Strategic Research Priorities – Questions and Answers

Background

What are the Strategic Research Priorities?
The Strategic Research Priorities (SRPs) aim to drive investment in areas that are of immediate and critical importance to addressing the societal challenges facing Australia and the world.

The SRPs will complement the broad base of support for research provided by the Australian Government and foster a more coordinated and strategic approach within the identified areas.

Why are the SRPs important?
In developing the National Research Investment Plan (Investment Plan), the Australian Research Committee (ARCom) identified that Australia’s investment in research would be most effective in meeting the needs of the nation if it were set within a comprehensive planning framework.

Strategic whole-of-government research priorities are central to this framework. Such priorities will encourage a critical research mass to develop and be supported in areas of competitive advantage and national importance.

The SRPs will assist the Australian Government to ensure that there is sufficient scale of effort to achieve a strong impact in these critical areas.

How do the SRPs fit within the broader policy settings for research in Australia?
The SRPs are a vital part of the research investment planning process outlined in the Investment Plan. This process will enable a coordinated, whole-of-government approach to research investment that is structured to meet national needs and provide value for money.

A process of this sort is likely, over time, to result in an increased proportion of Australian Government research investment being allocated on a strategic basis so as to meet government needs for research.
This does not mean that funding should be directed to applied, mission-based research to the exclusion of other forms of research. Even in the priority areas, a significant amount of the research will need to be early-stage, basic research.

The Investment Plan highlights the importance of a strong, cohesive research fabric that allows Australia to work on today’s challenges while maintaining the capacity to address tomorrow’s needs as they arrive. As stated in Action 6 of the Investment Plan, the Australian Government will continue to support a range of high-quality basic and applied research to provide the multidisciplinary capacity required to respond flexibly to evolving challenges.

**How were the priorities identified?**

In December 2012, the Chief Scientist presented a set of five societal challenges to the Prime Minister’s Science, Engineering and Innovation Council (PMSEIC) as the first step in the process to develop the SRPs. These challenges were endorsed by PMSEIC and adopted as the overarching structure for the development of the priorities.

The challenges are those areas which are the most important facing Australia and its place in the world and provide the framework within which elements of the Australian Government’s research expenditure can be prioritised in areas of strategic importance to Australia.

These challenges are:

- Living in a Changing Environment
- Promoting Population Health and Wellbeing
- Managing our Food and Water Assets
- Securing Australia's Place in a Changing World
- Lifting Productivity and Economic Growth

In February 2013 the Chief Scientist, in his capacity as Chair of ARCom, convened a forum of over 100 esteemed research leaders, senior members of the public service and members of industry to assist with developing the priorities. The expert groups were asked to identify the three most important research areas within each societal challenge.

ARCom considered the recommended priority areas at its 5 March meeting and developed advice on the SRPs and a process for their implementation. The SRPs were endorsed by the Australian Government and announced on 21 June 2013.

**Why are specific disciplines not identified as part of the priority setting?**

Addressing the SRPs and the societal challenges will require effort from across the full spectrum of research disciplines, including the physical and life sciences, engineering, information and communications technology and the humanities and social sciences.

A strong national research fabric, as described in the Investment Plan, is needed to ensure that Australia is able to respond effectively to current and emerging societal challenges. The research fabric represents the full spectrum of research endeavour across all the sectors and disciplines.
Are the National Research Priorities being discontinued?

Yes. The National Research Priorities (NRPs) have been discontinued. However, the period 2013-14 will be a transition year, in order to allow departments and agencies to phase out reporting requirements for the NRPs and develop appropriate procedures to align with the new SRPs.

Impact on the research sector

What will happen to research in areas not covered by the SRPs?

The Australian Government will continue to provide a broad base of support for research through existing mechanisms. Australia's research capacity will continue to be supported by the Australian Government and further strengthened through implementing the actions in the Investment Plan.

