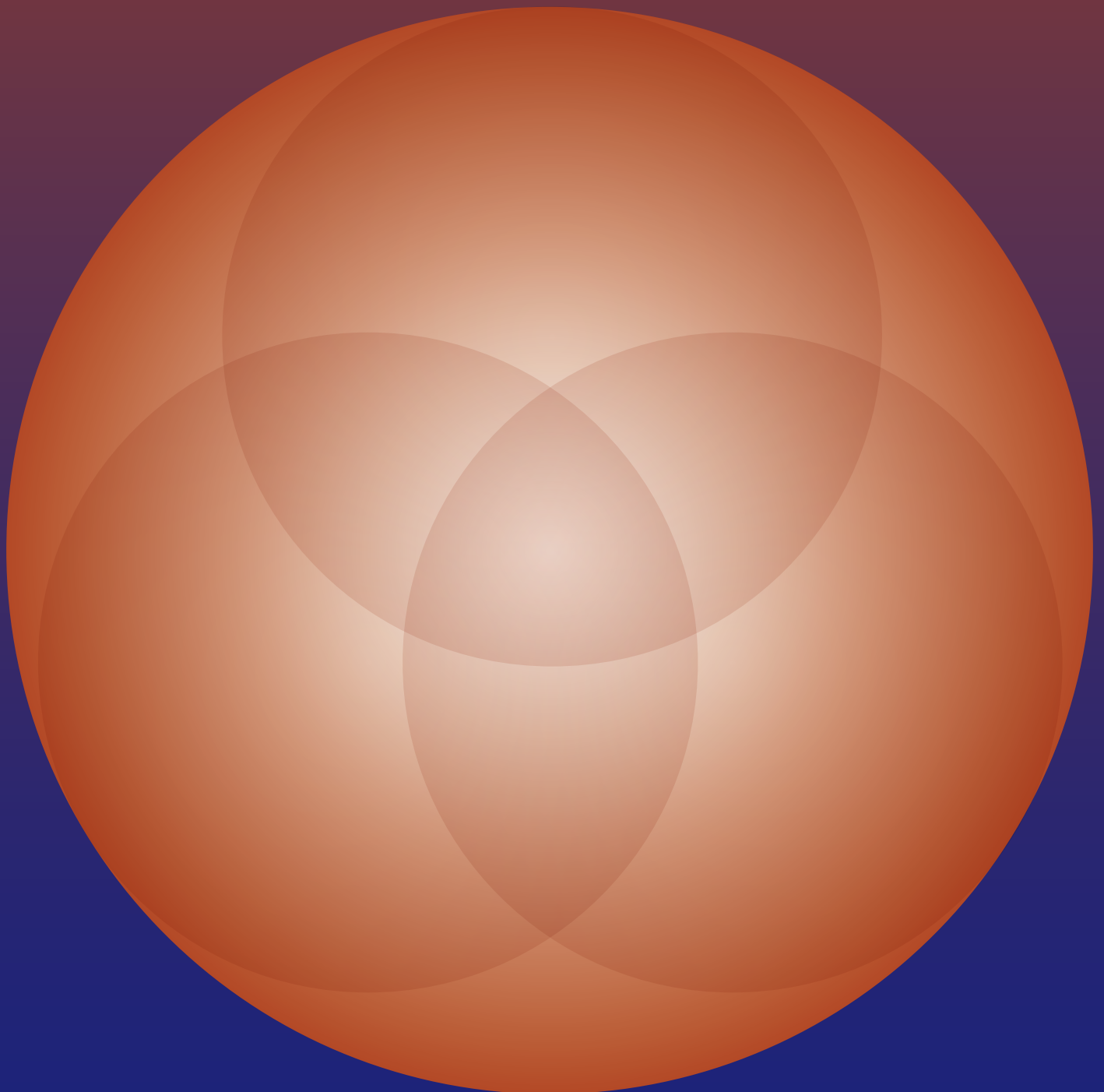

Research Governance as Infrastructure: Coordinating School-Based Research in Australia's Federated Education System

October 2026

The Community of Associate Deans Research in Education (cADRE)
is a Network of the Australian Council of Deans of Education

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Abbreviations

ACDE	Australian Council of Deans of Education
ACRES	Application for Conducting Research with Education Sites
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
AERO	Australian Educational Research Organisation
cADRE	Community of Associate Deans Research in Education
HDR	Higher Degree by Research
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
NAF	National Application Form
NHMRC	National Health and Medical Research Council
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
REN	Research in Education Network

Background and Purpose

A national roundtable convened by the Community of Associate Deans Research in Education (cADRE) on 26 February 2026 brought together representatives from universities and education systems and jurisdictions from across Australia, including government, Catholic and independent sectors. The discussion explored the current education research governance landscape, particularly the complexities of research approval processes in school settings, and opportunities for improvement.

This white paper synthesises insights from the roundtable and translates them into a set of practical recommendations for universities, schools, and education systems. The paper is designed for academic researchers, school leaders, system-level approval bodies, and professional associations seeking to streamline research approvals while supporting high-quality, policy-relevant research.

Key Messages

- Education research governance is a critical part of Australia’s national research infrastructure. It shapes what research can be conducted in Australian education settings, at what scale, and under what conditions.
- Governance arrangements must balance innovation and evidence generation with child safety, privacy, workload, legislative compliance and public accountability.
- Structural tensions in the system stem from Australia’s federated education architecture, and pressures on school and system capacity, rather than from opposition to research.
- National coordination mechanisms such as the *Research in Education Network* (REN) and the *Application for Conducting Research with Education Sites* (ACRES) are already strengthening consistency and interoperability across jurisdictions.
- A coherent reform agenda can be organised around three interconnected pillars: **Coordination, Partnership** and **Capability & Capacity**, focusing on governance as enabling infrastructure rather than compliance alone.

Executive Summary

Research governance plays a critical role in shaping Australia's education research ecosystem. The processes through which research is approved, coordinated and supported can influence the scale, scope and conditions under which research can be undertaken in Australian education settings. As demand for evidence-informed policy and practice continues to grow, governance expectations around child safety, privacy, data security, public accountability and workloads in schools have intensified. This has led to increasing scrutiny of research conducted with students, educators and school communities.

This white paper argues an important challenge in the current landscape is coordinating nationally oriented research needs across jurisdictionally distributed governance systems, while also supporting education researchers to engage effectively with education authorities. Within Australia's federated education system, responsibilities for education research governance are necessarily dispersed across education systems in each state and territory; however, researchers are increasingly seeking coordinated, cross-jurisdictional studies that existing governance arrangements were not designed to support. Tensions around research approvals are often interpreted by education researchers as inconsistency across jurisdictions or duplication of processes. In practice, they largely reflect legitimate differences in legislative frameworks, policy priorities and system responsibilities relevant to different education systems and jurisdictions.

