



The Australia-India Strategic Research Fund: Evaluation

Executive Summary

Disclaimer

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Report commissioned by the Department of Industry, Innovation and Science (2017)

I believe AISRF is all about forging collaborations between Australia and India, to have impact on dual economies for long-term benefit. I feel as though AISRF projects are aimed at establishing important areas and focus. It's not just blue-sky research. It aims to develop solid outcomes. (General stakeholder / panel member)

Science and commercialisation are essential for increasing Australia's productivity. They enhance the quality and effectiveness of Australia's knowledge and technology base, leading to globally competitive industries. International science and innovation partnerships extend Australia's research and development output and impact. They open access to world-leading expertise, infrastructure, markets, investment and funding programs. Through strong international partnerships, Australian researchers are able to enhance their skills, experience and opportunities.

Leveraging Australian Government investments in science and commercialisation activities (both financial and intellectual) internationally supports a dynamic Australian innovation system. The Department of Industry, Innovation and Science (DIIS) is responsible for promoting increased collaboration between Australian researchers and those in other countries. The AISRF helps Australian researchers from public and private sectors to collaborate with Indian scientists in leading-edge scientific research projects and workshops. The AISRF is Australia's largest fund dedicated to bilateral research and one of India's largest sources of support for international science. The objectives of the AISRF are to:

- Increase the uptake of leading-edge science and technology (S&T) by supporting:
 - collaboration between Australian and Indian researchers in strategically focused, leading-edge scientific research and technology projects; and
 - strengthening strategic alliances between Australian and Indian researchers;
- Facilitate Australia's and India's access to the global S&T system.

In August 2017, DIIS commissioned Social Compass to undertake an evaluation of the AISRF to assess the program’s effectiveness, efficiency and impact for the period 2013 to 2017 inclusive. The evaluation covers all AISRF funding arrangements and grants awarded from 2013 to 2017, with a primary focus on the DIIS administered project components of the AISRF. This includes grants awarded under Rounds 7 to 10 of the AISRF’s Science & Technology Fund and Biotechnology Fund and Round 2 of the Grand Challenge Fund.

The Department’s Statement of Requirement required a comprehensive evaluation of the AISRF to be undertaken against the criteria of appropriateness, effectiveness, efficiency, integration, performance assessment and strategic policy alignment. Social Compass developed a mixed-methods approach that incorporated qualitative and quantitative data collection from a range of sources designed to best address the evaluation questions. Three key methods were utilised: document review; on-line survey; and stakeholder interviews. Key findings and recommendations arising from the triangulation of these methods are as follows.

Key findings

1	<i>Appropriateness</i>
1.1	The original strategic policy objectives of the AISRF are still relevant and should be retained as its core focus. However, the value of engagement with business and commercialisation, as well as acknowledging the diplomatic benefits of the fund, could be more clearly articulated.
1.2	In the context of Australia’s commitment to science collaboration as underpinning Australia’s future prosperity, and the increasing diplomatic importance of the Australia-India relationship, there is a demonstrated need for the AISRF.
1.3	Consistent with 2013 evaluation findings, the activity is being undertaken by the most appropriate level of government, the Department of Industry, Innovation, and Science (DIIS). The two teams currently responsible (International Science Collaboration team, and AusIndustry) have good reputations with their stakeholders and they have collaborated closely in the transition of program administration to AusIndustry. This collaboration should continue to ensure utilisation of the expertise and knowledge of the International Science Collaboration team.

2	<i>Effectiveness</i>
2.1	The AISRF is effective in achieving the AISRF objectives. However, monitoring to ascertain the level to which relevant projects achieve commercialisation outcomes would be useful.
2.2	The AISRF program has clear and consistent objectives, however they do not currently include the diplomatic value of the program.
2.3	Individual participants are reporting very high rates of satisfaction in both their professional and personal development.
2.4	The Australian research sector has gained access to significant new research and knowledge, including important international datasets via AISRF projects.
2.5	The ongoing bilateral relations fostered by the AISRF have been consistently positive and collegial, with a generalised finding from stakeholders that the AISRF is a direct contributor to positive diplomatic relations.

