

Submission to South Australia's 2024-25 Budget

March 2024



Budget 2024-25: South Australia

Overview

This Submission to the state's 2024-25 Budget is focused on medium-term directions aligned with the Government's vision of a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy and with its mission: to capitalise on the global green transition; to be a partner of choice in an insecure world; and to build South Australia's talent.

South Australia's businesses have a central role in achieving these objectives through the direction and level of business investment and innovation; business involvement in the development of the State's workforce and industrial relations; and through the business role in job creation.

Ai Group offers general support to the Government's fiscal targets of:

- A surplus on the net operating balance
- Limiting trend growth of operating expenditure
- Achieving a sustainable level of net debt.

With general economic conditions expected to slow further over the first half of calendar 2024 as the impacts of higher interest rates flow through to household spending and business activity, we are wary that the small operating surplus in 2023-24 may not be achieved. Further, the small surplus anticipated for the 2024-25 year may also be called into question.

If the operating surplus were to be called into question because of a slowdown in employment and activity, we would caution against reverting to ad hoc revenue measures to patch up the budget. Such measures are likely to have a dampening effect on underlying activity and would be counterproductive. On the other hand, an intensification of efficiency improvements on the spending side of the budget is likely to offer more sustainable budgetary impacts.

Ai Group's policy recommendations for the 2024-25 Budget are set out under the following headings:

- Skills, training and education
- Climate and energy
- Defence industry
- Taxation
- Industry development.

1. Summary of recommendations

Skills, training and education

Ai Group sees skills, training and education improvements as a key to the recovery of productivity and real incomes growth and to improving inclusion.

- The South Australian Government actively support key national reforms including full implementation of the recommendations of the Noonan Review of the Australian Qualifications Framework.
- Funding initiatives to encourage women and people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse groups into technician and trade roles, including in manufacturing and defence.
- Supporting initiatives to increase apprenticeship and traineeship commencement and completions to provide a pipeline of workers and support apprentice retention.
- Implementing further initiatives to achieve the existing apprentice, trainee, Indigenous and long-term unemployed targets, as well as local worker targets on major State Government infrastructure projects.
- Funding to support the expansion of degree apprenticeships, especially in paraprofessional and technology-based occupations.
- Developing and implementing the Schools Connect initiative to enhance the school to work pathways in South Australia.
- Developing a digital capability plan for South Australia.

Climate and energy

With 2050 only 26 years away, this policy area is critical to SA's medium-term fortunes.

We recommend that SA develop further initiatives on industrial and residential energy efficiency upgrades, with an eye to scaling these up over time whether through the Economic Recovery Fund (ERF) or in parallel with it. SA should promote its industrial future by establishing financial incentives for early installations of industrial deep decarbonisation technologies.

SA should consider and fund the policy architecture, including adequate surveillance and quality assurance of installations and upgrades, as a key step in the upscaling of residential and commercial energy use upgrades.

Defence industry

South Australia is set to play a leading role in Australia's defence industry. Ai Group recommends:

- Implementing the South Australian Defence Industry Workforce and Skills Action Plan in full, complemented by any additional requirements to meet the workforce needs of the navy surface fleet investment.
- South Australia's Government should work to build collaboration with other Australian governments and industry to ensure the AUKUS agreement achieves its ambitious objectives.

Taxation

Our recommendations for the SA tax system are:

- Avoid the introduction of poorly designed and ad hoc tax measures to plug budgetary gaps.
- Close examination of the potential to phase out taxes on business insurance.
- Close examination of the introduction to an exemption from stamp duty for age pensioners purchasing a property to downsize from their existing residence.
- With considerable uncertainty over state taxing powers stemming from the High Court's recent decision in *Vanderstock*¹.
 - Ai Group recommends the SA Government prepare for the range of eventualities that could flow from changes in state taxation arrangements in consultation with South Australian businesses and other stakeholders.
 - In parallel with this, the Government should initiate and participate in a thorough and consultative examination of opportunities to improve the state's taxation arrangements.