The national roundtable convened by cADRE in February 2026 highlighted both the tensions and pressures, as well as reform momentum, already underway across the sector. Participants noted that while governance processes can appear fragmented, they are also evolving in response to shared challenges and growing collaboration across jurisdictions. Importantly, there was also agreement among participants that high-quality educational research should be co-designed with, and responsive to, the priorities, constraints and professional judgement of schools and systems; strengthening education research governance therefore depends on researchers listening carefully to school-sector voices and aligning projects with their evidence needs.

Established and developing national initiatives highlighted at the roundtable, including the Research in Education Network (REN) and the Application for Conducting Research with Education Sites (ACRES), provide an important foundation for more coordinated and interoperable governance infrastructure. These developments do not replace jurisdictional authority, but indicate a shift toward greater alignment, transparency and connectivity across the system.

During the roundtable discussion, three structural tensions were identified as shaping the current education research governance environment:

1. National research imperatives versus federated governance structures;
2. High-value research priorities versus operational capacity and risk constraints; and
3. Research independence versus system priorities and accountability requirements.

Drawing on the roundtable discussion, this paper proposes a reform agenda organised around three interconnected pillars that aim to strengthen governance as enabling infrastructure:

- **Coordination:** strengthening interoperability, transparency and alignment across governance systems for research projects, while preserving jurisdictional autonomy.
- **Partnership:** embedding earlier and more collaborative engagement among researchers, education research governance bodies and schools into proposed research projects.
- **Capability and Capacity:** investing in the workforce, infrastructure and systems required to sustain high-quality education research governance over time.

This paper outlines a staged reform pathway that builds on existing initiatives. In the short term, the priority is to consolidate and strengthen current mechanisms such as REN and ACRES; in the medium term, the focus shifts to improving interoperability and reducing duplication across jurisdictions; and over time, the intent is to support the emergence of a mature governance ecosystem characterised by shared principles, connected systems and strong relational infrastructure. Importantly, this agenda does not seek to standardise education research governance across Australia's education systems and jurisdictions. Rather, it seeks to improve alignment and connectivity within a federated structure whereby systems and jurisdictions retain autonomy while friction is reduced for researchers, education systems and schools. The overall intent is to strengthen a coherent national education research governance infrastructure that protects participants and enables high-quality, impactful educational research.

Why Education Research Governance Matters Now

Australia's education systems are increasingly data-driven and expected to deliver evidence-informed policy and practice in response to complex and rapidly evolving challenges. Governments, education authorities, schools and communities are seeking stronger evidence to support improvement across areas including student well-being, equity, inclusion, workforce sustainability, social cohesion, digital learning and educational outcomes (Australian Education Research Organisation, N.D; Australian Government Department of Education, 2024). In this context, school-based research has become an important component of educational improvement and reform.

At the same time, the governance environment surrounding educational research has become significantly more complex. Expectations relating to child safety, privacy, data security, public accountability and workloads in schools have intensified, increasing scrutiny of research conducted with students, educators and school communities (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2025; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024). Education systems must therefore balance growing demand for research engagement with expanding responsibilities for risk management, legislative compliance, public accountability and participant well-being. These pressures are occurring within Australia's federated education system, where governance arrangements differ across states, territories and education systems, including government, Catholic and independent education systems. Moreover, responsibilities are sometimes blurred. Universities are typically responsible for human research ethics review, while education systems determine whether and under what conditions research may proceed within schools and education sites.

Human research ethics review and education-authority authorisation are complementary but distinct processes. HRECs (Human Research Ethics Committees) are university-level committees that assess the ethical acceptability of human research under the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research 2025* (NHMRC, 2025); as such, they operate at the institutional level and have responsibility for ethics review across a broad range of disciplinary contexts. By contrast, education authorities determine whether and under what conditions research may occur in their sites. While clearer institutional guidance can assist education researchers in navigating the relationship between ethics review and jurisdictional authorisation processes, direct engagement with education authorities remains the most reliable source of advice regarding jurisdiction-specific access requirements.

As researchers increasingly pursue large-scale, cross-jurisdictional and nationally coordinated studies, governance arrangements have become more visible and consequential. Researchers frequently encounter differing approval processes, legislative requirements, policy priorities and operational expectations across jurisdictions. While such differences are often experienced as inconsistency or duplication, they largely reflect legitimate local or jurisdictional variation in governance obligations, accountability structures and policy contexts.

Education systems are also operating within challenging conditions shaped by workforce shortages, growing administrative demands and competing reform agendas (Granziera et al., 2025;

Windle et al., 2023). These realities influence not only the capacity of schools to participate in research, but also how systems assess feasibility, risk and cumulative burden across school communities. As a result, education research governance extends beyond ethical considerations to encompass strategic alignment, operational sustainability, participant burden, data stewardship and public trust.

The increasing complexity of education research governance is in tension with demand for educational research. Education systems across Australia remain strongly committed to evidence-informed improvement and continue to recognise the critical role of research in informing policy and practice (Australian Education Research Organisation, 2025). In recent years, the need for clear research translation and broader societal impact has also shaped the national research agenda. The challenge is to enable education research governance arrangements to evolve to support high-quality, ethical and impactful research while maintaining appropriate safeguards for students, educators and communities. This challenge has significant national implications: the effectiveness of education research governance shapes Australia's capacity to generate educational evidence, undertake multi-jurisdictional research, develop productive partnerships between universities and education systems, and translate research findings into policy and practice. Consequently, education research governance has emerged as a strategic issue for educational improvement.

Within this complex environment, education research governance must simultaneously enable high-quality research, protect participants, respect jurisdictional autonomy and support public accountability. These demands give rise to a series of structural tensions that shape how school-based research is approved and conducted across Australia. The following section examines these tensions in more detail.

Education Research Governance as Infrastructure

This paper recognises that education research governance within the Australian education sector requires an enabling infrastructure that meets the needs of jurisdictional priorities and national agendas. Cooperation and collaboration are key to this. Research governance is often discussed in procedural terms, focusing on approvals, applications, risk assessment and regulatory compliance. While these functions remain essential, they represent only part of the broader role of governance within the educational research ecosystem. Contemporary research and policy literature highlights the importance of system-level conditions, organisational capability, partnerships and knowledge mobilisation in supporting effective research engagement and evidence-informed improvement (Campbell et al., 2017; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024). Viewed through this broader lens, education research governance performs four interconnected infrastructure functions.

- 1. Protection:** Governance safeguards the rights, well-being and privacy of students, educators and communities while maintaining public trust in educational research. This function is reflected in ethical review processes, child safety obligations, privacy legislation and data governance requirements that underpin responsible research practice (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2025).
- 2. Coordination:** Governance provides mechanisms for aligning research activity across institutions, education systems and jurisdictions. In a federated education system,

governance arrangements help coordinate access, reduce unnecessary duplication and support strategic research effort across multiple levels of the system (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024).

