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Department of Industry and Science

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Dear Sir

Innovation Australia is pleased to provide the attached submission in response to the discussion paper “Crowd Sourced Equity Funding” prepared by Treasury.

Our submission is generally supportive of the model proposed by the discussion paper and makes comments regarding additional considerations. We have also referenced our submission to the CAMAC review on CSEF in November 2013 and have attached it for your information.

In addition to the issues raised in the discussion paper, we recommend consideration of the peer-to-peer lending and establishing a streamlined regulatory framework for crowd based financing by equity and debt.

The use of internet communication technologies and crowd based funding presents an opportunity to support the development of a new industry with positive implications for employment and economic growth. We recommend that any regulatory model consider the wider strategic implications that are consistent with the Australian Government’s *Industry Innovation and Competitiveness Agenda* to create a knowledge economy and to develop financial services.

I would be pleased to meet you to provide further clarification if required.

Yours sincerely

Dr Marlene Kanga AM
A/g Chair
6 February 2015

Attachment Innovation Australia’s submission to the Treasury’s *Crowd Sourced Equity Funding Discussion Paper*

Innovation Australia

Submission to Issues Paper on Crowd Sourced Equity Funding

Innovation Australia has a key role in providing independent advice to the Government on matters relating to innovation in business and industry. Accordingly, this submission is made in response to the discussion paper, “Crowd Sourced Equity Funding” issued by Treasury in December 2014.

Innovation Australia prepared a detailed submission to the review on Crowd Sourced Equity Funding (CSEF) by the Corporations and Markets Advisory Committee (CAMAC) in November 2013. We refer to this submission in our current paper and attach it for further reference.

Crowd Sourced Funding provides a strategic opportunity for Australia, not only to support innovation and innovative companies by providing new sources of capital to start-ups and small business, it is also an opportunity to create a new industry which provides financial services to the world.

The ability to establish a viable crowdfunding industry in Australia will be an important test of our ability to follow our own economic blueprint – to continue to transition our economy to a predominantly knowledge based one - through the progressive digitisation of existing and new products and services. It is also an important new channel that might positively strengthen a key economic pillar of the Australian economy – financial services.

With increasing speed and ease of international communications, location is no longer a factor in determining where successful markets will develop. Australia has many comparative advantages such as robust legal systems, lack of corruption, sound infrastructure and an educated work force. This presents an opportunity to create innovative, transparent, robust and market friendly structures for an environment that provides opportunities for investors and issuers as well as employment and growth in the economy.

Innovation Australia therefore believes that careful regulatory design for crowdsourced funding is important to not only provide a framework for how the industry will operate, but to ensure that the industry is given the best chance possible to establish and flourish in a competitive global financial environment.

While the issues raised by the CSEF discussion paper are sound, we encourage a review of the broader strategic implications of establishing a crowd sourcing platform for both debt and equity which can create further benefits in addition to supporting innovation. The regulatory framework needs to be balanced, providing adequate safeguards but without being overly onerous to any area of the value chain. It is important that Australia capture the benefits of the crowd funding model and not lose them to other, more competitive, jurisdictions with “lighter touch” regulatory regimes, including New Zealand.

Principles for Regulatory Framework for Crowd Sourced Funding

In our 2013 submission, *Innovation Australia* proposed the following principles and framework for establishing the regulatory framework for crowd sourced equity funding arrangements in Australia:

A regulatory regime needs to strike an appropriate balance between investor protection and the compliance costs to issuers and intermediaries. We believe that the regulatory settings should seek to facilitate the greater opportunities that crowd sourced equity funding offers for:

- entrepreneurs, start-ups and early stage businesses to access finance;
- investors to make modest investments across a range of investment options ;
- other potential benefits to emerge for businesses and investors, such as market validation;
- economic benefits to be gained in Australia;

and do this while providing protection to issuers, intermediaries and investors.

To achieve the desired outcomes of facilitation and protection, a balanced approach to regulatory policy settings should be designed that:

- facilitates a market with lower transaction costs;
- is proportionate, based on risk and limitation of damage;
- is outcomes-based, not prescriptive;
- ensures transparency and flows of information, in particular to facilitate a market based on reputations.

Consistent with our previous submission, we recommend:

1. Support for the establishment of exempt public company status for CSEF participants consistent with the proposed limitation on size by capital and/or revenue and the time frames for becoming and retaining exempt company status.
 - a. In our assessment, the proposed model in the discussion paper (Option 2) is more appropriate than the New Zealand model in this respect to promote the formation of a market unencumbered by the compliance requirements of public companies.
 - b. This is balanced by the requirement of intermediaries to hold an Australian Financial Services License including membership of an external dispute resolution scheme and insurance requirements.

2. Other risks¹ be addressed by:

- A standard template generic risk warning for investors which is included in the risk disclosure statement signed by participating investors;
- A dedicated website, similar to the New Zealand Financial Markets Authority website with information and risks associated with both crowd sourced equity funding and peer-to-peer lending (see www.fma.govt.nz);

3. Relationships between investors, intermediaries and issuers be managed via the supporting mechanisms recommended by the discussion paper.

However one exception is in relation to the relationship between intermediaries and issuers. Here we support the New Zealand model that provides reasonable arrangements for intermediaries to participate in the take up of an issuer's shares, and to charge fees commensurate with the size of the offering. We are satisfied that the requirement for intermediaries to hold a financial services license provides adequate controls and an appropriate balance of incentive for participation by intermediaries and risk mitigation.

4. Clarity is needed on the structure and responsibility of the proposed regulatory framework. We note the New Zealand model has the Financial Market Authority which is responsible for both CSEF and peer-to-peer lending. Such a streamlined framework with a single responsible authority provides the required safeguards for the market as well as opportunities for dissemination of relevant information.

5. A review of CSEF arrangements is made in two and a half years, with any changes to be implemented after three years. This would enable sufficient time for the market to develop and to address any unforeseen risks and circumstances.

6. Peer-to-peer lending with an appropriate regulatory framework being introduced at the same time as CSEF. There are important strategic reasons for Australia not to fall behind others in establishing the regulatory regime to facilitate access to both debt and equity for start-ups, entrepreneurs and SMEs.

