INDEPENDENT HIGHER EDUCATION AUSTRALIA

IHEA SUBMISSION

2026 NATIONAL RESEARCH INFRASTRUCTURE ROADMAP EXPOSURE DRAFT FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION

23 October 2026

IHEA Submission
2026 National Research Infrastructure Roadmap Exposure Draft for Public Consultation

Independent Higher Education Australia (IHEA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the Department of Education's 2026 National Research Infrastructure Roadmap Exposure Draft for Public Consultation, for which submissions are due by 12pm on 26 October 2026.

Introduction

IHEA represents Australia's independent higher education sector, including private universities, university colleges and other independent higher education providers. IHEA members contribute to Australian research and research training across a diverse range of disciplines and institutional missions.

The 2026 National Research Infrastructure Roadmap (Roadmap) provides an opportunity to improve access to shared national research infrastructure, particularly for smaller and specialised institutions that cannot reasonably replicate the costly infrastructure available within Australia's largest research intensive universities.

The central premise of the Exposure Draft is its recognition that high quality national research infrastructure is fundamental to Australia's research capability, economic prosperity, productivity and resilience.

Australia is facing significant economic and technological change. Productivity growth has slowed, competition for research talent and investment is increasing, and artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming research and industry.

Strong research capability and access to high quality infrastructure will be essential to Australia's international competitiveness and future prosperity. At the same time, the increasing scale and cost of advanced infrastructure strengthens the case for a nationally coordinated system that enables researchers to access capabilities beyond those available within their own institutions.

This strengthens the case for an accessible and nationally coordinated research infrastructure system.

Research infrastructure should not be viewed solely as an input to academic research. It is an important part of Australia's economic infrastructure. It enables new knowledge and technologies to be developed, supports research commercialisation and translation, strengthens links between researchers and industry, builds highly skilled workforces and provides capabilities that individual businesses and institutions could not efficiently develop themselves.

The final Roadmap should therefore seek to maximise both the research and broader economic and social returns from Australia's investment in NRI.

IHEA's submission focuses on those aspects of the Exposure Draft and consultation questions that are most relevant to independent higher education, particularly equitable access, research capability, digital and AI infrastructure, workforce development and the effective use of national research infrastructure.

Recommendations

- Ensure equitable access to NRI across Australia's higher education and research system, irrespective of provider type or institutional scale.
- Ensure smaller and specialised institutions can access NRI through clear and transparent access arrangements, including the technical support needed to use it effectively.
- Support broad access to digital and AI research infrastructure and develop the specialist workforce and research skills needed to use it effectively.

- Recognise practical barriers to accessing NRI, including travel and accommodation costs where researchers need to use infrastructure away from their home institution.
- Monitor access and participation across different types of institutions to ensure NRI operates as a genuinely national system.

Research infrastructure and Australia's economic future

Australia's future prosperity will depend increasingly on its capacity to generate, adopt and translate knowledge.

The Strategic Examination of Research and Development, Ambitious Australia, highlighted significant challenges within Australia's research, development and innovation system, including fragmentation, declining investment and the need to improve the translation of research into economic and social outcomes.

National research infrastructure has an important role in addressing these challenges. Access to sophisticated infrastructure allows researchers, businesses and other organisations to undertake research that would otherwise be prohibitively expensive or technically impossible. Shared infrastructure also allows Australia to concentrate investment in high quality capabilities rather than unnecessarily duplicating expensive facilities across institutions.

The economic benefits extend beyond the immediate research undertaken using those facilities. Research infrastructure can support new products and services, commercialisation, industry collaboration, new businesses and industries, and highly skilled employment. It also contributes to Australia's ability to attract and retain talented researchers and participate in major international research collaborations.

We therefore support the Exposure Draft's emphasis on coordination, long term planning and responsiveness to emerging national priorities. The final Roadmap should explicitly recognise that maximising the economic return from NRI requires both investment in world class infrastructure and ensuring that researchers, institutions and businesses can effectively access and use it.