3. **Enablement:** Governance creates the conditions under which high-quality research can occur within education settings, balancing opportunities for research engagement with responsibilities relating to student wellbeing, school operations, participant burden and public accountability. Effective governance functions as an enabling structure that supports productive collaboration between researchers, schools and education systems (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023).
4. **Research Translation & Knowledge Mobilisation:** Governance supports research translation and broader knowledge mobilisation by strengthening expectations regarding dissemination, reporting and reciprocal benefit for participating schools and education systems. Increasingly, education research governance processes are expected to support the effective use of research findings to inform policy and practice (Campbell et al., 2017; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024).

Understanding governance as infrastructure shifts the focus of reform. The objective is to strengthen the systems, relationships, capabilities and coordinating mechanisms that enable ethical, high-quality and impactful educational research at scale. This perspective is particularly important within Australia's federated education system. While governance responsibilities remain distributed across education systems and jurisdictions, the educational challenges confronting Australia – including equity, well-being, workforce sustainability, data interoperability, social cohesion and Closing the Gap – are of national scope. Building stronger governance infrastructure therefore requires balancing jurisdictional autonomy with greater coordination, transparency and collaboration across the broader educational research ecosystem.

The sections that follow examine the structural tensions shaping contemporary education research governance, highlight emerging innovations across Australian education systems, and propose a reform agenda designed to strengthen education research governance as national educational infrastructure.

Structural Tensions Shaping Education Research Governance

The challenges associated with school-based education research governance reflect a series of enduring structural tensions embedded within Australia's educational research ecosystem. These tensions arise because education research governance is required to simultaneously support multiple objectives: enabling high-quality research, protecting participants, responding to system priorities, managing operational realities and maintaining public trust.

These tensions reflect legitimate and often competing responsibilities held by universities, education systems, schools and governments. Understanding this is essential for designing governance arrangements that are both effective and sustainable.

Viewed through the lens of governance as infrastructure, the tensions reveal the complex balancing act required to coordinate research activity across a federated education system while maintaining ethical, operational and public accountability.

Tension 1: National Evidence Needs vs Federated Governance

Australia's most pressing educational challenges require high-quality educational research that generates robust evidence across a range of scales, from local studies through to cross-jurisdictional and nationally coordinated projects. Issues such as student wellbeing, workforce sustainability, educational equity, social cohesion and Closing the Gap demand research capable of generating insights that are useful beyond individual schools or systems. Consequently, many researchers are seeking to undertake studies that involve multiple education systems and jurisdictions, as well as exploring opportunities for appropriate data sharing.

In this context, 'national research needs' refers to areas of inquiry that address educational challenges with significance across multiple Australian jurisdictions or education systems; it does not imply that research proposed or commissioned by a national body necessarily carries greater priority or merit. The quality, relevance and feasibility of individual research proposals remain important considerations in determining whether research can be supported within particular education settings.

At the same time, the governance arrangements that regulate access to schools, participants and data remain fundamentally federated. States, territories and education systems operate within distinct legislative frameworks, policy priorities, accountability structures and operational contexts. As a result, research projects approved in one jurisdiction may require modification, additional review or separate approval processes elsewhere.

This situation may be viewed by education researchers as inconsistency or duplication; however, such variation often reflects legitimate differences in governance obligations. Education authorities are accountable for ensuring compliance with jurisdiction-specific legislation, privacy requirements, child safety obligations and operational priorities. Research approval decisions are therefore shaped not only by research quality, but also by broader responsibilities relating to system stewardship and public accountability.

An additional consideration is that research demand is not distributed evenly across jurisdictions. As a result, some education systems may carry a greater share of the administrative and operational workload associated with reviewing and supporting school-based research. This variation should be considered when developing approaches to national coordination and shared governance infrastructure.

The resulting tension is not simply administrative – it reflects a broader challenge facing Australian educational research: national evidence requires coordinated approaches, while governance authority remains distributed across multiple education systems and jurisdictions. Supporting national coordination mechanisms such as ACRES and REN therefore represents an important opportunity to improve interoperability and transparency without diminishing jurisdictional autonomy.

Tension 2: Research Ambition vs Operational Capacity

A second tension arises between the growing ambition of educational research and the operational realities facing schools and education systems. Many of the issues that governments, systems and communities most urgently want researched involve the highest levels of governance complexity and risk. These include student well-being, mental health, racism, social cohesion, trauma, family violence, equity and Closing the Gap. Research in these areas frequently involves vulnerable populations, sensitive personal information, heightened child protection considerations and complex consent requirements. As a result, such projects often require more intensive governance review, stronger safeguards and more comprehensive risk mitigation strategies. The research questions most critical to educational improvement are therefore often those that demand the greatest governance scrutiny. These pressures are felt particularly acutely by higher degree by research (HDR) candidates and researchers undertaking small stand-alone projects or contract research, for whom approval delays or jurisdictional differences can have significant consequences given tight timelines and/or limited resourcing.

At the same time, schools are first and foremost places of teaching and learning, with responsibilities to students, families and communities. They are also operating within challenging conditions characterised by workforce shortages, escalating workload pressures, more complex student needs, administrative demands and multiple concurrent reform initiatives (Granziera et al., 2025; Windle et al., 2023). Consequently, participation in research must be balanced against the core responsibilities and practical realities of contemporary schooling. Within this environment, even well-designed research projects can impose additional demands on educators, school leaders and support staff. Recruitment processes, surveys, interviews, observations and data collection activities all compete with existing responsibilities and finite organisational capacity.

The resulting challenge for governance systems is to balance the need for high-quality research with sustainable participation. Governance decisions require consideration of methodological quality and ethical integrity, as well as cumulative burden, operational feasibility and the equitable distribution of research activity across schools and communities. Accordingly, research approval processes must consider whether research can be conducted sustainably within the realities of contemporary schooling.

Where a particular project cannot be accommodated within schools, alternative recruitment strategies or settings may sometimes be appropriate; however, for some questions, the school context is integral to the research, and shifting recruitment elsewhere may alter the population, setting or validity of the study. Early dialogue should therefore focus first on whether risks, burden or design can be addressed proportionately.

Tension 3: Investigator-led Inquiry vs System Priorities

Research governance also operates at the intersection of academic inquiry and system accountability. Universities and researchers have important responsibilities to pursue new lines of inquiry, challenge existing assumptions and investigate emerging issues that may not align neatly with current policy agendas and system priorities. At the same time, education systems seek

research that addresses identified evidence gaps, supports strategic priorities and contributes to improvement efforts across schools and communities. While these objectives are not inherently incompatible, tensions can arise when governance feedback is perceived as shaping research questions, methodological approaches or conceptual framing in ways that researchers view as affecting scholarly independence.

In practice, many education research governance discussions concern operational feasibility rather than academic direction. Issues relating to timing, recruitment, participant burden, consent processes, access arrangements and data governance often require modification to ensure that projects can be implemented effectively within school settings. Effective governance therefore requires careful navigation of the boundary between scholarly autonomy and system stewardship. Researchers' early engagement with schools and education systems (including research co-design, where possible), strong reciprocal communication and transparent decision-making processes are essential in this context. Viewed through an infrastructure lens, education research governance performs an important mediating function, creating conditions in which high-quality educational research can proceed while ensuring that participation remains feasible, ethical and aligned with broader public responsibilities.