In our assessment, the New Zealand peer to peer model for debt issuance is relevant and provides a useful guide to Australian authorities for a regulatory framework. The emphasis here is on “light versus heavy handed” regulation with standardised risk disclosure arrangements. Limits on the size of participation similar to those in CSEF are included. The emphasis is on regulating the intermediaries through licensing

¹The Australian Securities and Exchange Commission (ASIC) and others have flagged such concerns in their submissions to the Murray Financial Systems Inquiry.

arrangements and borrowers through their compliance with the Financial Markets Conduct Act.

Conclusion

Innovation Australia believes that the approach we have suggested accomplishes the objectives of promoting and supporting innovation to enhance innovation and competitiveness in Australia.

As we have stated in our 2013 submission to the CAMAC review, CSEF not only offers potential to broaden access to capital, it will also provide an opportunity for some market validation of the product at an early stage. This latter aspect may assist in attracting investors in a second fund raising round.

Furthermore, this approach supports transparency and a level playing field by ensuring that all investors have access to the same information in a single location. It is also the model which best enables the collective wisdom of the crowd to be mobilised by facilitating online communication between investors about issuers, intermediaries and other players, which is critical given the division of labour in the due diligence process.

Subject to regulatory safeguards, it should be left to the market to decide who invests and where. The principal protection to investors will be caps on the amount that may be invested in any year by an individual.

Innovation Australia also encourages a consideration of the strategic implications of establishing a successful crowd sourcing platform for both debt and equity in Australia and the implications of creating a new financial service as an opportunity for the Australian economy.

We will be pleased to discuss our submission and provide further information if required.

Attachment 1: Detailed Responses to Questions in CSEF Discussion Paper

Attachment 2: *Innovation Australia* Submission to CAMAC Review on Crowd Sourced Equity Funding, November 2013.

Detailed Responses to Questions in CSEF Discussion Paper

Innovation Australia provides responses to the questions raised in the CSEF Discussion paper below. Detailed responses were previously provided in our 2013 submission to the CAMAC review to questions raised in that paper. Our responses below reference some of these previous responses as relevant. The full submission is included as an Attachment.

1. *Is the main barrier to the use of CSEF in Australia a lack of a CSEF regulatory structure, or are there other barriers, such as a lack of sustainable investor demand?*

As stated in our submission to CAMAC in November 2013, *Innovation Australia* believes that the market will determine the extent to which crowd sourced equity funding is used in Australia. It will depend on the risk appetite of investors to purchase shares in a diverse range of companies, an online platform as well as the track record established by issuers of shares and the intermediaries who select companies that eventually deliver returns to the investor.

2. *Do the existing mechanisms of the managed investment scheme regime and the small scale personal offer exemption sufficiently facilitate online offers of equity in small companies?*

As stated in our submission to CAMAC in November 2013, a regulatory framework specific to crowd sourced equity funding should be established to enable the full potential of the crowd to be harnessed. Please also see our detailed responses to Q 1, 2 and 3 in our November 2013 submission which addresses this issue.

3. *Other than the restrictions identified above in relation to limitations on proprietary companies, public company compliance requirements and disclosure, are there any other barriers to the use of CSEF in Australia?*

Our response to Question 10 in our submission to CAMAC in November 2013 discussed a number of additional matters including the need to ensure that the tax system does not pose barriers or operate as a disincentive to participation in CSEF.

4. *Should any CSEF regime focus on the financing needs of small businesses and start-ups only, or is there a broader fundraising role?*

Our submission to CAMAC in November 2013 addressed the issue of debt funding which now also has emerging platforms for crowd sourced debt and peer to peer lending.

We also note that crowd sourced funding for social enterprises and not-for profit organisations is also emerging. We have not addressed the regulatory and other safeguards that would apply to such funding.

5. *Do you consider that, compared to existing public company compliance costs, the exempt public company structure is necessary to facilitate CSEF in Australia?*

We support the exempt public company structure as stated in our response to Q1, 2, 3 and 9 in our submission to CAMAC in November 2013.

6. *To what extent would the requirement for CSEF issuers to be a public company, including an exempt public company, and the associated compliance costs limit the attractiveness of CSEF for small businesses and start-ups?*

The proposal for an exempt public company with reduced disclosure requirements for a limited time will assist small and innovative companies in their early years, and will make CSEF more attractive to these issuers.

7. *Compared to the status quo, are there risks that companies will use the exempt public company structure for regulatory arbitrage, and do these risks outweigh the benefits of the structure in facilitating CSEF?*

We have no information to assess the extent to which this might occur. However, the limitations of size of company and time frames for this structure to exist are likely to preclude the extent to which this structure would be misused.

8. *Do you consider that the proposed caps and thresholds related to issuers are set at an appropriate level? Should any of the caps be aligned to be consistent with each other, and if so, which ones and at what level?*

Our response to Q4 (iii) and (iv) and Q8 in our submission to CAMAC in November 2013 proposed investor caps which are consistent with the proposals in Option 2.

9. *Do CAMAC's recommendations in relation to intermediary remuneration and investing in issuers present a significant barrier to intermediaries entering the CSEF market, or to companies seeking to raise relatively small amounts of funds using CSEF?*

Our response to Q5 in our submission to CAMAC in November 2013 addressed a number of issues relating to intermediaries which are generally consistent with the proposals in Option 2.

10. Do the proposed investor caps adequately balance protecting investors and limiting investor choice, including maintaining investor confidence in CSEF and therefore its sustainability as a fundraising model?

Please see our response to Q4 (iii) and (iv) and Q8 in our submission to CAMAC in November 2013 which addresses investor caps. These are generally consistent with Option 2.

11. Are there any other elements of CAMAC's proposed model that result in an imbalance between facilitating the use of CSEF by issuers and maintaining an appropriate level of investor protection, or any other elements that should be included?

Please see our response to Q4 in our submission to CAMAC in November 2013 which makes comment on additional controls to protect investors.

12. Do you consider it is important that the Australian and New Zealand CSEF models are aligned? If so, is it necessary for this to be achieved through the implementation of similar CSEF frameworks, or would it be more appropriate for CSEF to be considered under the Trans-Tasman mutual recognition framework?

Innovation Australia does not consider that an alignment with the New Zealand model is necessary as geographic boundaries are not relevant in an on-line environment. Moreover, Australia should establish a regulatory framework that is attractive to Australian and international players in an increasingly globalised on-line market.