The Investment Plan highlights the importance of supporting a balance of mission-led and investigator-led research across the disciplines in order to ensure a strong, cohesive research fabric.

How will the SRPs impact on research in universities?

The SRPs provide a framework for the Australian Government, through its departments and agencies, to coordinate research investment and encourage a critical mass to develop and be supported in areas of competitive advantage and national importance.

While universities will not be expected to align their research profiles with the SRPs, they do provide a clear statement of the goals for research outcomes in Australia. It is important that the Australian Government articulate and communicate these outcomes in order to foster collaboration across the research sector and internationally.

Funding

Will all Australian Government research funding be tied to the SRPs?

No. The Australian Government will continue to provide support for research through a variety of targeted and untargeted funding mechanisms, including base research funding to universities, competitive research grants and support for the distinctive mission and core activities of publicly funded research agencies.

What proportion of funding will be allocated to the SRPs?

It is important that the scale of investment be sufficient to ensure that Australia has the capacity and capability to deliver research in priority areas. At this early stage, the Australian Government has not mandated that a specific proportion of government funding be directed to the priority areas.

First, we need to develop a better understanding of Australia's existing capacity and capability in priority areas, where current investment is currently directed and the probable impact over time of aligning a proportion of investment in priority areas.
The Australian Research Committee is undertaking an analysis of current capacity and capability and is developing a framework for whole-of-government reporting on investment and activities. This groundwork will be used to inform future advice on policy interventions to support the SRPs, including considering whether there is a need to change the level and balance of investment in priority areas. This will include considering all of the fundamental elements identified in the Investment Plan: publicly funded research, research workforce, infrastructure, collaboration and business research.

How will the SRPs impact on research grants provided through the ARC and the NHMRC?

The period 2013-14 will be a transition year to allow departments and agencies, including the ARC and the NHMRC, to remove the current requirement to report against the former National Research Priorities from their internal processes and to develop appropriate procedures to align with the new SRPs, in consultation with the Australian Research Committee.

Monitoring and evaluation

How will the SRPs be implemented?

The Chair of the Australian Research Committee (ARCom) will write to all departments and agencies engaged in the funding of research outlining the implementation process.

ARCom will consider the existing capacity and capability in the research system for each of the SRPs, taking into account all of the fundamental elements as described in the Investment Plan: publicly funded research, workforce, infrastructure, collaboration and business research.

This capacity and capability mapping will be provided to relevant departments and agencies as a baseline indicator of the research system’s capacity in the priority areas. It will support informed decisions on whether the capacity and capability exists to address the SRPs or if interventions are required to address gaps or barriers.

Departments and agencies will be asked to develop a plan for implementing the priorities within their organisations by ensuring that a proportion of their research investments are directed towards the SRPs in a way which is consistent with their existing mission and core activities. Departments and agencies will also be asked to report annually on activities or interventions undertaken to address the SRPs.

ARCom will continue to be responsible for coordinating and monitoring the implementation of the SRPs and preparing advice to the Australian Government on possible actions to address any gaps or barriers in Australia’s current research capacity.

What is the timeline for implementation?

The SRPs commence on 1 July 2013. However, the period 2013-14 will be a transition year, in order to allow departments and agencies to develop appropriate procedures to align with the new SRPs. The SRPs will be fully implemented by 1 July 2014.
How long will the SRPs last?

The SRPs will cover the period from 2013-14 through to 2015-16 and will be reviewed triennially as part of the development of the next National Research Investment Plan.

How will the SRPs be evaluated?

As part of implementing Action 12 of the Investment Plan, the Australian Research Committee will develop a mechanism for evaluating the national research investment planning process, including the SRPs.

It is likely this process will draw on the capacity and capability mapping for each of the SRPs being undertaken as part of the implementation, in order to evaluate the success of the SRPs in improving Australia’s capacity in these critical areas.

For more information

Go to www.innovation.gov.au/StrategicResearchPriorities