WIZER · CASE STUDY

Australian National University

Picking innovative winners — and taking the politics out of the decision

The organisation

The Australian National University ran a university-wide initiative to surface innovative research and creative ideas across disciplines. Led by Professor Tim Senden, Director of the ANU Research School of Physics, the program was designed to test whether the university's traditional selection processes — department-led, expert-panel-driven, hierarchy-sensitive — were the right way to find the most innovative work happening across the institution.

The decision problem

Innovation programs in universities have a known weakness. They are typically run by one department, on one topic, and selected by panels who naturally surface the kinds of ideas they recognise. The work that wins is the work the panel knows how to evaluate. Cross-disciplinary ideas, unconventional formats, and proposals from researchers outside the established networks tend to get filtered out — not through bad intent, but through the predictable patterns of how small expert panels make decisions.

ANU wanted to test a different approach. Open the selection process across the entire university community. Let ideas from any discipline — physics, science education, large-scale artwork, programmable robotics — compete on equal terms. Bring the broader ANU community into the decision rather than relying on a small panel of similar people to choose what counts as innovative.

This is the politics-of-decisions problem in compact form. A small group of similar people deciding what is worth funding will keep funding what people like them have always funded. The structural answer is not to replace the panel, but to widen the cognitive composition of the decision.

What Wizer did

Wizer designed and delivered the decision process. Researchers and idea-holders pitched their projects through a structured platform — videos, visuals, written descriptions — and the wider ANU community engaged with the ideas in two rounds of voting. The platform made the process transparent: voters could see who else was voting, projects could see how they were stacking up, and the criteria for selection were visible to everyone involved.

The methodology applies the wise crowd principle from decision science. The research, particularly the work of Scott Page on cognitive diversity and the Diversity Bonus, shows that under specific conditions a diverse group of evaluators consistently outperforms a smaller expert panel — not despite the lack of unanimous expertise, but because the wider cognitive composition surfaces options and concerns that a narrower group structurally cannot see.

Wizer is how that principle becomes operational. Twenty-six teams submitted ideas. The community engaged with all of them. Twelve were selected by the community to advance to the second round. A final nine pitched to an expert panel, which made the final selection with the benefit of broad community signal as one structured input among several. Four teams were awarded a $50,000 project prize each.

What changed

> *Wizer is the best thing we have ever done in my time at the university.*
>
> **— Professor Tim Senden, Director, ANU Research School of Physics**

2,300+ · members of the ANU community engaged in voting

8,000+ · votes cast across two rounds

26 · teams submitted ideas from across disciplines

4 · winners awarded $50,000 project prizes

The projects that won would not have surfaced through a single-department selection process. The ideas spanned materials technology, science education, large-scale artwork, and programmable robotics — work that crosses the boundaries traditional funding panels are built around. Researchers learned to pitch their work to non-specialist audiences. The community gained a stake in research selection that had previously been opaque to them.

Why this matters beyond a university

Health systems, large enterprises, and governance bodies all face versions of the same problem ANU faced. Selecting which transformation programs to fund. Choosing which EHR vendor to commit to. Deciding which initiatives the board should approve. These decisions are typically made by small panels of similar people — senior, experienced, and structurally narrow in cognitive composition. The decisions they make are the decisions that group is predisposed to make.

The wise crowd is not a replacement for expert judgment. It is a way to widen the cognitive composition of the decision so that the expert judgment is making its call with the benefit of

input the panel alone could not have surfaced. ANU is the proof that this works at scale — and the principle is the same whether the broader decision-making group is 2,300 people or 12.

Decision science explains why wider cognitive composition produces better decisions. Wizer is how organisations build that into the way they actually decide.

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