13. Do you consider that voluntary investor caps and requiring increased disclosure where investors contribute larger amounts of funds appropriately balances investor protection against investor choice and flexibility for issuers?

Please see our response to Q4 in our submission to CAMAC in November 2013 which makes comment on additional controls to protect investors.

14. What level of direction should there be on the amount of disclosure required for different voluntary investor caps?

Please see our response to Q4 in our submission to CAMAC in November 2013 which makes comment on additional controls to protect investors.

15. How likely is it that the obstacles to CSEF that exist under the status quo would drive potential issuers, intermediaries and investors to move to jurisdictions that have implemented CSEF regimes?

There is a demand for financing for small innovative companies which is unmet by current provides in the Australian market. The increase ease of obtaining financing in an on-line environment is likely to encourage Australian companies to seek funds elsewhere if the status quo is maintained.

16. What are the costs and benefits of each of the three options discussed in this consultation paper?

Innovation Australia does not have the resources to estimate the costs and benefits of the three options. However it should be noted that there are non-financial costs including market sentiment that may determine the success of CSEF in Australia.

17. Are the estimated compliance costs for the CAMAC and New Zealand models presented in the appendix accurate?

See our response to Q16 above.

18. How many issuers, intermediaries and investors would be the expected take up online equity fundraising in Australia under the status quo, the CAMAC model and the New Zealand model?

Innovation Australia does not have the data to provide any estimates.

19. Are there particular elements of the New Zealand model that should be incorporated into the CAMAC model, or vice versa?

Innovation Australia believes that the model should be suited to the Australian environment to facilitate CSEF and address the market failure to raise funding, especially for small innovative companies. We support a “light-touch” regulatory framework with a single regulatory authority for equity and debt funding.

20. Are there particular elements of models implemented in other jurisdictions that would be desirable to incorporate into any final CSEF framework?

Please see our response to Q4 in our submission to CAMAC in November 2013 which makes comment on the frameworks established in the US, UK and Canada (Ontario).

21. Do the issues outlined in this consultation paper also apply to crowd-sourced debt funding? Is there value in extending a CSEF regime to debt products?

Innovation Australia agrees that any frameworks that are established should also include peer to peer lending.

22. To what extent would the frameworks for equity proposed in this discussion paper be consistent with debt products?

Our submission to CAMAC in November 2013 provided extensive comment on investors, intermediaries and issuers and the types of controls and disclosure requirements that would support crowd funding. With changes appropriate for debt raising, a similar framework could be established.

We also recommend a streamlined regulatory framework with a single regulatory authority responsible for both CSEF and peer-to-peer lending, as established in New Zealand via the Financial Markets Authority (FMA). The authority also has provides good information for issuers, intermediaries and investors via its website (see www.fma.govt.nz). The website provides information for market participants, including compliance requirements, lists of registered providers of services and information on regulatory and enforcement actions. Such an authority could also provide reports on periodic reviews of the performance of the market for crowd based financing.

23. Would any of the options discussed in this paper, or any other issues, impede the development of a secondary market for CSEF securities?

We continue to hold the view, in accordance with our response to Q4 (vii) in our submission to CAMAC in November 2013, which recommended a ban on a secondary market for CSEF securities.

Innovation Australia

Submission to the Review of Crowd Sourced Equity Funding being undertaken by the Corporations and Markets Advisory Committee

Declaration of Interest

Innovation Australia is an independent statutory body established under the Industry and Research Development Act 1986. The mission of Innovation Australia is to increase the economic return from successful technology-based enterprises in Australia by guiding the Australian Government's investment in the commercialisation of the nation's research and development and innovation.

Introduction

Driving innovation is critical to maintaining and improving Australia's competitiveness. Access to finance is the principal barrier faced by innovative technology based companies in the early stages of their business development. It also represents a significant challenge to a broader range of small and medium sized businesses. Crowd sourced equity funding has the potential to provide access to wider sources of finance for these Australian businesses. We therefore believe it is important that regulatory measures are established to enable crowd sourced equity funding in Australia. We note that a number of countries are introducing regulation or examining options in advance of doing so and it is important that Australian technology startups and other businesses are not placed at a disadvantage to their international counterparts.

We consider that a statutory and compliance structure specific to crowd sourced equity funding should be established to allow share transactions across an online platform, as this will enable the full potential of the crowd to be harnessed. A regulatory regime needs to strike an appropriate balance between investor protection and the compliance costs to issuers and intermediaries.

We believe that the regulatory settings should seek to:

- facilitate the greater opportunities that crowd sourced equity funding offers for:
 - entrepreneurs, startups and early stage businesses to access finance;
 - investors to make modest investments across a range of investment options ;
 - other potential benefits to emerge for businesses and investors, such as market validation;
 - economic benefits to be gained in Australia;

and

- provide protection to issuers, intermediaries and investors.

The current regulation of investment is based on mandatory disclosure, which feeds into a due diligence model. In practice, many investors do not carry out the due diligence themselves, but rely on the services and reputations of other parties, such as financial advisers or market analysts and commentators; that is, there is a division of labour on due diligence. When designing the regulation of crowd sourced equity funding there is an opportunity to recognise that disclosure of information, on its own, is not sufficient for the market to operate efficiently. What is also needed is the division of labour on due diligence. This cannot exist without information being available in the marketplace to establish the reputations of those that turn the detailed information for due diligence into a form that many investors prefer to access. (See Box 1 for further discussion).

To achieve the desired outcomes of facilitation and protection, a balanced approach to regulatory policy settings should be designed that:

- facilitates a market with lower transaction costs;
- is proportionate, based on risk and limitation of damage;
- is outcomes-based, not prescriptive;
- ensures transparency and flows of information, in particular to facilitate a market based on reputations.

We believe that the extent to which crowd sourced equity funding is mobilised in Australia will be determined by the market and will depend, ultimately, on the appetite of investors to transact the purchase of shares in a diverse range of companies across an online platform. For technology startups, this appetite will be influenced by the track record that platform providers are able to establish for selecting companies which deliver returns and innovative new products and services.