Tension 4: Evidence Generation vs Evidence Use

A final tension concerns the relationship between research production and research utilisation. Significant effort is invested across Australia in generating educational research; however, the translation of findings into policy, practice and professional learning remains uneven. Here, it is important to distinguish between *research outcomes* and *research impact*: 'outcomes' refer to more immediate and observable outputs (e.g., knowledge, tools), while 'impact' refers to demonstratable change (e.g., practice, policy, systems, student outcomes). It is also important to recognise that both basic and applied educational research are vital to this pathway, albeit in different ways: basic research deepens conceptual and theoretical understanding that underpins future practice, while applied research is designed with more immediate policy, professional learning or classroom application in mind.

Schools, educators and education systems frequently contribute substantial time and resources to research participation. Yet findings are not always communicated back to participating communities in accessible or timely ways. Where dissemination is limited to academic publications or university outputs, research can come to be perceived as providing greater benefit to researchers than to participating schools or systems. This challenge has important implications for trust, engagement and the long-term sustainability of research partnerships. If schools and education systems are to continue supporting research participation, they must be able to see clear value arising from that participation. This requires attention not only to how research is approved and conducted, but also to how findings are shared, interpreted and applied.

Emerging approaches to knowledge mobilisation emphasise reciprocal relationships among researchers, practitioners and policy actors, recognising that research impact depends on ongoing engagement rather than one-way dissemination (Campbell et al., 2017). Within this context, governance has an important role to play in supporting expectations regarding reporting, dissemination and reciprocal benefit. This tension highlights a broader principle underpinning the

paper: education research governance should not be understood solely as a mechanism for regulating research activity—it is also part of the infrastructure through which new knowledge may be generated and translated into, for example, improved policy, practice and outcomes for students.

Implications for Reform

These tensions demonstrate that education research governance operates at the intersection of national evidence needs, public accountability, operational feasibility, academic independence and knowledge mobilisation. Enhancing education research governance is about more than streamlining approvals or reducing administrative burden. Consequently, meaningful reform must address the broader structures, relationships and capabilities that shape how research is conducted across Australia's educational research ecosystem.

The challenge for future reform is to manage these tensions more effectively through stronger coordination, greater transparency, deeper partnerships and sustained investment in governance capability. It is within this context that emerging innovations in education research governance assume particular significance.

Emerging Innovations and National Reform Momentum

Although the structural tensions outlined above present significant challenges, Australian education research governance is already responding to these in a way that suggests that education research governance is entering a new phase characterised by greater coordination, stronger partnerships, and growing recognition of education research governance as a strategic capability.

Importantly, many of the innovations emerging across the sector extend beyond efforts to improve approval processes alone. Collectively, they represent attempts to strengthen the underlying infrastructure that supports educational research, including the systems, relationships, capabilities and coordinating mechanisms that enable research to occur effectively and responsibly. Overall, these developments provide evidence that the foundations of a more connected and collaborative national governance ecosystem are beginning to emerge.

Strengthening Coordination across a Federated System

The most significant governance innovations currently underway focus on improving coordination across Australia's federated education system. While governance responsibilities remain distributed across education systems and jurisdictions, there is increasing recognition that greater alignment and interoperability can reduce unnecessary complexity while preserving local autonomy.

An established component of the national governance landscape is the REN, which provides a national forum for collaboration among education authorities (Australian Education Research

Organisation [AERO], n.d.). Through REN, education systems are able to share governance approaches, discuss emerging challenges, identify common priorities and strengthen communication across the broader education research landscape. In doing so, REN contributes to a more coordinated national approach while respecting the diversity of governance arrangements that characterise Australia's education system.

Participants also identified the *Application for Conducting Research with Education Sites* (ACRES) as a particularly significant reform initiative (AERO, n.d.). Building on the former National Application Form (NAF), ACRES seeks to improve consistency, transparency and efficiency across research approval processes. ACRES reflects growing recognition that researchers should encounter greater coherence when engaging with multiple education systems and jurisdictions. ACRES is a shared application form, currently used in PDF form in NSW and intended to be available through an online platform. Its significance lies in supporting greater consistency across applications rather than operating as a single national approval system. It signals a broader shift toward interoperable governance infrastructure capable of reducing duplication, improving clarity and supporting more efficient navigation of approval processes across the national education research ecosystem.

Together, REN and ACRES demonstrate growing commitment to strengthening the coordination function of education research governance and provide important foundations for future reform.

Expanding Partnership-Based Approaches

A second area of innovation involves the emergence of governance models that place greater emphasis on collaboration, early engagement and shared problem-solving between researchers and education systems.

Several jurisdictions have introduced more structured opportunities for researchers to engage with governance bodies prior to formal submission. These approaches include expressions of interest processes, consultation mechanisms, feasibility discussions and iterative project development pathways. Such approaches enable researchers to better understand governance requirements, operational constraints and system priorities before finalising project designs, reducing the likelihood of significant revisions later in the approvals process. These developments reflect a broader shift away from viewing governance solely as a transactional approval process. Instead, education research governance is understood as a relationship-based activity that benefits from early communication, mutual understanding and ongoing dialogue between researchers, schools and education systems.

The roundtable also highlighted examples of more mature partnership models. The New South Wales Department of Education's *State Education Research and Partnerships* (SERAP) *Expression of Interest* process provides one such example (NSW Department of Education, 2026). Through this approach, the department identifies priority areas and invites universities to propose research that addresses identified evidence needs. This creates opportunities for co-designed projects that are aligned with system priorities from inception while maintaining scholarly rigour and independence. Similarly, the ACT Affiliated Schools Research Program, developed through collaboration between the University of Canberra and the ACT Education Directorate,

demonstrates how long-term partnerships can support sustained engagement between universities and education systems (University of Canberra, n.d.). Such models illustrate how strong relationships can make governance processes more transparent, navigable and mutually beneficial.

Collectively, these innovations suggest that governance may be viewed as an opportunity to foster productive research partnerships, rather than simply regulating access to schools and research participants.

Building Governance Capability and Infrastructure

A third area of reform momentum concerns growing recognition that effective governance depends on capability, resourcing and institutional infrastructure.

Governance responsibilities have expanded considerably in recent years. Increasing application volumes, heightened privacy requirements, growing expectations around data stewardship, and greater attention to school workload and participant well-being have significantly increased the complexity of governance work. Yet governance capacity varies considerably across education systems, reflecting differences in scale, staffing and organisational resources. In response, many are investing in stronger governance infrastructure through dedicated approvals teams, improved digital workflows, enhanced guidance materials and more systematic approaches to communication with researchers. Participants also highlighted growing interest in professional learning, governance capability development, and resource sharing across jurisdictions.

Effective governance is recognised as requiring specialised expertise and sustained institutional investment. As research expectations continue to grow, governance capability itself is emerging as a strategic asset that supports the effective and sustainable conduct of educational research. Strengthening governance capability is therefore an essential component of the infrastructure required to support high-quality educational research.

