countries. These centres could harness the expertise of universities and industry partners from both countries, with concerted mission-based research efforts spanning both fundamental and applied research. These Centres of Excellence could be coupled with joint innovation precincts to nurture and bolster research commercialisation outcomes.

Shared research infrastructure facilities would be another mechanism that could enhance research collaboration. Dedicated funding to develop and maintain shared facilities would be a valuable support to research endeavours in both countries.

SUPPORTING COLLABORATION WITH A TRUSTED PARTNER

Given the increasing uncertainty surrounding broader geo-political relations in some areas, it is more important than ever to bolster our research relationship with countries with common interests, ideals and priorities. It is in the best interests of both Australia and the UK to support, enhance and incentivise research collaboration between our countries. A secure source of research funding will provide certainty and security for our researchers and provide not only an incentive to pursue research collaborations with the UK but also a viable alternative for researchers and institutions who may otherwise rely upon other streams of funding that are less reliable or secure.

Enhanced research collaboration would also cultivate an environment in which our two countries would actively work together to ensure best practice and information sharing in areas such as foreign interference, cyber security and defence research. These issues are of paramount importance in ensuring both our nations retain research advantages and protect sovereign integrity.

RECOGNITION OF FUNDING STREAMS

Funding received by Australian researchers from UK charities and research councils is not currently recognised on the Australian Nationally Competitive Grants Register (NCGR). Formal recognition of these funding streams on the NCGR would enable these sources to be acknowledged and included within calculations for Research Infrastructure Block Grants, incentivising researchers to apply for these funding streams.

¹ The DAAD's main funding sources are the German Federal Foreign Office—AA (35%), the Federal Ministry of Education and Research—BMBF (25%), the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development—BMZ (10%) and the European Union—EU (23%).

Similarly, Australian NCGR bodies could be recognised as a funding element for UK grants, and the Research Council UK could include Australian universities as partners to support cotutelle and joint PhD programs.

POLICY HARMONISATION

The FTA could lay the groundwork for streamlined policy settings that could also contribute to enhanced research collaboration.

Increased data access and sharing on large collaborative projects such as clinical trials would facilitate more effective research collaboration in areas with critical outcomes, particularly health and biomedical research.

Reciprocal recognition of ethics approval processes and protocols would also enable smoother and more efficient avenues to research collaboration.

Rationalising intellectual property arrangements would also help promote greater research collaboration. Streamlined data protection regulations, such as the establishment of an agreement similar to that signed between the UK and the US in October 2019 that would enable Australian researchers to receive restricted data under the European General Data Protection (GDPR) laws would be useful.

ENHANCED MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE AND KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

University research is a highly globalised activity, and universities not only seek to recruit the world's best and brightest researchers, but also engage in numerous activities involving international travel, including fieldwork, sabbatical stays and short-term scientific and research visits.

VISA SETTINGS

The university sector would benefit from an FTA containing provisions that improve visa protocols for Australian students and researchers visiting the UK and vice versa. Current visa processes can be lengthy and expensive, with the end result that researchers often travel on tourist visas.

A dedicated skilled visa stream that would facilitate the employment of university staff would enable smoother and more efficient transfer and exchange of people between Australia and the UK. This could be along the lines of the E-3 visa in the US, which allows people to work in a 'specialty occupation'—namely, one that requires qualifications at a Bachelor's level or above. The E-3 also allows spouses to work in the US, which is an important consideration particularly for early- and mid-career researchers and those with families.

International education and student mobility are other important features of the university sector. Maximising visa settings to ensure reciprocal benefits to students in each country and streamlined processing protocols would be useful to support both student exchange and other types of student mobility. For example, international students studying part-time in the UK are not permitted to work, even if it is integrated into the course. A change to this visa condition would promote further student mobility between our two countries. A change to UK visa protocols to allow Australian students to submit a further visa, e.g. transitioning to a work visa from a study visa from within the UK, without having to return to Australia would also support student mobility. Amendments to visa protocols such that Australian and UK students can enjoy reciprocal post-study work rights following the completion of a joint PhD program, even if they have not met the usual minimum in-country study requirement, would also be beneficial.

QUALIFICATIONS RECOGNITION

The higher education systems in Australia and the UK share many similarities, in both structure and quality. As such, a logical goal of the FTA would be to ensure automatic recognition of academic and professional qualifications between the two countries.

Improved recognition of online learning in degrees requiring professional accreditation, as well as recognition of degrees requiring professional accreditation across the two jurisdictions, would also be of benefit.

ANCILLARY CONDITIONS

Another issue that could be prosecuted within the FTA is streamlining of employment conditions between Australia and the UK for academics, or other university professional staff. This would include recognition of tenure between Australian and UK universities, as well as government research organisations and other research institutes. Coupled with reciprocal superannuation arrangements, this would facilitate easier movement of researchers and professional staff between our two countries.

For researchers or other university staff members with dependants, access to the public school system in each country would also support staff and researcher mobility.

MOBILITY PROGRAMS

Funded programs to improve professional staff mobility would enable professional and technical staff from each country to participate in exchange or short-term mobility programs. This would facilitate information and best-practice sharing between universities in both countries.

The FTA could also support improved student mobility and collaboration at the higher degree by research (HDR) student level. There are a number of ways this could be achieved. Under current regulations, universities can allocate a maximum of 10 per cent of their Research Training Program funding to international students, which curtails their ability to support international HDR students. A targeted funding program to support joint HDR, or cotutelle programs between Australian and UK institutions would greatly boost HDR student engagement between the two countries, connections which can lead to lasting research links. Alternatively, a reciprocal arrangement whereby students from each country are treated as domestic students could also serve the same purpose.

Funding to support targeted student exchange programs, similar in style to the ERASMUS program in Europe, would also serve to strengthen academic ties between Australia and the UK. These exchange programs could include an internship, or work integrated learning component, which would also bolster academic links with industry within both countries.

Universities Australia would be happy to provide further information regarding any aspects of this submission.

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