Box 1 The significance of reputation

In highly complex fields, citizens often cannot or do not want to do “due diligence” on all their decisions. Here they typically make decisions by relying on reputations. Indeed economist John Kay argues that reputation is the “normal market mechanism for dealing with asymmetric information.” ...

In many ways reputation can be understood as a particularly important aspect of the division of labour. As the world becomes more complex and as our expertise grows, markets for information become richer – more intermediated. As our expertise grows new areas of specialism grow. The individual actor in the economy cannot realistically exercise “due diligence” in all their choices. Instead they require access to expertise which is mediated. Once the need for expertise is identified, the question that then arises is how one should choose an expert.

Most professional services are heavily regulated often at substantial cost with little clear benefit. And yet very little if any of that regulation is directed towards improving the quality of the information on which reputations for expertise are based.

Those seeking to maximise transparency should also consider the architecture of the information ecology. For there are many things that can be done to create a situation where information that would be useful comes into existence and is disseminated to those who can benefit from it – and those who can discipline others to perform better with their buying and other choices. Thus for instance if investment advisors and/or share brokers kept independently auditable ‘sample portfolios’, we could, over a period of time, measure their performance. (Extracts from *The Ecology of Information and the Significance of Reputation*, Dr Nicholas Gruen).

Suitability of crowd sourced equity to finance technology startups

There are challenges to be addressed in applying the crowd funding model to equity investing. The success and recent proliferation of other types of crowd funding, for example the donation, reward and loan based variants, may not translate into a similar enthusiasm for crowd sourced equity investing. Some of the reasons for this include:

- the complex nature of equity investing;
- the challenges that widened share ownership will bring to small, hitherto closely owned enterprises in relation to management and compliance issues (including the cost to the issuer of dealing with the intermediary, of maintaining a share register and obtaining shareholder agreements);
- the impact on subsequent capital raising and the eventual sale of the company.
- increased exposure to intellectual property theft following the disclosure of information to a wide audience on the internet; premature exposure to competition and to copycat activities.

Where the business activities of a company involve significant research development and testing, are capital intensive and require a long runway to market, the founders need informed shareholders who comprehend fully the risks of early stage investing and the time to realisation of the investment. Existing business owners will need to weigh these considerations against the need for capital and the market validation that a successful crowd fundraising may offer.

Frequently, the individual who contributes money to a crowd funded project does so to support a cause to which some attraction is felt. This is termed “donation funding” in the Discussion Paper and is arguably the variant of crowd funding where the interest and imagination of large numbers of people is most likely to be captured to deliver the large numbers of small monetary contributions on which the concept of crowd funding rests. The use of crowd funding to attract donations to fund university research projects is an interesting development which is gathering pace in the United States. The collaboration between Deakin University and the crowd funding platform provider Pozible is an example in Australia.

If crowd sourced equity investing attracts sufficient interest, the benefit to the company seeking finance will be access to a significantly larger pool of investors. This would translate into large numbers of small shareholders (as noted in the Discussion Paper, this would require legislative change as the number of shareholders a private company may have is currently limited to 50). This would present issues for a technology startup which may need to raise larger amounts of capital in a later funding round. These matters will need to be addressed through some form of nominee and pooling or other arrangements, including possibly a variation of the class rights attaching to crowd equity investors.

For these reasons, while online crowd sourced funding platforms offer opportunities for linking angel and high net worth investors with technology start-up companies, and for building on existing networks and developing new ones, some have argued that crowd funding is less likely to open up early stage investing to large numbers of small investors. The counter argument is that issues which

are presented as potential obstacles ought not to be insurmountable. The ingenuity of financial markets would tend to support the latter view.

Crowd sourced equity funding for SMEs

In the case of the more typical small closely held business (i.e. not technology startups), the owner will be unlikely to want to offer equity to external investors that would have the effect of diluting the ownership of the company. A more attractive option would be loan finance via an online crowd funding platform, subject to having a sufficient revenue stream from which to make interest payments. More widely held ownership is likely to be of less concern where the venture is a new community focussed cooperative to address a geographically local need and where the likelihood of raising finance through other means is remote.

Conclusion

Despite the uncertainties that arise and the attendant challenges in adapting crowd sourced funding to raise equity capital for companies, the difficulty that small companies face in accessing finance from traditional sources suggests that governments will want to look carefully at the potential of crowd funding to open up new sources of capital, facilitated through an appropriate regulatory regime. This would allow the market to decide how, and the extent to which, the concept should be developed and applied in practice within the boundaries of that regulatory regime.

Responses to questions posed in the Discussion Paper

Question 1 *In principle, should any provision be made in the corporations legislation to accommodate or facilitate CSEF. If so, why, if not, why?*

Response

Yes, provision should be made in the corporations legislation to accommodate or facilitate CSEF. CSEF has potential to improve access to finance for some early stage knowledge rich companies and for a broader range of SMEs. The full extent of this potential will become clearer over time as the market develops and responds to the new opportunities of an enabling regulatory framework. Other countries are taking steps to introduce enabling regulatory regimes and it is desirable that, in Australia, we should examine the options for a workable facilitative framework. The question should be viewed in the broader context of the need to ensure the existence of a competitive business environment for entrepreneurs seeking to establish and build innovative new companies. Seen through this prism, CSEF is a piece of the jigsaw. The popularity and recent rapid growth of existing online crowd sourced funding platforms would not have been predicted by many. It would be wrong to assume that the equity based model will not generate interest and establish a presence. As noted in our introductory remarks, the market should ultimately determine how, and the extent to which, CSEF should be developed and applied in practice, within the boundaries of an enabling regulatory regime.