Toward a More Connected Governance Ecosystem

While significant jurisdictional diversity will remain a defining feature of Australia's education system, the innovations emerging across the sector point toward a more connected and collaborative approach to education research governance. These reforms do not seek to eliminate the structural tensions identified in the previous section, but represent efforts to manage those tensions more effectively through improved coordination, stronger partnerships and enhanced governance capability.

Viewed collectively, initiatives such as REN, ACRES, structured engagement processes, research partnership models and investments in governance capability suggest that the foundations of a more coherent national governance ecosystem are already being established. The challenge now is to build on this momentum by embedding these developments within a broader and more deliberate reform agenda. The following section outlines a framework for doing so through three interconnected reform pillars: **Coordination, Partnership, and Capability & Capacity.**

Reform Framework: Strengthening Education Research Governance as National Infrastructure

The preceding sections have presented education research governance as a form of enabling infrastructure that shapes the quality, scale and impact of educational research across Australia. They have also demonstrated that current governance challenges arise from the need to balance research ambition with legitimate responsibilities relating to participant protection, operational feasibility, system stewardship, and public accountability and benefit.

Meaningful reform therefore requires more than procedural refinement. While improvements to application processes and approval systems remain important, sustainable progress depends on strengthening the broader infrastructure that supports educational research. This includes the coordinating mechanisms, partnerships, capabilities and institutional arrangements that enable research to occur effectively across Australia's federated education system.

To support this work, a **reform framework** is proposed and organised around three interconnected pillars:

1. **Coordination:** improving coherence, transparency and interoperability across governance systems;
2. **Partnership:** strengthening collaborative and relationship-based approaches to governance; and
3. **Capability & Capacity:** investing in the workforce, systems and infrastructure required to sustain effective governance.

These pillars offer a practical framework for strengthening education research governance while respecting jurisdictional autonomy and the diversity of governance arrangements across Australian education systems.

Pillar 1: Coordination

Strategic Objective

Strengthen coherence, transparency and interoperability across Australia's education research governance landscape while respecting jurisdictional legislation, sectoral governance arrangements and local priorities. Australia's federated education system is characterised by diverse governance arrangements that reflect differing legislative frameworks, accountability structures and operational contexts. While such diversity is both legitimate and necessary, it can also create complexity for researchers seeking to undertake research across education systems and jurisdictions.

The objective of coordination is not uniformity, but to improve clarity, reduce unnecessary duplication, and strengthen interoperability across governance processes. More coordinated approaches can support researchers in navigating governance requirements while preserving the autonomy of individual education systems.

Why Coordination Matters

The Coordination pillar responds directly to the tension between research evidence needs and federated governance structures. Given that many of the educational issues that research seeks to address are national in scope, stronger coordination mechanisms will be essential for supporting high-quality research across Australia's distributed governance landscape. The objective is not to eliminate diversity across jurisdictions, but to ensure that diversity operates within a more coherent and navigable governance ecosystem.

Priority Action 1: Build on the Coordinated Approach to National Education Research Governance through ACRES

Broader adoption, implementation and ongoing refinement of ACRES (AERO, n.d.) should be regarded as a national reform priority. ACRES provides an opportunity to improve consistency and transparency across research application processes while reducing duplication for researchers undertaking multi-jurisdictional projects.

As confirmed by the ACRES Working Group, ongoing work includes:

- Expanding participation across education systems and jurisdictions;
- Refining application processes through ongoing evaluation and feedback;
- Aligning governance requirements where feasible;
- Improving interoperability across approval systems; and
- Supporting clearer guidance for researchers navigating multiple jurisdictions.

Led and shared by education authorities, ACRES is a key component of Australia's developing education research governance infrastructure. Universities and the broader education research sector will contribute evidence and feedback to inform its ongoing refinement, while governance decisions will remain the responsibility of education authorities.

Priority Action 2: Improve Transparency of Governance Processes

Education systems should strengthen public guidance regarding governance requirements, approval pathways and decision-making processes. Education researchers (including HDR candidates and their supervisors) and universities have a reciprocal responsibility to engage with that guidance early and incorporate jurisdictional requirements into research design, funding timelines and candidature planning.

Areas for greater transparency include:

- Approval pathways and governance responsibilities;
- Indicative timelines;
- Data sharing and governance expectations;
- Participant burden considerations;

- Reporting obligations; and
- Common reasons for revision or non-approval.

Improved transparency would enhance researcher understanding, support higher-quality applications and reduce avoidable delays throughout the approvals process, while improving the timeliness and clarity of approvals. This is particularly critical for HDR candidates and externally funded projects, whose research and candidature timelines are highly sensitive to governance processes.

Priority Action 3: Publish Research Priorities and Evidence Needs

While education systems have traditionally developed their own research priority statements, these priorities can be strengthened by engaging researchers in dialogue about critical areas for inquiry and emerging opportunities. Regular, concise statements developed through dialogue with education systems, schools and researchers should outline:

- Strategic research priorities;
- Identified evidence gaps;
- Areas of research saturation; and
- Opportunities for collaboration and partnership.

These statements should be published in accessible formats. Co-designed priorities would improve alignment between research proposals and system needs, draw on researchers' insights into emerging issues, and support more strategic deployment of research effort across the education sector. These priorities should guide dialogue and engagement while preserving space for investigator-led inquiry. Education authorities nevertheless have a legitimate role in determining the nature and volume of research that can be accommodated in schools, taking account of feasibility, quality, benefit, risk, staff workload and cumulative participant burden. At the same time, investigator-led research remains an essential component of a healthy educational research ecosystem and should continue to be supported alongside priority-aligned work.

Priority Action 4: Improve Visibility of Research Activity

Longer-term reform should explore mechanisms for improving visibility of approved and ongoing research activity across education systems and jurisdictions.

Potential approaches include:

- Shared registries of approved projects;
- Interoperable reporting systems;
- Clear mechanisms and expectations for reporting findings back to participating schools and education systems, including for HDR projects;
- Cross-system visibility mechanisms;

- National mapping of research activity in high-demand topic areas.

Improved visibility would support more strategic coordination of research effort, reduce unnecessary duplication and assist education systems in managing cumulative burden on schools, while ensuring that schools and systems receive accessible summaries of research findings and appropriate research outputs from the studies they support.

Pillar 2: Partnership

Strategic Objective

Strengthen collaborative and relationship-based approaches to education research governance that position research as a shared enterprise between universities, schools and education systems rather than a transactional approval process.

Across the roundtable discussions, one theme emerged consistently: the effectiveness of education research governance is strongly influenced by the quality of relationships between researchers and education systems. Where communication is open, expectations are understood and trust has been established, governance processes are often experienced as constructive, transparent and enabling. Conversely, where relationships are weak or engagement occurs only at the point of formal application, governance requirements are more likely to be perceived as opaque, burdensome or adversarial. This observation highlights an important principle: education research governance is not solely a procedural activity—it is also a relational one. Effective governance depends upon ongoing dialogue, mutual understanding and shared commitment to generating research that is both academically rigorous and practically valuable.