NRI can bring researchers and industry together by providing shared facilities, expertise, data and environments in which ideas can be developed, tested and validated. This is particularly important for small and medium enterprises and emerging businesses that may have considerable innovation potential but lack the resources to develop sophisticated research infrastructure themselves.

International collaboration is also increasingly important. Australia cannot provide every advanced research capability domestically. Access to international infrastructure, expertise and research networks strengthens Australian research capability and competitiveness. Opportunities arising through international research partnerships, including Horizon Europe, should complement domestic NRI planning and investment.

Ensuring broad and equitable access to national research infrastructure

IHEA supports the Exposure Draft's conception of NRI as nationally accessible infrastructure.

The value of national infrastructure is determined not simply by where it is located or which institution operates it, but by the research, innovation and collaboration it enables across the Australian research system. The Exposure Draft appropriately states that nationally significant research infrastructure is defined by its reach, connectivity and impact and does not depend on the size, location or administrative status of the institution hosting it.

This principle should be clearly reflected in the final Roadmap and in subsequent implementation and investment arrangements.

Australia's higher education research system is diverse. Research is undertaken not only by large public universities but also by private universities, University Colleges and other independent higher education providers, as well as medical research institutes, businesses, government agencies and other research organisations.

Independent higher education providers can bring specialised research strengths, different institutional models

and close connections with particular industries, professions and communities. Access to NRI should therefore be based on research need, quality and potential impact rather than institutional type.

This is particularly important for smaller and specialised institutions. Such institutions may undertake high quality research in areas of particular strength but cannot reasonably be expected to replicate the major physical, digital and technical infrastructure available within Australia's largest universities and research organisations. A genuinely national system can give these institutions access to infrastructure they could not reasonably provide themselves.

We ecommend that the final Roadmap explicitly recognise the importance of equitable access across the diversity of Australia's higher education and research system. Future arrangements should avoid unnecessary barriers that disadvantage smaller or specialised institutions because they lack the scale, resources or established infrastructure relationships of larger research intensive institutions.

Future NRI planning and consultation should include independent higher education providers and their representative bodies to ensure that the needs of smaller and specialised research institutions are considered alongside those of larger universities and research organisations.

While the Exposure Draft recognises access by publicly and privately funded users, this principle should be reflected in practical access arrangements, including eligibility, assessment criteria, charges and the availability of technical support. Accessible and transparent pathways should enable researchers to identify available infrastructure and understand eligibility criteria, application processes, technical requirements and charges. Researchers should also be able to obtain the technical and professional support required to use infrastructure effectively. This information should be readily available to researchers without established relationships with facility operators.

Arrangements to support equitable access should recognise practical barriers, including travel and accommodation costs where researchers need to use infrastructure away from their home institution. Consideration should be given to how these costs can be addressed through relevant research funding and infrastructure access arrangements.

Building the capability Australia needs

Australia's NRI capability depends on more than physical facilities. IHEA supports the Exposure Draft's recognition that the specialist workforce associated with research infrastructure is itself an essential part of the system. The draft identifies increasingly sophisticated infrastructure, greater coordination between capabilities and AI as making the NRI workforce more important and highlights career progression and professional development.

Investment in equipment without corresponding investment in the people required to operate, maintain and develop it will limit the return from public investment. The final Roadmap should therefore support sustainable career pathways, professional development and workforce mobility for research infrastructure specialists.

There is also an opportunity to strengthen the connection between NRI and research training. Higher degree by research students and early career researchers should have appropriate opportunities to develop experience using nationally significant infrastructure and emerging technologies. This would strengthen current research capability while helping to develop the next generation of researchers and technical specialists.

Digital capability will be particularly important. Artificial intelligence and data intensive research are changing research practices across disciplines. Access to high performance computing, secure data environments, research datasets, digital platforms and specialist expertise will increasingly influence the capacity of researchers and institutions to undertake internationally competitive research.