Question 2 *Should any such provision:*

- (i) take the form of some variation of the small scale offering exemption and/or*
- (ii) confine CSEF to sophisticated, experienced and professional investors? If so, what, if any, change should be made to the test of a sophisticated investor in this context, or*
- (iii) adopt some other approach (such as discussed in Section 7.3, below).*

Response

Investment in early stage companies tends to revolve around trusted networks of investors, professional advisers, experienced executives and entrepreneurs. These relationships are built up over time. From this perspective, it may be argued that a variation of the small scale offering exemption (see Discussion Paper, page 19) coupled with a limitation to sophisticated investors (albeit possibly with some expansion of the existing definition) would adequately serve the early stage company sector. Nevertheless, for the reasons noted in response to Question 1 and also the fact that CSEF has the capacity to serve a much broader range of enterprises than the technology start up alone, we consider that it is appropriate that a self-contained statutory and compliance structure for CSEF, open to all investors be established (that is, Option 5 identified in the Discussion Paper). This regime should require that an offer for securities is conducted through a sole intermediary, operating online only, consistent with the proposed crowd funding rules published by the US SEC and as noted in the discussion paper (first update version). This model is appropriate to harness the full potential of the crowd. Variations to the small scale offering exemption and/or confining CSEF to sophisticated investors will not enable CSEF in the true sense but will deliver crowd funding without the crowd. They will not capture the enthusiasm and the scale that the crowd has to offer and that have been demonstrated in the high growth in non-equity crowd funding activity over the past two years. CSEF not only offers potential to broaden access to capital, it will also provide an opportunity for some market validation of the product at an early stage. This latter aspect may assist in attracting investors in a second fund raising round.

Furthermore, this approach supports transparency and a level playing field by ensuring that all investors have access to the same information in a single location. It is also the model which best enables the collective wisdom of the crowd to be mobilised by facilitating online communication between investors. By enabling the sharing of knowledge and information among investors, this helps to disseminate information that will form reputations about issuers, intermediaries and other actors, which is critical given the division of labour in the due diligence process.

Subject to due regulatory safeguards, it should be left to the market to decide who invests and where. The principal protection to investors will be caps on the amount that may be invested in any year according to an individual's net income.

Question 3 *In the CSEF context, what changes, if any, should be made, and for what reasons, to the regulation of:*

- (i) proprietary companies*
- (ii) public companies*

(iii) managed investment schemes. In considering (iii), should the disclosure obligations of issuers to investors differ, in principle, if investors are investing directly (as equity holders in the issuer) or indirectly (through acquiring an interest in a managed investment scheme) and if so, how and why?

Response

(i) The shareholder cap should be raised to enable large numbers of investors to contribute relatively small amounts of money. If this change is not made, while companies will be able to choose from a larger pool of investors, they will not be able to aggregate significant amounts of capital by raising small contributions from many investors (the current cap for a small proprietary company being 50 non-employee shareholders).

(ii) The need to facilitate access to CSEF by unlisted public companies is less apparent and of a lower order priority, albeit that these companies do not have the same options for raising capital as a listed public company. Nevertheless, a decision has been made to become an unlisted public company in the knowledge of the attendant regulatory and compliance obligations and this itself could be indicative of a degree of confidence in the ability of the company to raise capital as an unlisted public company through existing means. A regulatory regime for CSEF should not preclude public unlisted companies from participating.

(iii) Managed investment schemes involving pooled investment through a trust framework are not well-suited as a vehicle for crowd sourced equity investing. Investments are held on trust for the scheme members by the responsible entity and this divorces the retail investor from the investee company. An important feature of, in particular, the donor-based crowd funding model, is the connection or affiliation the individual contributor has towards the funded project. It would not be desirable to introduce a regime which might remove or weaken this connection. This said, a regime might allow access by managed investment schemes to online CSEF platforms as an additional feature. This would enable people who preferred to invest through a managed scheme to do so.

Question 4 What provision, if any, should be made for each of the following matters as they concern CSEF issuers:

(i) **types of issuer:** should there be restrictions on the classes of issuers permitted to employ CSEF (for instance, investment companies are excluded from the CSEF provisions of the US JOBS Act. In Italy, CSEF is confined to designated ‘innovative start-ups’)

(ii) **types of permitted securities:** what classes of securities of the issuer should be able to be offered through CSEF

(iii) **maximum funds that an issuer may raise:** should there be a ceiling, and if so what, on the funds that can be raised by each issuer in a particular period through CSEF. Should that ceiling include any funds raised under the small scale personal offers exemption

(iv) **disclosure by the issuer to investors:** what disclosures should issuers have to provide to investors

(v) **controls on advertising by the issuer:** what controls, if any, should there be on advertising by an issuer

(vi) **liability of issuers:** in what circumstances should the directors or controllers of the issuer have liability in relation to CSEF. What defences to liability should apply

(vii) **ban on a secondary market:** should CSEF be limited to new issues, excluding on-selling of existing securities

(viii) **any other matter?**

Response to Question 4

(i) **types of issuer:** We would urge against confining CSEF to a particular class of company, as in Italy where access is limited to “innovative start-ups”. Apart from issues of definition which arise with the adoption of generic descriptions when it is sought to set parameters for eligibility, it is desirable that Australian companies should have access to the broadest range of sources of capital and markets. Investment fund companies should be excluded as under the US JOBS Act 2012 and as proposed for the Canadian regime. The regime should be limited to Australian incorporated issuers. If CSEF is facilitated through regulation in Australia, this will be done to improve access to finance for Australian SMEs principally. It would be difficult and costly to perform due diligence on foreign companies and similarly to enforce local regulatory provisions.

We also note the US SEC has proposed that companies without a specific business plan or a plan which is simply to engage in a merger or acquisition with an unidentified entity should be excluded. The basis for this is to ensure that investors are provided adequate information to make an informed decision. We would support a similar exclusion in an Australian regime for like reason.

(ii) **types of permitted securities:** ordinary shares; non-convertible preference shares; non-convertible debt securities that are linked only to a fixed or variable interest rate; and, shares that are convertible into ordinary shares or non-convertible preference shares. This is consistent with the Canadian proposal and recognises that the exemption is intended to facilitate capital raising by small and medium sized companies and that, accordingly, complex products need not and ought not to be accommodated under this exemption. Furthermore, such products are less likely to be well understood by the majority of retail investors and therefore the associated investment risks not properly appreciated.

(iii) **maximum funds that an issuer may raise:** a limit of no more than \$1.5 million in a 12 month period would constitute an appropriate ceiling, in line with the current Canadian proposal. It will be consistent with the capital requirements of many start-ups and pitched at a level which is able to help to bridge the gap between founders and angel finance and formal venture capital. It will also be suitable to meet the capital requirements of a broader range of small businesses which may wish to raise capital via a crowd funding platform.

The ceiling could exclude funds raised under the small scale personal offers exemption given the conditions which apply, including the limitation to 20 investors.