Industry development

South Australia has a strong foundation of industry development programs that can be built upon to assist in advancing the SA economy and living standards.

- Ai Group urges the continuation of the directions adopted in SA's Small Business Strategy; its energy efficiency and green industry programs; the Economic Recovery Fund (ERF); and its innovation, commercialisation and research collaboration initiatives and we support the ongoing refinement of programs informed by tapping into industry insights.
- We urge an extension of services currently available to small businesses to a larger cross-section of small and medium-sized businesses.
- The SME sector currently faces the challenge of adjusting to the significant changes to Australia's industrial relations arrangements. The provision of information and guidance about the required adjustments could be considered for inclusion under the Small Business Strategy.

¹ *Vanderstock v Victoria* [2023] HCA 30 (18 October 2023)

- The scope to incorporate additional energy efficiency tools in the suite offered in SA should be explored.
- In upcoming ERF funding rounds the SA government should consider giving emphasis to promoting early installation of deep decarbonisation technologies, improvements in energy efficiency and lifting the capacity of the building and construction sectors and the defence industry.
- The effectiveness of the state's innovation programs can be increased by ensuring that South Australian businesses who work with innovation service providers and collaboration partners from outside South Australia are not discriminated against in the provision of SA government innovation support. There are clear benefits of trade and specialisation in innovation service provision and collaboration from which SA would derive net benefits.
- There is scope to improve the backing of early-stage innovative activity by building greater links between specialist early-stage financing groups and with institutional investors.
- The SA Government should draw on industry insights to help ensure the merger of the University of Adelaide and the University of South Australia adds to the new Adelaide University's involvement in the generation and commercialisation of new ideas.
- The SA government supported Adelaide Intermediary Program that drives collaboration and knowledge transfer in the MedTech and Pharma (MTP) domain is highly regarded and could inform and shape initiatives in other industries.
- SA government involvement in the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS) is similarly commendable. Its effectiveness could be magnified by working with businesses and business organisations to increase awareness and knowledge of benefits.

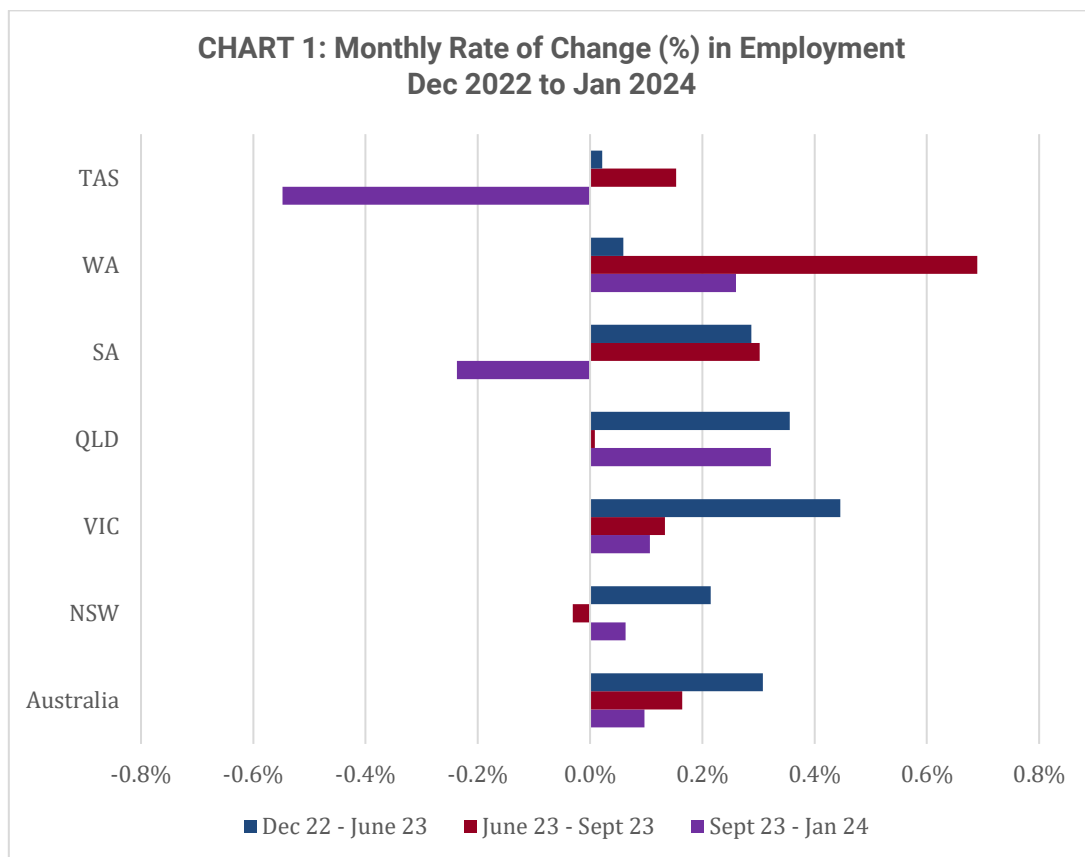
2. South Australia’s economic and fiscal position