There is a risk that these capabilities become concentrated in institutions with the resources to develop or purchase advanced digital infrastructure independently. Nationally accessible digital research infrastructure can help address this risk. The final Roadmap should therefore prioritise broad access to national digital and AI

capabilities, including for researchers at smaller and specialised institutions.

At the same time, rapidly changing technologies require flexible planning and investment arrangements. Australia needs sufficient capacity to respond to technological change while maintaining the longer term certainty required to sustain infrastructure, retain specialist staff and support effective research planning.

Coordination, investment and measuring success

IHEA supports stronger national coordination of research infrastructure investment. The increasing cost and complexity of NRI strengthens the case for avoiding unnecessary duplication and improving coordination between Commonwealth and state governments, universities, research organisations and industry.

However, greater coordination should not result in excessive centralisation or an overly narrow interpretation of national priorities. Australia needs the capacity to invest strategically in areas of national importance while maintaining a broad research base capable of generating new knowledge and responding to opportunities that cannot always be predicted in advance.

Investment decisions should also recognise the ongoing costs of research infrastructure, including maintenance, upgrades, digital systems, specialist staff and the practical costs of making infrastructure accessible to researchers.

The success of Australia's NRI system should ultimately be assessed by the value it creates for the research system, economy and community, rather than simply the number or scale of facilities funded.

Measures should include the breadth and diversity of users; access across different institutional types and locations; research and industry collaboration; research training and workforce development; international engagement; research commercialisation; and economic, social and research outcomes.

Monitoring should also examine the diversity of NRI users, patterns of utilisation and unmet demand, using proportionate reporting to inform future planning and improvements to access.

Conclusion

The 2026 National Research Infrastructure Roadmap provides an opportunity to strengthen Australia’s research capability through a more coordinated and accessible national research infrastructure system. As research infrastructure becomes more costly and sophisticated, Australia needs to make the best use of its investment and ensure that access is not determined by institutional size or type.

The final Roadmap should ensure that national research infrastructure is genuinely accessible across Australia’s research system. This is particularly important for smaller and specialised institutions that cannot reasonably replicate the physical, digital and technical infrastructure available within Australia’s largest universities and research organisations.

Achieving this will require clear access arrangements, investment in the specialist people and skills needed to operate and use research infrastructure, broad access to national digital and AI infrastructure, and recognition of the ongoing costs of maintaining and providing access to infrastructure. Investment should also strengthen collaboration between research and industry and be assessed by the research, economic and social benefits it produces.

A national research infrastructure system should be national in practice as well as in name. Researchers undertaking high quality research should be able to access the infrastructure they need, irrespective of the size or type of their institution.

Who We Are

Independent Higher Education Australia Ltd. (IHEA) is a peak body established in 2001 to represent Australian independent (private sector) higher education institutions. Our membership spans independent universities, University Colleges and other institutes of higher education that are registered with the national higher education regulator, TEQSA, as well as associate members seeking registration.

There is a long tradition of independent higher education providers in Australia, with the first provider created as early as 1815, only 27 years after the first British settlement in Sydney in 1788. In total, five independent providers were established between 1815 and 1845, before the establishment of Australia's first public university. The fifth of these was St James College, which was created in 1845. The founders of St James College were then involved in creating Moore College in 1856 and remarkably Moore College, a University College, still exists and is Australia's longest continuously operating independent higher education provider.

Our Vision is that: students, domestic and international, have open and equitable access to world class independent higher education in Australia, built on the foundations of equity, choice and diversity.

Our Mission is to represent independent higher education and promote recognition and respect of independent providers as they contribute to Australian education, the Australian economy and to society in general. We achieve this by promoting continuous improvement of academic and quality standards within member institutions, by advocating equity for their staff and students and by delivering services that further strengthen independent providers' reputations as innovative, sustainable and responsive to the needs of industry and other relevant stakeholders in both higher education and vocational education and training. IHEA's commitment is to excellence, productivity and growth in independent higher education being delivered through a trusted Australian education system underpinned by equity, choice and diversity.

