AUSTRALIAN BUSINESS DEANS COUNCIL

# ABDC submission: Review of Research Requirements: 'Australian University Category'

By email
7 September 2026

The Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) welcomes ATEC's review of research requirements in the Australian University category and the opportunity to provide feedback on policy design to progress the SERD recommendation on research specialisation.

As the peak body for Australian university business schools, ABDC supports a strong, resilient, and sustainable research ecosystem that delivers impact, innovation, and raises national productivity. These goals can be achieved through institutional research specialisation; however, adequate safeguards are needed to ensure that:

- research informed teaching remains the cornerstone of the university system;
- universities have autonomy to pursue research strategies aligned with their unique institutional missions, and responsive to their local context; and
- there is sufficient investment for interdisciplinary and foundational research across a broad range of disciplines, not just those identified as priority areas.

To assess research quality and performance in a specialised model, the ABDC recommends that field-normalised standards are used. Research quality standards should also capture the societal impact of research, including its contribution to stakeholders outside of academia. The ABDC has developed a Societal Impact Framework (ABDC SIF) that enables business researchers and business schools to capture their scholarly, organisational/governmental, and societal impact. This tool has applications beyond business disciplines, helping researchers and universities demonstrate research activity and performance.

Risks and transition challenges will be observed differently across the ABDC's membership, which includes a mix of teaching-focussed, research intensive, regional, metropolitan, and dual sector universities.[1] For some institutions, specialisation could have effects on student experience, potentially limiting research training pathways, and be at odds with Universities Accord objectives for equity and tertiary attainment.

The following sections provide more detailed comments in response to the consultation questions.

The ABDC looks forward to continuing engagement with ATEC as reforms are progressed.

For any further inquiries, please contact me (president@abdc.edu.au), or the ABDC's Executive Director, Caroline Falshaw: office@abdc.edu.au

Regards,
**Professor Maryam Omari**
**ABDC President**

[1] The ABDC includes 36-member business schools: https://abdc.edu.au/about/our-members/

### Demonstrating depth, scale, and sustainability in a specialised model

As noted in the discussion paper, the definition of “materially higher quality research” in a specialised model is critical and requires clear indicators. In designing any reforms, the ABDC agrees that it is essential to consider interactions and timing of any changes alongside TEQSA’s Determination 2021, and the finalisation of the ARC’s Research Insights Capability.

Performance indicators should be field normalised to take account of differing research norms and impacts across disciplines. In addition to volume-based metrics, we argue that there should be at least a 50 per cent weighting on societal impact to measure research performance in business disciplines. The ABDC SIF has been developed to help researchers capture illustrative evidence and map the societal impact journey. This tool can be used to capture information about how scholars interact with end users of research to solve real-world problems.

### Safeguards to support research quality, scholarship, teaching and learning, and student outcomes

The ABDC generally supports the rationale of SERD recommendation 3 regarding research specialisation. Concentrating research resources and capability in areas of institutional strength has the potential to provide greater mission differentiation, and better coordinated investments in infrastructure and capability. However, the ABDC is concerned about revising the provider category standards if minimum disciplinary breadth is expressed only as a minimum of 4-digit FORs. As the discussion paper observes, this minimum could result in universities being technically compliant with a research strategy that is too narrow to be sustainable. University research needs sufficient disciplinary breadth to:

- uphold the research–teaching nexus;
- support and undertake interdisciplinary and non-traditional research; and
- maintain research capacity.

It is critical that any policy change maintains the research–teaching nexus as research capability and research informed teaching differentiates the university provider category from other categories in the tertiary system. If the current Part B settings are not retained, safeguards and incentives are needed to ensure sufficient disciplinary breadth for graduate employability outcomes and HDR supervision capability. Research informed education is of increasing importance in an AI world, preparing students with distinctly human skills in critical thinking, communication, ethics, and judgement.

A risk of specialisation for business disciplines, and social sciences more broadly, is that institutions concentrate academic roles with a research component in STEM disciplines that attract high levels of Category 1 funding and have high FWCIs and other impact metrics. This could result in the creation of ‘teaching ghettos’ where learning and teaching is no longer underpinned by active scholarship, undermining the university provider category. This could also potentially undermine higher degree research programs, at a time when industry partnered PhDs and research programs is growing, tackling real world problems that require multi-disciplinary team approaches.

Engaging students in scholarly research projects with academic researchers is a critical part of what university education offers that is distinct from other provider categories. Research training contributes to research capacity across higher education and industry, preparing graduates for work.

Specialisation could potentially compromise student experience, particularly in regional universities if adequate safeguards for local research ecosystems and capability are not implemented.

*Recommendations:*

- The ABDC supports safeguards, such as a minimum research requirement in non-specialisation areas, to ensure sufficient disciplinary breadth to maintain research training, curriculum renewal and overall research capability.
- Consideration be given to developing consortiums in HDR training and coursework to ensure that students have access to co-delivered programs.

### Institutional, regulatory, and system level risks

SERD's proposal of voluntary uptake for research specialisation is vital for upholding university autonomy; however, self-selection could have the unintended consequence of eroding institutional differentiation if universities are incentivised to follow today's funding at the expense of maintaining research capacity across a broad range of disciplines. This could risk a loss of research capacity in foundational areas that do not draw substantial grant or industry funding but nonetheless are critical to the evolution of knowledge in business disciplines.

Government and business cannot always anticipate future workforce needs accurately — system flexibility, and a degree of continuing research breadth, is needed to encourage innovation, interdisciplinary collaboration and curiosity-driven research. Overemphasis on regulation and central control of funding to 'priority' areas risks missing crucial innovations and breakthroughs from curiosity-driven research and interdisciplinary collaboration.

*Recommendations:*

- Incentives for universities to maintain adequate discipline coverage.
- Monitoring and mechanisms to ensure system sustainability and an adequate breadth and distribution of disciplines.

### Transition arrangements

As noted in the consultation paper and Threshold Standards, changes in university research policy require long lead times, with complex impacts on staffing, strategy and governance.

*Recommendations:*

- Changes to the Threshold Standards should be implemented with adequate transition and grandfathering arrangements to avoid regulatory and reporting burdens.
- Existing providers in the university provider category should be deemed to continue to meet the category standard while new reporting requirements are phased in.