The objective of partnership-based governance, therefore, is to create conditions in which governance processes are informed by stronger communication, earlier engagement and deeper understanding of the respective responsibilities held by researchers and education systems.

Why Partnership Matters

The partnership pillar responds directly to the tension between research independence and system priorities. While governance arrangements will always involve differing responsibilities and perspectives, strong relationships can help ensure that these differences are navigated constructively.

Partnership-based governance recognises that effective research depends not only on robust procedures, but also on trust, communication and shared understanding. By strengthening these relational foundations, governance can move beyond a model focused primarily on approval and compliance toward one that actively supports collaboration, learning and educational improvement. Viewed through an infrastructure lens, partnerships are a core enabling mechanism of education research governance.

Priority Action 1: Embed Structured Early Engagement

Education systems should expand opportunities for researchers to engage with governance bodies before formal applications are submitted.

Potential mechanisms include:

- Expressions of interest processes;
- Pre-submission consultation pathways;
- Scheduled engagement windows;
- Research liaison meetings;
- Project scoping discussions; and
- Iterative feedback opportunities during project development.

Early engagement allows researchers to better understand governance requirements, system priorities and operational realities before projects are finalised. It also enables governance bodies to identify potential issues relating to participant burden, data governance, timing and feasibility at an earlier stage. Importantly, structured engagement should be viewed as an opportunity to improve project quality and reciprocity. Future efforts to strengthen early engagement should draw on existing jurisdictional experience, including approaches such as the New South Wales Department of Education's SERAP *Expression of Interest* process (NSW Department of Education, 2026).

Priority Action 2: Expand Co-Designed Research and Partnership Models

Education systems and universities should continue to explore partnership models that support greater alignment between research activity and system priorities. Examples already emerging across Australia include research pitch processes, affiliated school programs and collaborative research partnerships that involve shared problem definition and project development. Such approaches can:

- Improve the relevance and usability of research;
- Reduce duplication of effort;
- Strengthen pathways to implementation and impact;
- Clarify governance expectations early; and
- Foster longer-term relationships between researchers and education systems.

At the same time, partnership-based approaches must preserve space for researcher-led research. A healthy educational research ecosystem requires both strategically aligned research and scholarly inquiry capable of generating new perspectives, challenging assumptions and identifying emerging issues.

Priority Action 3: Strengthen Ongoing Dialogue Between Universities and Education Systems

Research governance is most effective when communication extends beyond individual applications. Universities and education systems should establish mechanisms for sustained dialogue regarding:

- Emerging governance challenges;
- Changes in policy and legislative requirements;
- Data governance expectations;
- School workload considerations;
- Research priorities; and
- Opportunities for collaboration.

Potential mechanisms include:

- Regular liaison forums;
- Cross-system governance working groups;
- Annual governance roundtables;
- Joint professional learning activities; and
- Collaborative development of guidance materials.

Such approaches can strengthen mutual understanding while reducing the likelihood that governance requirements are experienced as unexpected or arbitrary.

Priority Action 4: Clarify Responsibilities in Governance and Scholarship

One of the most sensitive aspects of education research governance concerns the distinction between legitimate governance oversight and academic decision-making. These responsibilities are distinct but overlap in practice when education authorities assess whether a proposed design is sufficiently robust, feasible and proportionate to justify its conduct within their settings. Education systems have clear responsibilities relating to participant protection, operational feasibility, legal compliance and public accountability. Researchers, meanwhile, retain responsibility for scholarly design, theoretical framing, methodological integrity and research translation. Education authorities may legitimately consider matters such as feasibility, participant burden and potential system benefit when deciding whether research should proceed in their settings. These considerations are distinct from judgements about the scholarly merit or academic contribution of the research itself, which remains the responsibility of education researchers and their institutions. Developing a clearer, shared understanding of these respective roles would help reduce misunderstanding and strengthen trust between governance bodies and researchers.

Where feedback is provided during governance review, it should be clear whether concerns relate to:

- The value of the research;
- Legal or policy requirements;
- Operational feasibility;
- Participant burden;
- Data governance;

- Risk management; or
- Research design considerations.

Clarifying these distinctions can help ensure that governance processes support both rigorous scholarship and responsible implementation.

Priority Action 5: Strengthen Reciprocal Benefit and Knowledge Mobilisation

Partnership-based governance should encompass early, collaborative engagement with schools and education systems in research co-design, and extend beyond project approval and implementation to include the dissemination and use of research findings. Researchers and education systems should work together to strengthen expectations regarding:

- Reporting back to participating schools;
- Accessible dissemination of findings;
- Professional learning opportunities;
- Collaborative interpretation of results; and
- Ongoing engagement following project completion.

Examples may include:

- School-facing summaries;
- System-focused policy briefs;
- Webinars and presentations;
- Professional learning resources; and
- Shared repositories of research outputs.

Strengthening reciprocal benefit is essential for maintaining trust and reinforcing the value of research participation across schools and education systems, positioning research as a shared enterprise.

Pillar 3: Capability & Capacity

Strategic Objective

Strengthen the governance capability, institutional infrastructure and system-level resourcing required to support high-quality, ethical and sustainable education research across Australia's school education systems and jurisdictions.

The effectiveness of education research governance depends not only on the design of processes and the strength of partnerships, but also on the capacity of institutions to implement and sustain those processes over time. As expectations for school-based research have grown, so too have the demands placed on governance systems responsible for reviewing and coordinating research activity.

Across education systems, governance workloads have increased due to rising application volumes, more complex data governance requirements, heightened expectations relating to privacy and child safety, and growing emphasis on ensuring that research participation does not impose undue burden on schools and educators. At the same time, governance functions are often required to operate within constrained staffing environments and with varying levels of digital and administrative infrastructure. These conditions create an important structural reality: even well-designed governance frameworks will struggle to operate effectively without sufficient capability and resourcing.

Why Capability & Capacity Matter

This pillar addresses a fundamental constraint on the effectiveness of education research governance systems: the ability to consistently implement and sustain high-quality governance practices over time. While coordination improves coherence and partnership improves relationships, capability and capacity determine whether governance systems can function reliably at scale. In this way, they enable education research governance infrastructure to operate.

Viewed through this lens, investment in governance capability is not simply a matter of efficiency or administrative improvement. It is a prerequisite for ensuring that Australia's education research governance system can support ethical, high-quality and impactful educational research into the future.

Priority Action 1: Invest in Governance Workforce and Infrastructure

Education systems and relevant national partners should consider how governance functions can be sustainably resourced to manage increasing complexity and demand, recognising existing jurisdictional investment and the finite resources available across education systems.

This may include:

- Expanding dedicated education research governance and approvals teams;
- Developing shared governance services across systems where appropriate;
- Investing in digital workflow and case management systems;
- Standardising templates and documentation to reduce administrative burden; and
- Strengthening communication systems between researchers and governance bodies.

Improved infrastructure and resourcing would support more consistent decision-making, reduce delays, and enhance transparency and predictability across approval processes.