With the national macroeconomic policy focus firmly on the task of reducing inflation, the Australian economy has slowed from its post-pandemic bounce under the weight of interest rate rises and the dampening impacts of fiscal drag on purchasing power.

Against this background, South Australia has been assessed as holding up relatively well. In its January 2024 *State of the States*, CommSec reported South Australia to be leading CommSec’s performance chart for the first time in the 14-year history of the publication.

CommSec reported South Australia as outdoing its own average performance by more than the case in other states and, against this measure, was ahead of all other states in terms of economic growth; unemployment; construction work; and dwelling starts.

While commendable, there are warning signs of a setback to these fortunes. In particular, as shown in Chart 1, employment growth in South Australia has slipped noticeably in recent months.



Source: ABS, *Labour Force Australia*, February 2024 (seasonally adjusted).

South Australia's employment growth had been ahead of the national rate of growth in the first half of 2023 and held up strongly through the September quarter at a time when national employment growth eased. In more recent months, SA's employment has gone into reverse and eroded many of the gains made in the September quarter.

While only a pointer, this reversal in the labour market comes at a time when broader conditions are anticipated to slow further as the full impact of earlier interest rate increases flow through the South Australian economy.

It is also an indication that the upwards revisions in the Mid-Year Budget Review (MYBR) to the 2023-24 employment growth forecasts (from 1 per cent in the 2023-24 Budget to 2½ per cent in the MYBR) and, to a lesser extent, to Gross State Product and State Final Demand could prove to be on the optimistic side.

A slowdown in employment and activity could challenge the ability to record a surplus operating budget position for the 2023-24 year. Similarly, the small surplus anticipated for the 2024-25 year may also be called into question.

If the 2023-24 and 2024-25 operating surpluses were to be called into question because of a slowdown in employment and activity, we would caution against reverting to ad hoc revenue measures to patch up the budget. Such measures are likely to have a dampening effect on underlying activity and would be counterproductive.

In the sections that follow, we recommend policy measures in support of the positive directions identified in the Government's South Australian *Economic Statement* of April 2023 this submission. These directions are closely aligned with Ai Group's areas of policy emphasis.

3. Skills, training and education

Skills and labour shortages remain one of the key issues impacting South Australian businesses. Ai Group's 2024 Australian CEO Survey found that almost all businesses (87%) expect to be impacted by skills shortages this year.

Ai Group welcomes the work being undertaken in South Australia on identifying the future skills and workforce requirements of South Australian employers through the Skills Outlook, and the efforts to meet these skills needs through state and Commonwealth investment to deliver 150,000 training places over the next 5 years.

Ai Group welcomes the Skills Shortage Solutions for South Australia, including engaging more women in trades in the civil and construction industries. We recommend funding further initiatives to encourage women and people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse groups into technician and trade roles, including in with a greater emphasis on manufacturing trades.

We recommend that the South Australian Government actively support key national reforms that seek to shift the training system to become fit-for-purpose for the skill demands in the future, including supporting full implementation of the recommendations of the Noonan Review of the Australian Qualifications Framework and the current work on VET Qualification Design.

