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Watt review takes “contact sport” to new level

‘The Review of Research Policy and Funding Arrangements’ provides a strong blueprint for the future of research, rightly identifying university and industry collaboration as a ‘contact sport’ in need of improvement, says Group of Eight (Go8) Chief Executive Vicki Thomson.

The review, conducted by Dr Ian Watt AO, contains many recommendations that, if adopted, will greatly assist Australian universities and business and industry work more cohesively for the nation’s future benefit. It is yet another welcome example of a new willingness in Australia for all those involved in research policy development and implementation to find a common direction.

“As we have seen in today’s release of the ERA 2015 National Report, Australia’s universities are world class in their research. Dr Watt’s report is an excellent starting point in focusing this excellent research capacity to further engage with business, government and the community for maximum national effect.

“However, we must be careful with both the detail and the implementation of elements of the Watt review to ensure we get the balance right.

“In particular, the planned streamlining of research block grants, whilst broadly supported, will leave the funding of the indirect costs (overheads) of public research as low as 22.5 cents in the dollar. This compares to 80c in the dollar in UK and is under half the widely agreed minimum level of funding for indirect costs in Australia. This is funding that is needed to literally keep the lights on for the excellent Australian research that underpins national innovation.”

The Go8 is pleased that Dr Watt was prepared to deal seriously with the “contact sport” that is collaboration between universities and business. His plans for both incentives and programs to promote this collaboration dovetails with the Go8’s recently released Innovation 2016 strategy, which the Review acknowledges and commends.
The Go8 plan includes:

- The creation of a $200m early stage commercialisation fund;
- Expanding participation in internship programs at both undergraduate and postgraduate level;
- Drafting elements of a reward and recognition framework for academics that promotes the symbiosis between excellent fundamental research and impact research that delivers outcomes for the community;
- Establishing an Industry/Innovation Board to help the Go8 implement its strategy; and
- Supporting the development of a national research impact assessment mechanism.

“As Australia’s leading group of research intensive and industry engaged universities the Go8 will engage willingly and energetically with government and other innovation stakeholders to ensure we get right the details right. It is a document for the future.”

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