2	<i>Effectiveness</i>
2.6	In the absence of the AISRF, many successful research projects would not have gone ahead, including several documented large-scale projects which are of significant importance to Australia, India, and globally.
2.7	The AISRF is having a direct economic impact, employing on average approximately 16 full-time positions per project, with 5.3 of these being Australian. Better data systems are required to further understand this impact. Very few unsuccessful AISRF applicants managed to subsequently secure alternative funding to go ahead with their project, and successful applicants typically received cash and in-kind funding from their own institute.
2.8	While the AISRF is meeting its current objectives, the lack of data on commercialisation and public good outcomes means that the program's value for money cannot be easily assessed.

3	<i>Efficiency</i>
3.1	The evidence from this evaluation suggests the fund is administered and delivered in an efficient manner in meeting its objectives, including strengthening diplomatic relations.
3.2	The compliance costs incurred by stakeholders are deemed to be fair and appropriate in relation to the size and overall value of the fund.
3.3	The AISRF represents value for money in efficiently meeting its objectives, in particular the collaboration between Australian and Indian researchers and strengthening of strategic alliances, as well as diplomatic relations. A substantial return on investment could be realised by and better measured with clear reporting frameworks and by working to improve what is currently low collaboration with business.

4	<i>Integration</i>
4.1	The AISRF is a bilateral science program that is highly consistent with broader Australian and State Government science policy including the National Innovation Science Agenda (NISA).
4.2	The AISRF ability to fund large stand-alone projects would appear to reduce the need for coordination with the majority of Commonwealth and State programs. Where it does cross over, such as in the case of the NHMRC, there is insufficient evidence as to whether coordination could be further improved or is operating at an optimal level.
4.3	The efficiency of the AISRF could have been enhanced if some funding had not been tied to the Official Development Assistance (ODA) funding, as this would avoid some eligibility issues.

5	<i>Performance Assessment</i>
5.1	There is only one "Key Performance Indicator" for the AISRF: <i>Number of collaborative research projects completed that reported strengthened international relationships</i> . This does not sufficiently capture the full outputs and outcomes of the AISRF and therefore means demonstrating value for money is not possible using that measure.
5.2	There are large amounts of data within project reports and program files, and DIIS could develop the systems to aggregate key aspects of this regular program reporting data.

5	Performance Assessment
5.3	The existing Evaluation Ready Data Matrix for the program could be reviewed with a focus on program impact and value for money.

6	Strategic Policy Alignment
6.1	The AISRF is highly consistent with the Australian Government’s broader approach to science and innovation, and foreign diplomacy.
6.2	The AISRF is supporting Australian Government objectives in relation to bilateral engagement with India, via the long-term maintenance of this bilateral initiative and its outcomes of deep engagement between the two countries in science and innovation as well as intercultural engagement and understanding.
6.3	The AISRF is playing a unique role in the Australia-India research relationship and is highly complementary to other Australian science programs and policies.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: While retaining the building of research collaborations as its core focus, the Department should consider further developing the objectives of the AISRF to

(a) More explicitly support the engagement of business in commercialising research outcomes. Given AISRF project timelines are usually shorter than is necessary to reach product commercialisation, this may include opportunities for assistance or facilitation for researchers, beyond the AISRF project.

(b) Recognise the diplomatic value of the AISRF.

Recommendation 2: There is a demonstrated need for the AISRF, therefore the fund should be continued. Negotiation of ongoing funding should explore the value of increasing funding and/or making the fund permanent.

Note: The 2018 budget did include an extension for the AISRF for four years, but not permanent funding.

Recommendation 3: AusIndustry should continue to liaise with the International Science Collaboration Team, to incorporate their expertise of cultural and sociological matters, such as Indian engagement, into the future operation of the AISRF.

Recommendation 4: The efficiency of the AISRF could be enhanced by ensuring some funding is not tied to sources such as ODA with eligibility restrictions. .

Note: The 2018 budget extension for the AISRF is fully funded through DIIS and therefore does not include ODA funding.

Recommendation 5: The Department should maintain formal mechanisms of feedback for unsuccessful applications.

Recommendation 6: The Department should supplement its case study methodology of demonstrating impact with a quantitative reporting and monitoring framework. This can be based on collation of existing program performance data that carefully considers all objectives of the AISRF. This could be supported by the Department reviewing and updating its Evaluation Ready Data Matrix in relation to program impact and value for money.