Apprenticeships and traineeships

Apprenticeships and traineeships are an important pathway into skilled roles. The most recent publicly available data show that apprenticeships and traineeship commencements have been declining across Australia to around pre-COVID levels. For the June quarter of 2023, South Australia had 28,085 in training, a 12.6% decrease since June quarter 2022. We note the projected demand for 60,000 VET qualified new entrants to 2027-28, including around 13,000 technicians and trade workers alongside over 10,000 community and personal service workers, and more than 8,000 clerical and administrative workers. Technicians and trade workers are projected to be in high demand in manufacturing, housing and infrastructure construction, accommodation and food services and other services.

South Australia is playing a leadership role in the responsiveness of the training system to employer needs after the South Australian Skills Act (2021) allowed declarations of higher apprenticeships. We welcome the declaration by the South Australian Skills Commission of software engineering, aligned to the Bachelor of Software Engineering (Honours), as a higher education trade apprenticeship. Together with BAE Systems, the University of South Australia and other South Australian businesses, Ai Group has developed a software engineering degree apprenticeship program which will allow high-level learning to be combined with practical studies. South Australian companies have completed recruitment for the first intake of degree apprenticeships in Australia.

As outlined in the Employment White Paper, Working Future, the Commonwealth has identified it will collaborate to explore opportunities for new higher apprenticeships in areas such as net zero, care and support, and digital, with a key role for TAFE Centres of Excellence. There is an opportunity for South Australia to continue to take a leading role in expanding the apprenticeship system to include higher qualification levels by funding further degree apprenticeships, especially in paraprofessional and technology-based occupations.

Ai Group has previously submitted a proposal to partner with the South Australian Government to deliver Schools Connect, a program to identify students who are interested in pursuing a career in industries with skills shortages (manufacturing, healthcare and childcare) and connecting them with an apprenticeship or traineeship in their local school zone. This proposal involved working with students from year 10 to introduce them to the industry, with a school-based apprenticeship/traineeship offered in year 12. Ai Group recommends that this initiative is further developed and implemented to enhance the work currently undertaken by the Department of Education to improve the school to work pathways in South Australia.

Digital capability plan

Ai Group welcomes the development of the Digital Strategy 2023-2026, which outlines how digital technology can empower schools and preschools to deliver world-leading education and also help children and students to thrive in a digital world. It is also important that similar consideration is given to the skills needs of industry and the workforce in the context of significant and rapid change through digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI).

Early indications from the Ai Group 2024 Skills Survey demonstrate that AI is a key issue in terms of skills development for members, both at leadership and broader workforce levels. While this survey is currently out in the field, these emerging results are pointing to the need for training that supports organisations to effectively utilise the opportunities that digital

technologies and AI bring. Ai Group recommends the development of a Digital Capability Plan for South Australia.

Ai Group recommends:

- The SA Government should work with the SA Training and Skills Commission to develop a strategic workforce strategy and action plan, drawing on data and insights across industry and other stakeholder expertise to ensure SA's skilling and training priorities match the ambitions of the Government including in relation to housing, infrastructure, the transition to net zero, defence industry development and the manufacturing sector.
- The South Australian Government actively support key national reforms including full implementation of the recommendations of the Noonan Review of the Australian Qualifications Framework.
- Funding initiatives to encourage women and people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse groups into technician and trade roles, including in manufacturing.
- Supporting initiatives to increase apprenticeship and traineeship commencement and completions to provide a pipeline of workers and support apprentice retention.
- Implementing initiatives to provide a pipeline of workers and support apprentice retention rates to achieve apprentice, trainee, Indigenous and long-term unemployed targets, as well as local worker targets, on major State Government infrastructure projects.
- Funding to support the expansion of degree apprenticeships, especially in paraprofessional and technology-based occupations.
- Developing and implementing the Schools Connect initiative to enhance the school to work pathways in South Australia.
- Developing a digital capability plan for South Australia.