Priority Action 2: Build Governance Capability within the Research Ecosystem

Governance effectiveness depends in part on the capacity of researchers and institutions to engage appropriately with approval processes. Universities and research organisations should therefore strengthen training and professional development for researchers, including:

- Understanding school and system governance requirements;

- Designing research that is feasible within school contexts;
- Data governance, privacy and ethical compliance;
- Effective communication with education systems; and
- Planning for dissemination and reporting obligations.

Supervisors of HDR students and research training programs play a critical role in embedding this capability for postgraduate and early-career researchers engaging in school-based research for the first time.

Schools and Faculties of Education should also support education researchers to understand the interface between ethics review and site authorisation. While universities play an important role in building governance capability, detailed guidance regarding jurisdiction-specific processes is generally best provided through engagement with the relevant education authorities.

Priority Action 3: Strengthen Data Governance Capability and Practice

Data governance has become one of the most complex and sensitive dimensions of school-based research. Education systems, universities and researchers should work collaboratively to strengthen capability in:

- Data minimisation and proportionality;
- Informed consent processes;
- Secure storage and data access arrangements;
- De-identification and anonymisation practices;
- Data sharing agreements; and
- Data destruction and lifecycle management.

Strengthening data governance capability is essential not only for compliance, but also for maintaining public trust and ensuring the ethical use of student and school data in research.

Priority Action 4: Develop Sustainable Infrastructure for Cross-Jurisdictional Research

As research increasingly spans multiple education systems and jurisdictions, governance systems require improved interoperability and coordination infrastructure.

Priority areas include:

- Alignment of core governance terminology and documentation where feasible;
- Shared guidance for multi-jurisdictional research applications;
- Improved coordination between approval bodies across systems;
- Continued development and refinement of national mechanisms such as ACRES; and
- Strengthening linkages through national coordination forums such as the REN.

These developments do not require uniform governance systems, but they do require sufficient alignment to reduce unnecessary duplication and enable efficient navigation across jurisdictions.

Priority Action 5: Build and Sustain National Governance Capability

Governance capability should be understood as a shared national resource that underpins the quality and sustainability of educational research.

Sustained investment in capability-building should include:

- Cross-jurisdictional professional learning and knowledge exchange;
- Sharing of good practice across systems;
- Joint development of tools, templates and guidance materials;
- Succession planning and retention of institutional governance knowledge; and
- Strengthening of collaborative networks across universities and education systems.

Without sustained attention to governance capability, improvements in coordination and partnership risk being undermined by implementation constraints.

Shared Stewardship of Education Research Governance

Research governance in Australian school education is a shared system-level function distributed across universities, education systems, schools, researchers and national coordinating bodies. Its effectiveness depends on the extent to which these actors operate as part of a coordinated ecosystem rather than as isolated points within an approval chain.

Schools and Faculties of Education occupy a distinctive position within this ecosystem. In addition to preparing the future teaching workforce, they are the primary institutional sites for the development of education research capability, including HDR training, investigator-led inquiry, partnership research and large-scale externally funded research. This dual responsibility for workforce preparation and knowledge generation gives Schools and Faculties of Education a unique public role in supporting the ongoing improvement of Australian education. Shared stewardship also requires universities and research organisations to consider how their own structures and processes can support more effective research governance. Opportunities to reduce unnecessary administrative burden, improve coordination, and strengthen internal governance capability can complement the efforts of education authorities and contribute to a more coherent and collaborative governance ecosystem.

Education research governance infrastructure is not owned by a single actor; it is maintained, used and shaped through distributed responsibility. In the same way, education research governance relies on the coordinated actions of multiple stakeholders, each contributing distinct but interdependent functions. The following outlines the core stewardship roles within this system:

Education Systems

Education systems play a central role in shaping the conditions under which school-based research occurs. This includes responsibility for defining strategic research priorities, managing approval processes, ensuring compliance with legislative and policy requirements, and safeguarding the well-being of students, educators and school communities.

Education systems also play an important role in balancing multiple system objectives, including enabling high-quality research, managing school workload, maintaining public trust, and ensuring alignment with broader reform priorities. Increasingly, systems are also responsible for ensuring that governance processes are transparent, proportionate and accessible to researchers.

A key stewardship challenge for education systems is therefore about sustainability – not only managing risk, but also enabling meaningful research engagement in ways that are sustainable for schools and aligned with system priorities.

Universities

Universities are responsible for preparing researchers to engage effectively and responsibly with school-based research environments. This includes embedding governance awareness within research training, supporting ethical and feasible research design, and ensuring that researchers understand the operational realities of schools and education systems.

Universities also play a critical role in aligning human research ethics processes with system-level governance requirements, particularly for projects involving multiple jurisdictions. In addition, they are responsible for supporting researchers to engage in early and constructive communication with education systems, and for strengthening dissemination practices that ensure research findings are accessible and useful to education stakeholders. In this sense, universities are not only producers of research, but also key intermediaries between research design and governance systems.

Researchers

Researchers have primary responsibility for working with schools and education systems to design and conduct ethical, high-quality and feasible research. This includes shared attention to consent, data governance, privacy, participant wellbeing and compliance with jurisdictional requirements. Researchers also play a critical role in shaping the practical viability of research within school contexts by co-designing studies with school and system partners, being mindful of school workload, minimising unnecessary burden on participants, and engaging early with governance bodies to understand and respond to local expectations. In addition, researchers have a responsibility to collaborate with schools and systems on how findings are interpreted and communicated, ensuring that participating communities receive meaningful research outputs that support local decision-making and contribute to reciprocal value, trust and ongoing innovation in how research is undertaken.

National Bodies and Coordinating Mechanisms

National bodies and cross-jurisdictional coordinating groups play an essential role in strengthening coherence across Australia's federated education research governance system. This includes facilitating communication between jurisdictions, supporting the development of shared tools and frameworks, and enabling alignment where appropriate across governance processes. Working in partnership with education authorities, these bodies and mechanisms can support greater national coordination while recognising that governance responsibilities and decision-making authority remain with the relevant jurisdictions. Mechanisms such as REN and the ACRES Working Group represent important components of national coordination infrastructure, with ACRES implementation and uptake still progressing. These initiatives support improved consistency, transparency and interoperability while respecting jurisdictional autonomy. The role of national coordination is not to impose uniformity, but to strengthen the connective infrastructure that allows distributed governance systems to function more effectively as a whole.

Shared System Responsibility

Ultimately, effective education research governance depends on shared stewardship across the entire education research ecosystem. No single actor can achieve effective governance outcomes independently, because governance is produced through the interaction of multiple roles, responsibilities and decision points.

This includes shared responsibility for:

- Maintaining clear and consistent communication;
- Reducing unnecessary burden on schools;
- Strengthening transparency and trust;
- Supporting alignment between research design and system priorities; and
- Ensuring that research participation produces meaningful value for education communities.

When governance is viewed as infrastructure, these responsibilities are not separate tasks allocated to different actors. They are interdependent functions within a single system whose effectiveness depends on coordination, trust and shared purpose.

