

UNSW Submission the Independent Review of Commonwealth Funding for Strategic Policy Work

The University of New South Wales (UNSW) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Independent Review of Commonwealth Funding for Strategic Policy Work.

Executive Summary

The following are the key points of this UNSW submission:

- 1) Part of UNSW's mission is to contribute to public debate on the challenges of our time.
- 2) UNSW has identified several barriers making it challenging for academics to contribute to strategic policy work:
 - a. Access barriers such as nationality and clearance level
 - b. Knowing about the existence of strategic policy work
 - c. Procurement issues such as applying for and contracting strategic policy work

Informing public debate

UNSW is committed to making a difference for the benefit of the wider community in Australia and around the world. This includes leading discussions on the key issues facing Australia and the broader Indo-Pacific region. UNSW is dedicated to contributing our expertise to public debate and to promote informed discussions on the challenges of our time. Working together with Commonwealth agencies within Australia's national security community is a part of this, including, for example, through UNSW's Defence Research Institute and UNSW Canberra's School of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Expert Advice

Expert advice is critical to supporting decision making across all levels of government, including in strategic policy. Obtaining advice from external sources is an excellent insulator from inadvertently creating echo chambers that recycle the same ideas and advice. Particularly in the current geo-political environment, universities are uniquely placed to provide a variety of perspectives, backgrounds and experiences that are relevant to Australia's particular national security challenges. Creating a clear pathway for academics to be more involved in consulting on strategic policy work is therefore desirable. A key step for this will need to be to make policy processes and context more readily available to an academic audience, and to equip academics to make their work accessible. Examples of recent UNSW research informing strategic policy include the work undertaken by UNSW Canberra's School of Humanities and Social Sciences in War Studies, for example in Contextualising Littoral

Manoeuvres¹. Understanding Australia's military history is critical to informing future strategy and learning from the past, and UNSW Canberra is in a unique position to facilitate these discussions.

There also is scope to think about how think tanks could work more closely with academics to together inform strategic policy work. A balance between public-sector experience, academic expertise, and a background in, for example, the armed forces ensures diverse and robust policy advice by bringing together a variety of backgrounds. This could be achieved by seconding academics to think tanks, thereby bridging the gap between research and policy to increase the likelihood that policymaking reflects the most current and best evidence. Academics could provide expertise at different stages of strategy policy work to help shape or co-design the project, and to evaluate the success and impact once it is completed.

Barriers

There are multiple barriers universities face to providing strategic policy work to Commonwealth agencies within Australia's national security community. UNSW supports the Government's outreach to academics to familiarise themselves with the policy-making process and acknowledges the work by the Behavioural Economics team in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet².

Access barriers

A large proportion of researchers at universities come from across the globe. By restricting which academics can participate in strategic policy work, diversity of thought risks being restricted. While certain strategic policy work appropriately must follow relevant clearance requirements, it would be worthwhile to explore when clearance is needed, and when strategic policy work can be undertaken by subject matter experts regardless of nationality/ clearance level. This would ensure experience regardless of background can contribute to the general understanding of an issue.

Knowing about strategic policy work

A big barrier academics who would like to contribute to strategic policy work face is awareness of the research questions and the work to be contracted. To be able to contribute, knowing that tenders exist is critical. There are multiple ways to address this barrier:

- Make new work visible by proactively approaching the broader research community;
- Proactively reach out to universities to understand their areas of expertise;
- Build institutional relationships with universities, particularly with their partnering teams that ensure a broad range of academics with subject matter expertise are considered;
- For consultancies, work with organisations such as UniSearch³, a dedicated provider of expert opinion and consulting services for UNSW academics, to identify experts.

Applying for strategic policy work

Applying for a tender is a significant time commitment for academics who also manage a teaching and research workload. To increase participation in tenders, a possibility is to undertake two-stage applications, that initially require only a short outline of the proposed work, with promising applicants then invited to submit a full proposal. This approach has recently been adopted by the Australian Research Council's Discovery Projects stream⁴ to streamline Expression of Interest from applicants, with this model being of significant benefit to academics that are time constrained.

¹ See <https://www.unsw.edu.au/canberra/about-us/our-schools/hass/our-research/war-studies>

² See <https://behaviouraleconomics.pmc.gov.au/blog/making-research-matter-tips-academics-engaging-policy-makers>

³ See <https://unisearch.com.au/>

⁴ See <https://www.arc.gov.au/news-publications/media/feature-articles/discovery-projects-scheme-two-stage-application-process>

Contracting strategic policy work

While some contracts are large, and therefore require bespoke contractual agreements, often strategic policy work requires a smaller quantum of investment. This means that there might be scope to adopt a more risk-based contracting approach in line with the Commonwealth Procurement Rules and other relevant legislation.

To accelerate contracting, there are a couple of areas that could be considered:

- Explore the possibility to use standard form head agreements more readily for strategic policy work. This could mirror existing head agreements such as the Defence Science Partnership program that all public universities in Australia have signed to work with DSTG⁵.
- Most government departments have different terms and conditions in their contracts. There is an opportunity to explore if these terms and conditions could be unified as they pertain to strategic policy work for Commonwealth agencies within Australia's national security community.
- There is a frequent use of clauses that lead to universities such as UNSW having to engage lawyers, even for small-scale consulting or policy work:
 - An unreasonably high level of liability included in the contract that is not commensurate with the risk of the work being performed.
 - Conflict of interest clauses that apply to all staff members of the university, not just the team working on the project.

Conclusion

Increasing the engagement of academics employed by Australian universities to inform strategic policy work for Australia's national security community will bring diversity of thought, frank and fearless advice based on the available evidence, and contribute to our broader public debate around Australia's strategic circumstances. UNSW is looking forward to continuing to work together with Australia's national security community to maintain our Australian way of life.

Should you wish to discuss any issue raised in this submission, please do not hesitate to contact Senior Government Relations Manager, Ms Maxie Hanft, on 0481 259 417 or m.hanft@unsw.edu.au.

⁵ See <https://www.dst.defence.gov.au/partner-with-us/university>