4. Climate and energy

South Australia faces significant long-term energy and climate challenges that should inform Budget-relevant policy in the coming year.

The extreme energy price rises of 2022 have been largely reversed in wholesale energy markets, and the benefits of that should start to be felt by more retail customers soon. But industry faces significant challenges in re-establishing energy advantage and finding clean, affordable and secure sources of process heat. Meanwhile low building energy efficiency leaves many SA households highly exposed to energy costs and temperature extremes.

SA will consider updates to its emissions targets and climate policies this year. Similar reviews in other jurisdictions have led to the adoption of substantial economy wide targets for 2035; these go well beyond what can be delivered within the electricity sector and necessitate broader activity. The Commonwealth is conducting a similar review.

At the same time the economy is still absorbing the inflationary pressures of recent years, with a tight labour market and many competing demands on delivery capacity for infrastructure and building upgrades.

Ai Group recommends:

- SA develop further initiatives on industrial and residential energy efficiency upgrades, with an eye to scaling these up over time whether through the Economic Recovery Fund (ERF) or in parallel with it.
- SA should promote its industrial future by establishing financial incentives for early installations of industrial deep decarbonisation technologies whether through the ERF or in parallel with it.
- SA should consider and fund the policy architecture, including adequate surveillance and quality assurance of installations and upgrades, as a key step in the upscaling of residential and commercial energy use upgrades.

5. Defence industry

Australia faces one of its most complex strategic environments in generations, highlighting the critical role of a strong defence industry in national security. South Australia is integral to this landscape.

The first locally made AUKUS-class nuclear-powered submarine is set to be delivered to the navy in the early 2040s, with South Australia as the manufacturing hub. This, along with the additional investment in the navy surface fleet, presents a transformative opportunity, calling for the development of new technologies, capabilities, and skills.

To make the most of these prospects, South Australia must strengthen the capacity and capability of its industrial base, focusing on areas such as engineering, operations, program management, supply chain, and support functions.

Defence industry capability development

To meet this growing workforce and skills demand, immediate action is crucial to recruit and develop skilled workers. The South Australian Defence Industry Workforce and Skills Action Plan is a welcome initiative that should be implemented in full. In addition, given the recent announcement of further investment in the navy surface fleet, consideration should be given to whether the initiatives of the Action Plan need to be extended.

Ai Group is well placed to support the rollout of initiatives such as the Defence Industry Connection Program Scholarships and Degree Apprenticeships contained in the Action Plan. Ai Group has managed the Defence Scholarship program for the past four years. Our involvement in degree apprenticeships has included coordinating the software engineering apprenticeship – the first degree apprenticeship in Australia. Our actions have included gathering industry support, developing the employment arrangements, applying for the approval of the SA Skills Commission and managing the recruitment exercise.

Ai Group recommends:

- Implementing the South Australian Defence Industry Workforce and Skills Action Plan in full, complemented by any additional requirements to meet the workforce needs of the navy surface fleet investment.
- South Australia’s Government should work to build collaboration with other Australian governments and industry to ensure the AUKUS agreement achieves its ambitious objectives.

6. Taxation

The following table summarises the current mix of taxes and their relative importance in South Australia’s own-source budgeted tax collections.

TABLE 1: Composition of SA’s Taxes (\$ millions in current year values)

	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27	Change 23-4 to 26-7
Payroll tax	1771	1864	1958	2062	16.4%
Conveyances	1201	1246	1319	1396	16.2%
Land tax - private	488	502	517	533	9.2%
Land tax - public	227	233	239	246	8.4%
Other property taxes	281	296	306	314	11.7%
Insurance taxes	632	658	686	716	13.3%
Gambling tax	605	612	622	632	4.5%
Motor vehicle taxes	850	870	893	917	7.9%
Total taxation revenue	6055	6281	6540	6816	12.6%

Source: SA, Mid-Year Budget Review.

Notwithstanding improvements that have been made over the years², South Australia's taxing arrangements retain a high dependence on relatively inefficient taxes. Conveyance duties, insurance taxes and payroll taxes are frequently ranked as among the more inefficient of the tax bases used in Australia. They are also among the leading sources of South Australia's tax revenue. This dependence is set to rise in coming years with these taxes also the fastest growing over the forward estimates.