IHEA members have different missions, scales and course offerings across the full AQF range (Diplomas to Doctorates). IHEA has 93 members, which rises to over 120 if providers' constituent colleges and subsidiaries are included.

IHEA's 93 members comprise:

- Five private Universities (Australian University of Theology, Avondale University, Bond University, Torrens University and University of Divinity).
- Six University Colleges (ACAP University College, Australian University College of Divinity, Alphacrucis University College, Excelsia University College, Moore Theological College and SAE University College).
- Seventy–nine not–for–profit and for–profit institutions of higher education (which includes twelve full or partially self–accrediting institutes); and related corporate entities.
- Three corporate owners of higher education providers.

IHEA members teach approximately 74 percent of the students in the independent sector (i.e., more than 140,000 students) and educate students in a range of disciplines, including law, agricultural science, architecture, business, accounting, tourism and hospitality, education, health sciences, theology, creative arts, information technology, human services and social sciences.

IHEA holds a unique position in higher education as a representative peak body of higher education providers. Membership in IHEA is only open to providers registered, or seeking registration, with the Australian regulator – TEQSA. However, some IHEA members are dual– and multi–sector providers who also deliver VET and/or English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) courses.

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IHEA Member Institutions

IHEA INDEPENDENT HIGHER EDUCATION AUSTRALIA

Universities

- Australian University of Theology
- Avondale University
- Bond University
- Torrens University Australia
- University of Divinity

University Colleges

- ACAP University College
- Alphacrucis University College
- Australian University College of Divinity
- Excelsia University College
- Moore Theological College
- SAE University College

Institutes of Higher Education

- Academies Australasia Polytechnic
- Academy of Interactive Technology
- Acknowledge Education
- Adelaide Central School of Art
- AIBI Higher Education
- AIM Business School
- Australasian Academy of Higher Education
- Australasian College of Health and Wellness
- Australian Chiropractic College
- Australian College of Christian Studies
- Australian College of Nursing
- The Australian College of Physical Education
- Australian Data and Cyber Institute
- The Australian Institute of Music
- Barton Business School
- Campion College Australia
- Central Institute of Technology and Innovation
- Christian Heritage College
- CIHE Australia
- COLLARTS
- The College of Law
- Eastern College Australia
- Education Centre of Australia
  - Asia Pacific International College
  - ECA College of Health Sciences
  - Higher Education Leadership Institute
- Endeavour College of Natural Health
- EQUALS International
- Fairmont College Australia
- Gateway Business College
- Governance Institute of Australia
- Holmes Institute
- IBC Education
- iCareers Institute
- ICHM
- Ikon Institute of Australia
- International College of Management, Sydney
- International School of Global Leaders
- JMC Academy
- Kaplan Business School
- Kaplan Higher Education
- King's Own Institute
- Laurus Higher Education
- LCI Melbourne
- Le Cordon Bleu Australia
- Leaders Institute
- Lyons College
- Marcus Oldham College
- MIECAT
- Morling College
- Nan Tien Institute
- National Institute of Organisation Dynamics Australia
- Navitas
  - Curtin College
  - Edith Cowan College
  - Eynesbury College
  - Deakin College
  - La Trobe College Australia
  - Griffith College
  - SAIBT
  - SIBT
  - Western Sydney University International College
- Nova Higher Education
- Photography Studies College
- Polytechnic Institute Australia
- Russo Business School
- Sheridan Institute of Higher Education
- Skyline Higher Education Australia
- S P Jain School of Global Management
- Stanley College
- Sydney Institute of Higher Education
- Sydney International School of Technology and Commerce
- Sydney Met
- Southern Academy of Higher Education
- Tabor College
- The Tax Institute Higher Education
- Torrens University Australia
  - Think: Colleges
- Universal Business School Sydney
- Universal Higher Education
- UoW College
- UTS College
- Wentworth Institute

Economic contribution of independent higher education