(iv) **disclosure by the issuer to investors:** there is a premium to be gained from low transaction costs for issues of securities. In all cases when designing regulation of financial markets, there is a balance to be struck between, on the one hand, the need to provide reliable and useful information to the investor and, on the other hand, the costs the issuer has to bear in providing the information to

meet the relevant disclosure requirements. The use of investor and issuer financial caps and the facilitation of information sharing over online communication channels are important features of CSEF which ought to enable regulation with less costly compliance burdens on the issuer.

The stepped approaches provided under the US JOBS Act and in the Canadian proposal are an attempt to strike this balance. Of these two, we believe the approach taken in the US legislation is to be preferred. The issuer must provide financial statements, certified by an officer of the issuer if the specified target offering amount is \$100,000 or less, reviewed by an accountant if that amount is up to \$500,000 and audited if that amount is over \$500,000. Noting that many investors will not undertake due diligence themselves, information available to the investor (and actors that the investor relies on, by reputation, to interpret the information) should include the principal risks facing the issuer as well as recent financial statements. Information should also be provided about the key personnel of the issuer, including recent experience. We note, for example, that the US SEC is proposing to require disclosure of the business experience of directors and officers of the issuer during the last three years.

We also strongly urge consideration of the establishment of a lower tier of investment which would be accompanied by only very limited issuer disclosure requirements. This tier might be capped at, say, a maximum investment of \$250 and would facilitate investment in social enterprise, while not being confined to that sector. Similarly, this tier would enjoy exemption from the income or net wealth qualifications applying to individuals making larger investments.

Ongoing disclosure should include provision of annual statements. The issuer should also maintain books and records which contain: information on shares and securities issued by the issuer, the price and date; the names of all holders of shares and securities and the size of their holdings; and, the use of funds raised.

We do not comment further on the disclosure to be provided by the issuer save to observe that, in the context of early stage investing there are certain key matters about which it is important for investors to have information and these matters should guide the information that issuers provide. Not all of these matters need to be the subject of obligatory disclosure but there is unlikely to be any harm in requiring disclosure, or establishing a system that rewards disclosure (through information that forms good and bad reputations - see earlier discussion). They include:

- explanation of the product, process or service and basic description of any technology it is dependent on for its functionality
- what is the edge or competitive advantage over what is currently available in the market that will make it successful
- what are the principal risks the company faces including any risks associated with the technology
- any estimates prepared of size of market
- milestones and path to market
- what the capital raised will be used for
- key personnel (directors and senior executive management) and the roles of, including the continued involvement of the inventor of any relevant technology

- how any intellectual property is protected and whether the issuer is aware of any disputes concerning it or challenges to the validity of any associated patents or other forms of intellectual property protection
- anti-dilution, “tag along” and “drag along” rights

(v) **controls on advertising by the issuer:** we support the controls provided under the US JOBS Act. In particular, we consider it important that the intermediary’s online platform is the sole location for access to information about the offer. This will assist with overall regulation and the provision of a level playing field for all investors.

(vi) **liability of issuers:** we comment that investor protection and confidence demands that issuers should be liable for statements they make which they know or ought to have known were false or misleading.

(vii) **ban on a secondary market:** CSEF should be limited to new issues, excluding on-selling of existing securities. The primary purpose of enabling CSEF should be to improve access to capital for small companies, that is, via new issues.

(viii) **any other matter?** No other comments are made.

Question 5 *In the CSEF context, what changes, if any, should be made, and for what reasons, to the current licensing requirements applicable to intermediaries?*

Response

We comment in broad terms that the licensing requirements need to reflect the role of the operator of an online CSEF platform. The principal role should be to host investment opportunities in an efficient and transparent manner for the benefit of issuer and investor. Some platform providers may offer additional services such as access to mentors and other advisers. However, we suggest that they should not hold investors’ funds. This allows for less stringent licensing arrangements while not compromising investor protection, but being sufficient to ensure the integrity of the CSEF regime.

Pending fundraising targets being met, investors’ funds should be held by an external agent appropriately licensed for such purpose. We note the proposed US SEC rules require transmission of funds by the investor directly to an account with a qualified third party bank. Platform providers should also not provide financial or investment advice. A licensing regime should recognise this limited role but nevertheless require a platform provider to demonstrate that it has adequate capital, human and technological resources to perform its function. This should enable overly burdensome regulatory arrangements to be avoided.

Question 6 *What provision, if any, should be made for each of the following matters as they concern CSEF intermediaries:*

(i) *permitted types of intermediary* (also relevant to Question 5):

(a) *should CSEF intermediaries be required to be registered/licensed in some manner*

Response

Our comments below are to be read with our response to Question 5. We believe there should be a licensing regime. An appropriate approach would be to require for platform operators (intermediaries) to register with the Australian Securities and Investments Commission to enable a central register of platform operators to be maintained and to address investor protection issues including integrity, proficiency and solvency requirements. The degree of regulation will depend on whether intermediaries will be permitted to hold investors' funds or securities, as to which, we have expressed the view that they ought not to be (see Response to Question 5). The discussion paper suggests some alternative approaches for handling investors' funds at paragraph 2.2.3.

(b) *what financial, human, technology and risk management capabilities should an intermediary have for carrying out its role*

Response

We do not comment in detail but would note that in all cases there will need to be a sufficient minimum level of human, technology and risk management capabilities to ensure that investors are able to have confidence in the CSEF market. At the same time it is desirable to avoid over regulation of intermediaries as this may impede unnecessarily the development of the market. Platform providers should be required to carry standardised warnings about the risks of equity investing and the especially high risks associated with investing in technology start-ups.

The need for an intermediary to build reputation in the CSEF market is likely to mean that those specialising in hosting early stage technology companies will carry out significant due diligence before agreeing to host a company on their platform. In such a case the operator's human resources will need to include individuals with experience in early stage investing and the operator will build its brand and reputation around the quality of the investment opportunities it hosts. Other operators will run less highly curated platforms. There may be opportunities for intermediaries to make use of others with expertise for example, business incubators could be involved in the due diligence vetting process. Online channels of communication between investors will be an important feature to facilitate information sharing and to build the reputation of participants in the CSEF market.

There will also need to be secure online payments systems and systems to guard against fraud and money laundering.