Raising the efficiency of the State's tax arrangements should be a key consideration in any review of state taxes.

Recently some states have introduced payroll tax surcharges that have a range of perverse impacts on workforce growth and investment. This route should be avoided in general and in the 2024-25 Budget. More positively other states have moved to phase out taxes on business insurance premiums and to provide a targeted downsizing exemption from stamp duty.

Tax suggestions for the 2024-25 Budget

- Avoid the introduction of poorly designed and ad hoc tax measures to plug budgetary gaps.
- Close examination of the potential to phase out taxes on business insurance.
- Close examination of the introduction to an exemption from stamp duty for age pensioners purchasing a property to downsize from their existing residence.³

Uncertainty over States' taxation powers: options for reform

Considerable uncertainty over state taxing powers has arisen from the High Court's recent decision in *Vanderstock v Victoria*⁴ (Vanderstock).

The High Court decision (in a 4:3 majority) ruled the Victorian electric vehicle road user charge unconstitutional. While this may appear of narrow consequence, the principles underlying the decision have cast a shadow over a wider range of taxes levied by the states.

Ai Group recommends that the SA Government prepare for the range of eventualities that could flow from changes in state taxation arrangements in consultation with South Australian businesses and other stakeholders.

While adding to uncertainty, the High Court decision in Vanderstock also opens an opportunity to look more thoroughly at SA's taxes and options for improvement. Ai Group recommends that the South Australian Government initiate and participate in a thorough and consultative examination of opportunities to improve the state's taxation arrangements.

² Two of these improvements are particularly noteworthy. In the late 1990s South Australia transferred its Emergency Services Levies from an insurance to a land tax base. Some, though not all other jurisdictions have picked up this positive reform direction. More importantly, South Australia phased out stamp duty on commercial property conveyances in the years leading to 1 July 2018. This removed a barrier to business reorganisations and restructuring.

³ The exemption would be most effective and more supportive of affordability if matched by an increase in supply of smaller dwellings in relevant locations.

⁴ *Vanderstock v Victoria* [2023] HCA 30 (18 October 2023)

7. Industry development

Ai Group is a keen advocate of state government initiatives to promote business success and development in support of employment growth and advances in the living standards of South Australians. Our emphasis in this policy area is on measures to lift business capabilities; to encourage and facilitate business innovation; and to reduce the regulatory and paperwork burdens facing businesses.

To these ends, we see considerable merit in the current range of policy initiatives already in place in South Australia. The areas of emphasis are well chosen and the directions have strong potential to lift employment and contribute to higher living standards. Accordingly, our recommendations relate to retaining, exploring refinements, and considering expansions to South Australia's existing programs.

Businesses capabilities of small and medium-sized businesses

We strongly support the emphasis on capability development of, and information provision to the state's small and medium sized businesses. The Government's 2023 Small Business Strategy provides a firm underpinning to the initiatives developed in

- Strengthening business capability
- Building skills and workforce
- Navigating the digital environment
- Boosting business sustainability
- Embracing diversity
- Improving access to government services.

Ai Group recommends:

- We urge the continuation of this direction and support the ongoing refinement of programs and sensible extensions of services to a larger cross-section of small and medium-sized businesses.
- South Australia's small and medium sized business currently face the challenge of adjusting to the significant changes the federal has made to Australia's industrial relations arrangements. Providing information and guidance about the required adjustments could be considered for inclusion under the Small Business Strategy.

Energy efficiency

By improving their energy efficiency, businesses can reduce costs and dedicate more funds to investment, employment, training and business development. They can also make a positive reduction to emissions intensity of productive activity and contribute to Australia's decarbonisation targets.

The South Australian Government provides a commendable range of services and information to assist businesses in their consideration of energy efficiency options.⁵ This service links businesses to publicly funded federal government and South Australian state and local government programs through grants, co-investment and partnership programs.