Implications

The effectiveness of education research governance in Australia depends on the extent to which it is treated as a collective responsibility rather than a series of discrete administrative transactions. Strengthening shared stewardship across the system is therefore essential to achieving the broader objectives of this paper: improving coordination, strengthening partnerships, and building the capacity required to support high-quality, ethical and impactful educational research at scale.

A Staged Agenda for Future Reform

The roundtable discussion and analysis presented in this paper indicate that Australian education research governance is already undergoing meaningful transformation. The REN, ACRES, and a range of jurisdictional innovations in early engagement and partnership-based governance demonstrate that reform is already underway.

The central challenge moving forward is the coordination, scaling and integration of existing reform activity into a more coherent national governance ecosystem. To support this process, this section outlines a staged agenda for future reform. This framing recognises that governance change will occur over time, through iterative improvement rather than single-system redesign.

Phase 1: Strengthening and Consolidating Existing Foundations

The immediate priority is to consolidate and strengthen reforms already in progress across jurisdictions and national coordinating bodies.

Key priorities include:

- Broader adoption, implementation and refinement of ACRES as a shared application mechanism;
- Ongoing strengthening of REN as a practical forum for cross-jurisdictional governance collaboration;
- Iterative improvement of existing early engagement and consultation processes;
- Refinement of jurisdictional guidance materials based on implementation experience; and
- Strengthening feedback loops among researchers, systems and governance bodies.

At this stage, the focus is on improving clarity, usability and consistency within existing structures, rather than introducing additional layers of reform.

Phase 2: Improving Interoperability and System Connectivity

The second phase of reform focuses on improving the degree to which existing governance systems can operate in a more connected and interoperable way across education systems and jurisdictions.

Priority areas include:

- Reducing duplication in multi-jurisdictional research applications;
- Strengthening alignment of core governance terminology and documentation where feasible;
- Improving coordination among government, Catholic and independent education sectors;
- Enhancing cross-jurisdiction visibility of approved research activity;

- Exploring shared or interoperable digital infrastructure to support governance workflows; and
- Developing more consistent approaches to data governance expectations across jurisdictions.

This phase does not seek to eliminate jurisdictional diversity, but to reduce unnecessary fragmentation where it creates barriers to high-quality educational research.

Phase 3: Embedding a Mature National Governance Infrastructure

The longer-term ambition is to develop a more mature and integrated national education research governance infrastructure that supports high-quality educational research across Australia's federated system. This does not imply a single national governance system; rather, it refers to a coordinated ecosystem in which jurisdictional autonomy is maintained, but supported by shared infrastructure, common principles and interoperable processes. In practice, such an ecosystem will also require clear stewardship: one or more bodies with an explicit mandate, authority and resourcing to coordinate, maintain and continually improve national governance infrastructure.

Key features of a mature system may include:

- Established national coordination mechanisms that support ongoing alignment (including REN and related structures);
- Widely adopted shared application frameworks such as ACRES;
- Standardised or interoperable governance data systems supporting visibility of research activity;
- Mature partnership models between universities and education systems embedded across jurisdictions;
- Established expectations regarding reciprocity, dissemination and knowledge mobilisation; and
- Sustained investment in governance capability across systems.

In such a system, researchers would still engage with multiple jurisdictions, but the experience would be more coherent, transparent and navigable than it is today.

Cross-Cutting Enablers

Across all phases of reform, several enabling conditions are critical:

- Sustained cross-system collaboration among universities, education systems and national bodies;
- Continued investment in governance capability and infrastructure;
- Commitment to transparency and communication across jurisdictions;

- Preservation of space for independent investigator-led research alongside system-prioritised research; and
- Recognition that governance reform is iterative, relational and long-term in nature.

Evaluating Progress

As reforms mature, their effectiveness should be evaluated against clearly articulated indicators of system improvement. These might include reductions in unnecessary duplication and administrative burden, improved timeliness and predictability of decision-making, and improved researcher and education-system experience of governance processes. Evaluation should also consider whether research governance arrangements appropriately balance the facilitation of research with the protection of schools, participants and jurisdictional priorities. Higher approval rates should not, in themselves, be regarded as an indicator of improved governance.

Implications

The emerging reform landscape suggests that Australia is well positioned to strengthen its education research governance system over time; however, progress will depend on the ability of stakeholders to coordinate existing initiatives, align reform efforts where appropriate, and invest in the infrastructure required to support sustainable improvement. Rather than seeking a single moment of system redesign, the opportunity is to build a progressively more coherent governance ecosystem through staged, cumulative reform.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that education research governance in Australian education settings is a critical part of the nation's research infrastructure. Within a complex and distributed governance environment, it shapes how research is conducted and coordinated, and how findings are translated into practice. This framing moves the conversation about education research governance beyond an emphasis on administrative and compliance-related functions, towards understanding governance as enabling infrastructure within a broader education research ecosystem.

Across a highly complex federated system, education research governance arrangements are required to balance multiple, complex imperatives: enabling high-quality research, safeguarding students and school communities, maintaining public trust, and ensuring that participation in research does not impose unsustainable burden on schools and educators. The structural tensions identified in this paper reflect the challenge of maintaining this balance within a diverse national system. Importantly, the analysis presented herein does not suggest that the system is failing; rather, it demonstrates that education education research governance is operating under increasing pressure as expectations for evidence-informed policy and practice continue to grow. In this context, the question becomes, how can education research governance evolve to better

support contemporary research needs and ambitions, while maintaining its essential protective and accountability functions?

This paper has identified three interdependent pillars for strengthening the system: **coordination**, **partnership**, and **capability & capacity**. Taken together, these pillars provide a framework for improving coherence across jurisdictions, strengthening relationships between researchers, schools and education systems, and ensuring that governance systems are sufficiently resourced and capable of sustaining high-quality practice over time.

The REN and the ACRES, along with a range of jurisdictional innovations in early engagement and partnership-based governance, demonstrate that meaningful reform is already underway. The immediate task is to consolidate, implement and evaluate these foundations before proposing additional infrastructure. The task ahead is to build upon and connect existing efforts into a more coherent and interoperable national governance ecosystem.

This paper has also emphasised that governance reform in a federated system will not, and need not, result in uniformity. Diversity of governance arrangements reflects legitimate differences in legislative frameworks, policy priorities and operational contexts across education systems and jurisdictions. The objective of reform is not standardisation, but improved alignment, transparency and connectivity across the system as a whole. Seen in this light, the reform of education research governance is best understood as a long-term process of system maturation. Progress will depend on sustained collaboration among education systems, universities, researchers and national coordinating bodies, as well as ongoing investment in the infrastructure and capabilities required to support effective governance practice.

The opportunity now is to continue strengthening the foundations of this system so that it can better support high-quality, ethical and impactful educational research. In doing so, Australia can ensure that school-based research remains both rigorous and relevant, and that it continues to contribute meaningfully to improving outcomes for students, schools and the broader education system.

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