- (c) *what fair, orderly and transparent processes must the intermediary be required to have for its online platform*

Response

Issues of process should be addressed by regulation to ensure a measure of standardisation which will support market integrity and investor confidence. Basic information about the offer, the issuer and the intermediary should be provided.

- (d) *should an intermediary be required to have an internal dispute resolution and be a member of an external dispute body, such as the Financial Services Ombudsman*

Response

We consider these two requirements to be appropriate.

- (ii) *intermediary matters related to issuers:* these matters include:

- (a) *what, if any, projects and/or issuers should intermediaries not permit to raise funds through CSEF*

Response

No view is expressed. Our interest in CSEF lies principally in the potential it may have to improve access to finance for innovative early stage Australian companies.

- (b) *what preliminary/ongoing due diligence checks should intermediaries be required to conduct on issuers and their management*

Response

To build and protect their reputation, intermediaries will seek to undertake basic enquiries about companies and key personnel. These might include: searches to establish the identity of a company including registered office, to check that financial accounts have been filed up to date, to ascertain the existence of any charges on the company's business and assets and pending legal actions and judgments; searches against directors, officers and significant shareholders to establish, among other matters, background and the absence of bankruptcy and director disqualification orders. It will be important for investors to be able to access a verification of the identity of the issuer, and also information about the issuer to inform their decision about the investment. A due diligence vetting process for issuers would enable this. However, it is not essential that it be the intermediary that undertakes the due diligence. Other actors could provide this service, as long as the information is made available to potential investors at the time they are considering the investment, that is, on the online crowd sourcing platform. The regulatory settings should be designed to create a systems where the results of due diligence are communicated to the investors, but with the flexibility to allow the market to establish the means for delivering this outcome.

(c) what preliminary/ongoing due diligence checks should intermediaries be required to conduct on the business conducted by issuers

Response

We believe that enquiries about the business conducted by the issuers are principally matters between the issuer and the investor. We have commented on the type of information that an investor might wish to obtain and consider before making a decision to proceed with an investment (Response to Question 4 (iv)).

(d) to what extent should intermediaries be held liable for investor losses resulting from misleading statements from issuers made on their websites

Response

Provided that the intermediary has exercised reasonable care to verify the accuracy of matters that it is required by regulation to verify (to be decided but these would be matters capable of ascertainment and verification by routine enquiry), and provided that the intermediary does not have knowledge or reason to suspect that statements made by the issuer are not true, liability for misleading statements made by the issuer should rest with the issuer as maker of the statement. The intermediary should not be held liable. For the situation to be otherwise would risk placing undue burden on the intermediary and operate as a disincentive to the establishment of a CSEF market in Australia. Intermediaries should post notice on their website where material statements made by issuers have not been able to be verified by the intermediary (or agents instructed on the intermediaries' behalf) and that investors should make their own enquiries prior to subscribing for shares. Intermediaries should not be permitted to recommend or endorse particular investment opportunities.

(e) to what extent should intermediaries be held liable for investor losses resulting from their websites being used to defraud investors

Response

Provided that the intermediary has exercised reasonable care to verify the accuracy of matters that it is required by regulation to verify (to be decided), liability for investor losses should rest with the issuer and the investor should pursue legal remedy against the issuer.

(f) what possible conflict of interest/self-dealing situations may arise between issuers and intermediaries (including intermediaries having a financial interest in an issuer or being remunerated according to the amount of funds raised for issuers through their funding portal), and how these situations might best be dealt with

Response

Where any element of the intermediary's remuneration is linked to the amount of funds raised, the intermediary should be under an obligation to disclose this fact to investors. The intermediary and its officers should be prohibited from having any financial interest in the issuer, consistent with the US SEC proposals.

- (g) *what controls should be placed on issuers having access to funds raised through a CSEF portal*

Response

Access by the issuer to funds raised should not be permitted until the issuer's fund raising target has been achieved. Intermediaries should not be permitted to hold or manage any investor funds. This allows for less stringent licensing arrangements while not compromising investor protection. Pending fundraising targets being met, investors' funds should be held by an external agent appropriately licensed for such purpose. We note the proposed US SEC rules require transmission of funds by the investor directly to an account with a qualified third party bank, which has agreed to hold the funds and to transmit them to the issuer or investors, depending on whether the offering is completed or cancelled.

- (iii) *intermediary matters related to investors:* these matters include:

- (a) *what, if any, screening or vetting should intermediaries conduct on investors*

Response

Basic identity checks should be carried out by the intermediary or an agent instructed for the purpose as a measure of protection against fraud. Intermediaries will need to comply with existing anti-money laundering regulations.

- (b) *what risk and other disclosures should intermediaries be required to make to investors*

Response

Standard warnings should be developed which it would be obligatory for all intermediaries to carry on their online platform. These should take the form of a basic "health" warning to draw the investor's attention to the high risk of loss of capital associated with investments in companies which are in the early stages of business development. A short warning is more likely to be read and considered, compared to a long detailed warning. A short warning could then direct investors to more detailed information. In this, attention should be drawn in general terms to risks linked to technology, market, intellectual property and competing products. There should also be a recommendation to take legal and financial advice and attention should be drawn to the risks of dilution of first round shareholdings as a consequence of later funding rounds and to the illiquid nature of investments in technology startups, and that there will typically be a lack of dividends during the early development stages. Attention should also be drawn to the potential impact of preferential shareholder rights on returns to ordinary shareholders.

- (c) *what measures should intermediaries be required to take to ensure that any investment limits are not breached*

Response

Consideration should be given to a regime of self-certification for investors. The important issue is for prospective investors to be adequately appraised of the high risk of loss of capital associated with early stage investing, the illiquid nature of the investment, the risk of dilution and the lack of dividends.

- (d) *what controls should be placed on intermediaries offering investment advice to investors*

Response

Intermediaries should not be permitted to provide financial advice.

- (e) *should controls be placed on intermediaries soliciting transactions on their websites*

Response

The intermediary should not be permitted to solicit transactions but be limited to hosting and publishing the investment opportunity on the website. We support safe harbour provisions proposed by the US SEC to enable intermediaries to apply criteria to limit offerings on its website to, for example, specific industries, without being deemed to be soliciting transactions or providing investment advice.