Ai Group recommends:

- We urge the continuation and refinement of this program and the co-funding grants, loans and other partnership arrangements administered by Green Industries SA. There is scope to incorporate additional energy efficiency tools in the suite offered in SA.

Economic recovery fund

South Australia's Economic Recovery Fund (ERF) offers grants and loans to co-fund business opportunities with the objectives of lifting employment; the quality of employment opportunities; productivity; exports; and by supporting the development of innovative technologies.

The grants are selected by evaluating competitive bids against clear criteria. In the first round, they were orientated to manufacturing innovation and regional tourism infrastructure development.

In remaining funding rounds for the ERF, there is scope to adjust targeting and administration of these competitive grants.

Ai Group recommends:

- Ai Group supports retaining the ERF and having clear channels for consultation with the business community to inform the Government's selection of the best opportunities for achieving its objectives.
- In earlier sections of this submission, we have recommended that in upcoming Economic Recovery Fund rounds the SA government should consider giving emphasis to promoting early installation of deep decarbonisation technologies, improvements in energy efficiency and lifting the capacity of the building and construction sectors.

Backing innovation

There is a strong policy case for public sector backing of innovation in the public, not-for-profit, and business sectors. There is a clear cluster of innovation programs supported by South Australia's government. The Research and Innovation Fund (RIF) and associated programs aim to add value to a strong range of innovative activity in the state.

⁵ See <https://www.sa.gov.au/topics/energy-and-environment/using-saving-energy/energy-resources-businesses>

We also support the involvement of the SA's government in the stimulation of early-stage innovative activity in the state. This includes:

- Seed-Start, which offers co-funding support for business commercialisation initiatives for SA businesses.
- Encouraging activities that help build innovation ecosystems and networks.
- SA Government backing of SA-located Cooperative Research Centres.

Ai Group recommends:

- The SA Government should tap into industry insights to help ensure the merger of the University of Adelaide and the University of South Australia adds to the new Adelaide University's involvement in the generation and commercialisation of new ideas.
- There is scope to increase the effectiveness of the state's innovation programs by ensuring that South Australian businesses who work with innovation service providers and collaboration partners from outside of South Australia are not discriminated against in the provision of SA government support. There are clear benefits of trade and specialisation in innovation service provision and collaboration from which SA would derive net benefits.
- Ai Group supports this direction of the SA Government's innovation support and encourages the Government to build on the existing programs including by tapping into insights from the business community and partnering with existing business networks.
- The SA government supported Adelaide Intermediary Program that drives collaboration and knowledge transfer in the MedTech and Pharma (MTP) domain is highly regarded and could inform and shape initiatives in other industries.
- SA government involvement in the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS) is similarly commendable. Its effectiveness could be magnified by working with businesses and business organisations to increase awareness and knowledge of benefits.
- We see scope to improve the backing of early-stage innovative activity by building greater links between specialist early-stage financing groups and with institutional investors.

About Australian Industry Group

The Australian Industry Group (Ai Group®) is a peak national employer organisation representing traditional, innovative and emerging industry sectors. We have been acting on behalf of businesses across Australia for 150 years.

Ai Group and partner organisations represent the interests of more than 60,000 businesses employing more than 1 million staff. Our membership includes businesses of all sizes, from large international companies operating in Australia and iconic Australian brands to family-run SMEs. Our members operate across a wide cross-section of the Australian economy and are linked to the broader economy through national and international supply chains.

Our purpose is to create a better Australia by empowering industry success. We offer our membership strong advocacy and an effective voice at all levels of government underpinned by our respected position of policy leadership and political non-partisanship.

With more than 250 staff and networks of relationships that extend beyond borders (domestic and international) we have the resources and the expertise to meet the changing needs of our membership. We provide the practical information, advice and assistance you need to run your business. Our deep experience of industrial relations and workplace law positions Ai Group as Australia's leading industrial advocate.

We *listen* and we *support* our members in facing their challenges by remaining at the cutting edge of policy debate and legislative change. We *provide solution-driven* advice to address business opportunities and risks.

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