

CSIRO Management Response to the Mid-Term Review of Aus4Innovation program- Phase II

Aus4Innovation (A4I) is a ten-year (2018 – 2028), two-phase, AUD 33,5 mil development program, funded by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), co-funded and managed by CSIRO - Australia's national science agency, and delivered in strategic partnership with Vietnam's Ministry of Science and Technology (MST). The program is underpinned by two MoUs for ST&I collaboration signed between MST – DFAT and MST – CSIRO during the Australian and Vietnamese Prime Minister's respective visits.

As the program is progressing towards its graduation, a Mid-term Review (MTR) was conducted, aiming to assess its performance in phase 2, but considers this in the context of the broader program. The MTR examines relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, inclusion, and bilateral value, and provides forward-looking recommendations to maximise impact over the program's remaining implementation period.

13 recommendations were provided, and below is the management response by CSIRO / A4I Program:

Recommendation 1

A 'stocktake' of current programming should be undertaken documenting pathways and targets towards embedding and institutionalisation of A4I supported initiatives within the Vietnam innovation landscape.

Drawing on the results of the 'stocktake', a systematic review should be undertaken of the overall A4I portfolio to assess the 'status' of different interventions and for decisions to be taken around opportunities to consolidate, reduce and restructure interventions, based on their likelihood of achieving tangible systemic results by the end of 2027. This should include review of individual Grants in order to assess pathways related to the technical feasibility, financial viability and desirability/appetite for adoption.

It is important that this process not shy away from hard decisions (i.e. cut projects that are not performing and reallocate funds). In cases of a decision to discontinue, focus should then turn to 'responsible closure', in terms of maximizing lessons learned from the activity to date and maintaining a positive relationship with impacted stakeholders.

CSIRO response: Agree

Remarks (Explanation, action plan for the recommendation required): Following the receipt of the draft MTR report, and aligned with A4I's planning cycle, A4I has convened a three-day planning session to review the current portfolio of the program, agree on priorities for the graduation phase, and develop a forward plan with a strong focus on institutionalisation and sustainability accordingly. The implementation of this plan is pending upon approval of the A4I Steering Committee.

Timeframe (e.g when action will be taken): Completed

Recommendation 2

For those activity areas that will continue, A4I should engage partners in co-development of concrete plans for embedding and institutionalising A4I supported activities and learning. This

process should be explicitly framed as ‘handover and sustainability’ planning and focus on what can be achieved in the next two years.

This should include a systematic, project-by-project review of opportunities and strategies for co-financing with partners (recognising that this reflects a deepening of partnerships), but also like-minded programs.

CSIRO response: Agree

Remarks: Building on the program review at the Planning session, A4I will develop a program pathway, outlining how the program will re-focus activities under each component to strengthen prospects for institutionalisation within targeted partner organisations. An innovation focused political economy analysis was completed in May to inform this process. Strategic partners will be engaged throughout the institutionalisation pathway to ensure their strong ownership, smooth hand-over, and sustainable adoption of A4I’s policy tools, frameworks, guidelines, and networks.

Timeframe: Q3 2026

Recommendation 3

Based on Recommendations 1 & 2, program strategies for embedding and institutionalising should be revised and documented as ‘element workplans’, including clear timelines, milestones and targets that guide the coming two years.

**** noting the need for additional (likely internal) support to be made available to the Grants team, given review of the current status and opportunities of the whole Grants portfolio will be a significant exercise.**

CSIRO response: Agree

Remarks: Supporting the Program Pathway will be a detailed workplan at component level – including for the Innovation Partnership Grant - with clear timelines and milestones to guide the implementation of activities in the final two years of the program.

Timeframe: Q3 2026

Recommendation 4

A4I should prepare a formal Exit Strategy and Closure Plan outlining handover steps, necessary sustainability measures, and clear documentation of which activities will be completed or stopped before program end.

CSIRO response: Agree

Remarks: A4I will develop a formal Exit Strategy and Closure Plan by end of Q3 2026, providing a structured framework to guide handover steps, sustainability measures, and responsible closure of activities in the final phase of the program.

Timeframe: End of Q3 2026

Recommendation 5

A4I, in conjunction with the Embassy of Australia in Vietnam, should explore opportunities to facilitate a high-level meeting of key stakeholders (prioritising MST, MAE and MoF participation) focused on considering options R&D and innovation financing. This would shed light on financing needs, pathways and obstacles (noting that Resolution 193 highlights the importance of innovation financing), while also providing a platform for sharing knowledge and progress of IPG activities and the IPG process with key audiences.

This should include consideration of options for more explicitly integrating and/or harmonizing A4I's grants with GoV innovation eco-system functions such as the National Innovation Centre, including discussion of the role and/or feasibility of the mooted Australia-Vietnam Innovation Centre.

CSIRO response: Partially Agree

Remarks: A4I has established a strong partnership with MST, as its strategic partner, and MAE's sub-ministry agencies, as operational partners. As part of its institutionalisation pathway, the program will work with Post to explore opportunities to establish and facilitate structured inter-ministerial dialogues – and engaging additional partners, where relevant - to embed A4I's results within their systems. Given the program's remaining timeframe, efforts will prioritise deepening and consolidating these existing partnerships, while taking a targeted approach to engaging any new stakeholders.

Timeframe: Q2 2027

Recommendation 6

A strategy needs to be urgently developed for more systematic and strategic engagement of MAE at national level with a view to motivating more active engagement with A4I across the remaining two years – focused on embedding and institutionalising learning emerging through HICs and other RAF work.