- (f) *what controls should there be on intermediaries holding or managing investor funds*

Response

Intermediaries should not be permitted to hold or manage investors' funds. See response to Question 6 (ii) (g).

- (g) *what facilities should intermediaries be required to provide to allow investors to communicate with issuers and with each other*

Response

We believe that information and knowledge sharing among investors has the potential to improve the investment decision making process in the crowd funding context. Accordingly we concur in the US SEC proposal to require intermediaries to facilitate communication between investors on its online platform.

- (h) *what disclosure should be made to investors about being able to make complaints against the intermediary, and the intermediary's liability insurance in respect of the role as an intermediary*

Response

No comments are made.

- (i) *what disclosure should be made about the commission and other fees that intermediaries may collect from funds raised*

Response

Where any element of the intermediary's remuneration is linked to the amount of funds raised, the intermediary should be under an obligation to disclose this fact to investors. No additional comments are made save that there should be rules to provide for disclosure of remuneration arrangements to ensure transparency.

- (j) *what, if any, additional services should intermediaries provide to enhance investor protection*

Response

No additional comments.

- (iv) *any other matter?*

Question 7 *In the CSEF context, what provision, if any, should be made for investors to be made aware of:*

- (i) *the differences between share and debt securities*

Response

Basic information could be provided. Beyond this, these are matters on which an investor may be expected to obtain legal advice, should additional information be desired, having regard to the cost of obtaining advice relative to the amount to be invested. As noted earlier, the intermediary should be required to recommend that prospective investors obtain legal advice before entering into a binding commitment to invest.

- (ii) *the difference between legal and beneficial interests in shares*

Response

Similarly, beyond the provision of basic information, this is a matter on which legal advice should be obtained by the investor, where appropriate.

(iii) any classes of shares in the issuer and its implications for investors. A related question is whether disclosure, alone, would suffice.

Response

Beyond the matters noted earlier as regards information and warnings the intermediary should be required to provide to the investor, these are matters about which the issuer should be required to provide full and comprehensive disclosure to the prospective investor via the intermediary's online platform. Attention should, for example, be drawn to any limitation upon crowd equity shareholders' voting rights.

Question 8 *What provision, if any, should be made for each of the following matters as they concern CSEF investors:*

(i) permitted types of investor: should there be any limitations on who may be a CSEF investor

Response

We would propose no limitation on who may be an investor, consistent with the US and Canadian proposals and with investor protection being provided through investment caps based on income.

(ii) threshold sophisticated investor involvement (Italy only): should there be a requirement that sophisticated investors hold at least a certain threshold interest in an enterprise before it can make CSEF offers to other investors

Response

No. It is considered that such a restriction, while having some benefit in de-risking the investment for the less well informed investor, would run strongly counter to the objective of increasing access to capital. The protection for the investor should focus around caps on how much may be invested relative to net income and wealth.

(iii) maximum funds that each investor can contribute: should there be some form of cap on the funds that an investor can invest. In this context, there are a number of possible approaches under *Issuer linked caps* and under *Investor linked caps*

Response

There should be a cap. As noted in the discussion paper, investment caps are an important measure of investor protection. We believe the US model is to be preferred, that is, limiting the total monetary amount that an investor may invest in all CSEF issuers in one year according to that person's income or net worth. A cap where the investor is limited to what he may invest in any one intermediary on an annual basis (a part of the Canadian proposal) may be unduly restrictive as investors may wish to direct their investment through a preferred intermediary with a strong track record or due to some other attributes of that intermediary. We also believe the per annum aggregate CAD10,000 limit under the Canadian proposal to be unduly restrictive. We prefer the investment limits under the JOBS Act which are set out in paragraph 4.4.1 of the discussion paper.

(iv) **risk acknowledgement by the investor:** should an investor be required to acknowledge the risks involved in CSEF

Response

This is a useful way to emphasise and draw attention to the risks of early stage investing.

(v) **cooling off rights:** should an investor have some right of withdrawal after accepting a CSEF offer

Response

Since CSEF is aimed at the retail investor, this consumer protection type of measure is appropriate.

(vi) **subsequent withdrawal rights (Italy only):** should an investor have some further withdrawal right subsequent to the offer

Response

No comments are made.

(vii) **resale restrictions:** should there be restrictions for some period on the on-sale of securities acquired through CSEF

Response

We consider there should be such restrictions to prevent the manipulation of the share price through “pump and dump” activities.

(viii) **reporting:** what ongoing reporting should be made by the intermediary and/or issuers to investors in regards to their investment

Response

Issuers should be required to report to investors with audited annual financial statements

(ix) **losses:** what recourse should investors have in relation to losses resulting from inadequate disclosure

Response

No additional protection to the CSEF investor beyond the recourse available to other investors.

(x) **remedies:** what remedies should investors have in relation to losses resulting from poor management of the enterprise they invest in

Response

None beyond those already existing under the law

(xi) **any other matter?**

Question 9 *Should any accommodation for CSEF in the Corporations Act be in the form of incremental adjustments to the existing provisions, or be in the form of a self-contained regulatory regime for CSEF?*

Response

See responses to questions 1 and 2. We believe a self-contained regulatory regime is required rather than incremental adjustments to existing provisions.

Question 10 *What, if any, other matters which come within the scope of this review might be considered?*

Response

Consideration might be given to a means of tracking the performance of companies hosted on and funded through online CSEF platforms so that this data is available for investors in the future to facilitate informed decision-making. This may focus the attention of intermediaries on the quality of the companies they host.

Intermediaries might be encouraged to consider publishing their portfolio performance on their website. This would be a means of shaping market behaviour other than by prescription.

Disclosure does not necessarily need to be mandatory. Often the immediate cause of lack of information in the market is the lack of a well-recognised standard to report against. Here the first task is to establish one or encourage one to emerge. Once it has, the best performers will generally have an incentive to report against it and this will put pressure to disclose on other players, lest they be seen to have something to hide. The desired outcome of information disclosure can be achieved without compulsion.

We also draw attention to the need, in considering what appropriate policy settings might be, that consideration is given to any implications that internet enabled CSEF may have for the tax system. It is desirable that the design and administration of the tax system should not pose barriers or operate as a disincentive to participation in the CSEF market, for example, the system should not unduly raise transaction costs.