Collaborative research infrastructure as a Regional Public Good

A Proposal for an Asian Research Area

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Key Points:

- The proposed Asian Research Area (ARA) would be designed to allow researchers to move, facilitate research cooperation across national boundaries, and develop transnational research projects and training programs, particularly on issues and problems across national boundaries.
- Such an ARA would be a regional public good providing for regional cooperation on scientific research, and has the potential to enhance our capacity to solve problems – such as for example, those related to energy, water, food, and health – that confront the region as a whole.
- The three key features of the ARA are: mobility, regional public good, and knowledge infrastructure.
- In order to build an ARA we need a regulatory network of regional funding agencies. In the Australian context, this would mean giving the Australian Research Council (ARC) an explicit mandate to build and develop ARA.
- An ARA would enable us to reconceive the mission of the public university in a post-national context.

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We need a regional initiative to develop a comprehensive framework for regional scientific cooperation: an **Asian Research Area**.

As the regional economy becomes more knowledge-driven, governments around the region are developing international strategies to facilitate and enhance bilateral scientific cooperation and partnerships. For example, the Obama Administration has instituted a range of science-related diplomacy initiatives with China. As countries such as China, India, and Korea become knowledge powerhouses, this science diplomacy will, over the next decade or so, become as crucial as the more conventional instruments of economic diplomacy. In Australia, public universities and governments have attempted to enhance research collaboration with the Indo-Pacific region with targeted programs such as the Australia-India Strategic Research Fund. Leading research intensive universities such as the Australian National University, University of Queensland, University of Melbourne and University of Sydney have made substantial investments in research collaboration with China.

Yet, much of this science diplomacy remains at the bilateral level and is justified in terms of its value as a geo-economic strategy to enhance national competitiveness to improve the relative rankings of higher educational institutions. Most of what goes on in the education sector is usually under the auspices of trade in services as countries and higher education institutions attempt to profit from higher education. What is lacking in this instrumental or positional goods rationale for research cooperation is an understanding of how such collaborations might serve public purpose or benefit. In other words, we need to reconceive research collaboration in terms of the broader collective good served by our public university system.

**Public Good Beyond the National State**

But to do this we must consider the public purposes and benefits beyond the box of the ‘national state’ and reconceive the public good as providing collective benefits at the regional or global level. In other words, we need to rescale the public mission served by research collaboration. The crucial question is this: how do we redefine the ‘public’ as universities operate on global and regional scales?

And here the regional scale becomes pivotal in helping to shape a conception of a regional public good: measures or initiatives that promote and encourage regional coordination in order to deal with common challenges or problems. It is a regional public good in that the development of regional cooperation on scientific research has the potential to enhance our capacity to solve problems – such as those related, for example, to energy, water, food, and health – that confront the region as whole. It is clear that these great challenges can only be confronted through global and regional cooperation. Given the growing importance of ‘regional’ regulatory architectures in global governance these forms of regional public goods become crucial in dealing with cross border governance challenges. The advantage of an ARA is that it not only helps to provide such a regional public good but is also a platform that allows us to deal with other regional governance challenges.
The proposed Asian Research Area (ARA) would be comparable to the European Research Area. It would be designed to allow researchers to move, facilitate research cooperation across national boundaries, and develop transnational research projects and training programs, particularly on issues and problems that cross national boundaries. Such a regional framework would enable us to conceive of the mission of the post-national public university as one component of a shared cooperative enterprise to meet societal challenges and provide for collaborative research infrastructure in the region.

Moreover, enhancing regional cooperation has the benefit of developing research capacities in some of the less developed countries of the region while at the same time giving these countries a stake in the development of research collaborative infrastructure. In addition, developing scientific cooperation on areas such as space exploration and Antarctic research will require sharing the funding of research infrastructure for even the most affluent countries in the region. Collaboration on research infrastructure will not merely enhance regional capacities in these areas, but will also serve as a counterweight to the militarisation of research in these fields of research. Alongside these public good benefits, the development of an ARA will encourage and facilitate the movement of academics particularly early career academics and postdoctoral researchers. APEC has already looked at the possibility of business visas, but why not one for academics and researchers so that they can be more mobile within the region? We need to develop regional policies that allow academics and researchers to move more freely within the region. It is only by allowing such mobility that we can develop the organic grounds for research collaboration on projects and programs. We probably need to take baby steps to develop such a mobility scheme but it is an essential facet of an ARA.

The three key elements of the proposed ‘Asian Research area’ are:

**Mobility**: easing and facilitating movement of researchers within the region through common visa arrangements and reciprocal agreements between universities and research institutes in the region.

**Regional Public Good**: focus on confronting the common governance challenges we confront within the region in areas such as inequality, health, and food.

**Knowledge Infrastructure**: facilitating the development of common knowledge infrastructure including access and participation in regional funding and infrastructure programs.

**Next Steps**

Like many regional initiatives, the ARA will need to commence on a small scale. One such step could be through weaving a mini-lateral agreement between research funding agencies of Singapore, Hong Kong, Korea, China, Japan, India, and Australia. The Asian Development Bank has the potential to play a crucial role in the possible funding of fledgling collaborative research platforms in areas such as food and health. And, at a minimum, such a proposal needs to be placed on an ASEAN+3 track agenda. It is precisely in such functional areas as research cooperation that regional solutions have displayed the greatest possibility of success, and this may well be the key ingredient for success of an ARA.
Regional public goods of the sort being discussed here do not require the construction of distinctive regional institutions. It is more a question of regionalising regulatory governance at all levels and forms of governance. Hence this regulatory regionalism would mean regionalising research funding agencies and ministries so that they have the capacities to deliver these public goods.

One such avenue for this is through developing a network of regional funding agencies. This could include developing funding schemes (such as between the ARC and ESRC in the UK) for co-funding research projects. These schemes then may then form the basis of a more institutionalised arrangement of research funding within the region. In the Australian context, this would mean giving the Australian Research Council (ARC) an explicit mandate to build and develop an Asian Research Area (ARA).

More crucially, this regulatory regionalism means giving the leading universities in the region a clearer regional focus on cooperation on research infrastructure. Public universities in the region have a vital role to play if we are to build an ARA. It will have the added benefit of enabling public universities to focus on public goods not just on the league tables that increasingly drive higher education policies.

We should not underestimate the difficulties of instituting an ARA. The nationalistic and militaristic bias towards national research policies in the region makes such a multilateral initiative difficult. Nevertheless, if we are to deal with the significant societal challenge confronting us in the region a proposal such as the ARA is pivotal in conceptualising the public university in a post national context.
IPGRC Research Mission

A primary focus of our research agenda is on political dynamics of governance and institutional innovations in the provision of public goods and regulation especially as it relates to economic and social development in the region.

This will address issues relating to the organisation of markets and politics, and their effectiveness and fairness in addressing complex economic and social problems. It will also include an examination of the transformations of political organisation and authority at various scales – global, national, and regional – which have a bearing on the complex multilevel governance of the delivery of public goods and regulations.

The centre has a particular focus on the global and regional challenges arising from the shifting tectonic plates of economic and political power to the Indo-Pacific region.