CSIRO response: Agree

Remarks: This strategy will form an integral part of the A4I program pathway and Exit Plan, as outlined above.

Timeframe: Q3 2026

Recommendation 7

A4I should clarify plans in terms of development of a mechanism that enlists A4I and other relevant 'Australia-connected' Alumni as a program asset given their potential to contribute to fostering of an 'innovation culture' in Vietnam, and also their contribution to strong Australia-Vietnam ties. Great alumni programs use minimal resources effectively to facilitate more peer-to-peer and peer-led support, taking the pressure off organisers and moving to a more sustainable model.

CSIRO response: Agree

Remarks: An Australia- Vietnam Innovation Network (AVIN) Strategy, supported by a detailed workplan is under development, and scheduled for completion in early Q3 2026. The Strategy will outline a clear pathway for AVIN, including approaches to embed partnership practices within selected partner organisation(s), to support its sustainability beyond the A4I program lifecycle.

Timeframe: Q3 2026

Recommendation 8

A4I and DFAT should coordinate to enhance connection and coordination with different DFAT teams, particularly focusing on issues with cross-cutting relevance, for example (including but not limited to):

- Integrating security issues in STI policy discussions
- Actions related to climate resilience
- Learning from the various policy influence efforts
- Effective policy pathways
- Utilising PEA outputs to stay abreast of opportunities

CSIRO response: Agree

Remarks: A4I looks forward to working closely with DFAT to further enhance the coordination across different teams. The program has already taken initial steps, including (i) working with the Climate Change (CC) Advisor at Post to review the integration of CC across A4I activities, and identify actions to deepen CC mainstreaming, (ii) undertaking an in-depth PEA with a strong focus on the national innovation system to inform its pathway ahead, and (iii) engaging with other programs, such as Aus4Adaptation and Aus4Growth to explore synergies and potential transition of relevant legacies.

Timeframe: Q3/Q4 2026

Recommendation 9

Based on the above-described process of portfolio review and refinement, A4I should adapt program reporting approaches to explicitly monitor and measure progress towards systemic change targets

CSIRO response: Agree

Remarks: A4I has strengthened its component reporting templates across all workstreams (Innovation Policy Dialogue, Network of Innovation Actors, and Innovation Funding and Finance) to explicitly orient reporting toward outcome-level evidence of systemic change, moving beyond activity description. The revised templates introduce structured outcome progress tables — distinguishing what was completed from what changed and why it matters — alongside evidence confidence ratings, contribution analysis, and systemic change snapshots that capture relational, behavioural, and institutional shifts that conventional indicators might miss.

Timeframe: Completed

Recommendation 10

Strengthen program capacity (human and financial) for ‘strategic communications’ in support of system change objectives, recognizing the important need of strategic engagement and knowledge

sharing in facilitating institutionalisation. This should be viewed as a different skillset to public diplomacy, since it must reflect and support program strategy and end of program outcomes.

CSIRO response: Agree

Remarks: Using communications to support program delivery is clearly articulated in the A4I Communications Strategy for Phase 2. Moving forward, A4I will further strengthen its communications capacity to support its institutionalisation objective in the “graduation” period. This includes deeper collaboration with STI specialised communication experts and channels to deliver targeted and impactful communication products.

Timeframe: Q2-Q3 2026

Recommendation 11

Organize a joint policy dialogue (and/or research) on the role of intermediary organizations in agricultural innovation, co-chaired by the MAE and MST, as a strategy for raising awareness of the key role played by such organisations, and also the importance of MAE and MST collaboration on the subject.

CSIRO response: Agree

Remarks: This will be conducted within the RAF and Policy Component Pathway. Opportunities to also include this within the IPG pathway will be explored.

Timeframe: Mid 2027

Recommendation 12

Give priority to more systematic approaches to institutionalisation of GEDSI learning emerging from different work areas, including promotion and refinement of the SII framework as a potential resource for carriage of innovation inclusion post A4I.

CSIRO response: Agree

Remarks: GEDSI will be integrated into all component pathways, with targeted activities to promote the SII framework, with a strong focus on building partners’ capacity to uptake the SII Maturity Model and SII Guide for Researchers, where appropriate.

Timeframe: Q3 2026

Recommendation 13

Ensure CSIRO is able to maintain a prominent profile in-country (including the CSIRO Counsellor role) since a failure to do so would present significant risk in terms of leveraging progress already made, undermining high levels of trust achieved, ensuring high level access to senior government partners, and perceptions of commitment to seeing such a well-positioned program through until completion.

CSIRO response: Partially Agree

CSIRO/A4I response: CSIRO recognises the importance of maintaining a strong and visible presence to sustain relationships with key stakeholders and deliver the program through to completion. CSIRO does not intend to maintain a Counsellor position or permanent in-country senior role. Instead, a structured management approach has been put in place to ensure continuity of leadership, relationship management and delivery. This includes:

- Program Director oversight from Australia, supported by regular in-country engagement and travel by the Program Director and other senior CSIRO staff
- A strengthened role for the Hanoi-based A4I team in day-to-day stakeholder engagement
- Close coordination with DFAT to ensure a continued strong relationship with the Government of Vietnam
- A planned and managed transition of key relationships, jointly agreed with DFAT and implemented through structured handover processes

This approach aligns with CSIRO's delivery model across the region and will be continuously reviewed with DFAT to ensure A4I maintains trust, access and delivery effectiveness during the final phase of the program.

Timeframe: Q3 2026 (with ongoing review)