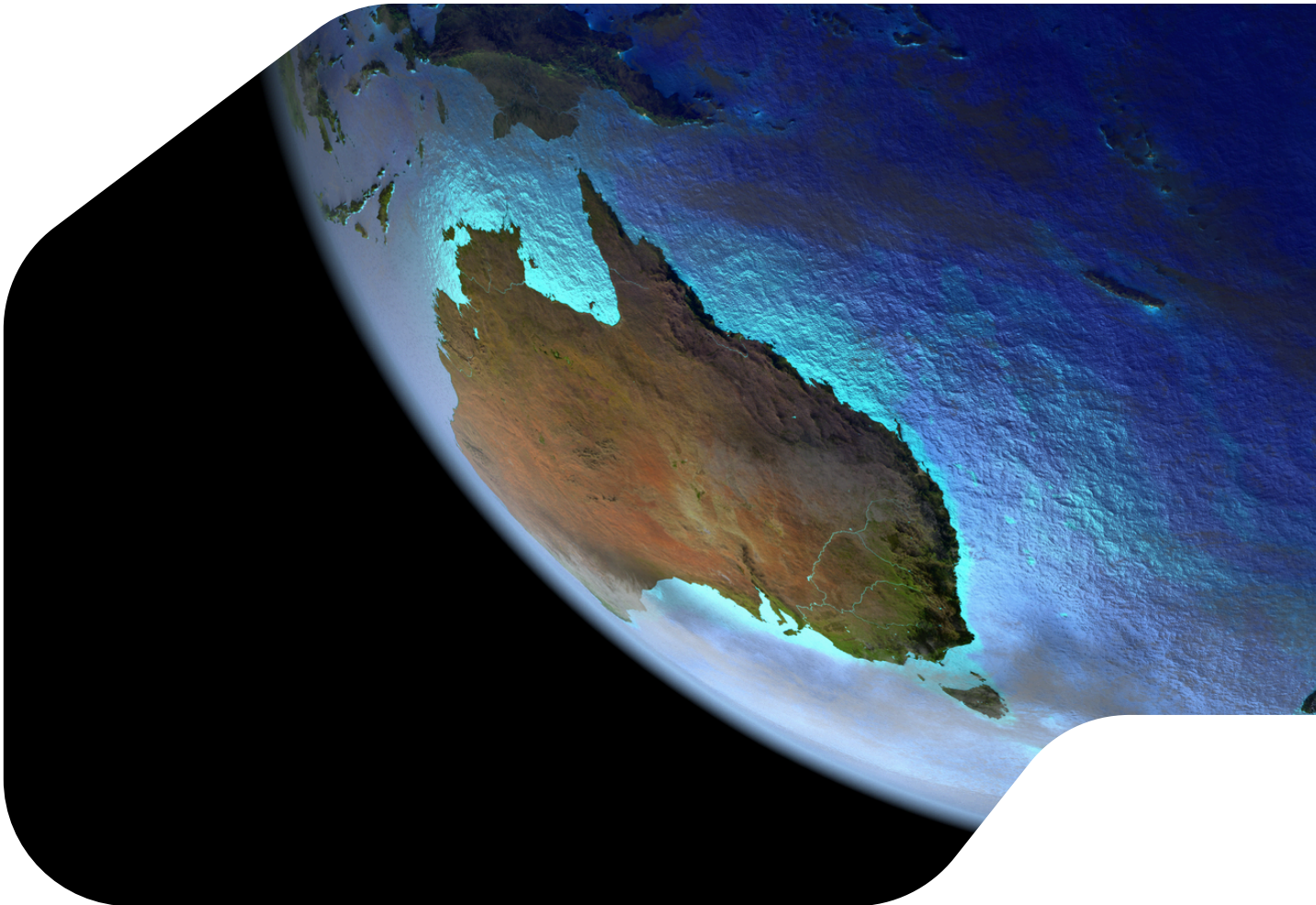




POLICY REVIEW OF THE NATIONAL COMPETITIVE GRANTS PROGRAM – A NEW PLAN FOR ARC FUNDED RESEARCH



SUBMISSION TO:
AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH COUNCIL

APRIL 2025

Submission to the Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program, Discussion Paper: A New Plan for Australian Research Council-Funded Research

The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (the Academy) is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that brings together the multidisciplinary expertise of our nation's leading thinkers to provide practical, evidence-based advice on important social issues facing society.

As the pre-eminent organisation in Australia representing excellence across the social science disciplines, we welcome the opportunity to respond to the Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program, Discussion Paper: A New Plan for Australian Research Council-Funded Research (Discussion Paper).

Introduction

The Academy strongly supports the new plan for the National Competitive Grants Program (NCGP), which positions early-stage, investigator-led research within the research and development (R&D) system and recognises the crucial role of the social sciences alongside other disciplines. We endorse the essential contours and intent of this plan for Australian Research Council (ARC) funded research, especially its long-term strategy to support and enhance Australia's research workforce and increase the risk appetite for breakthrough ideas needed to drive innovation, economic prosperity, and societal wellbeing. The plan is consistent with our previous submissions to the Review of the Australian Research Council Act 2001 and the Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program.¹

Noting the complexity of implementing such ambitious change, we offer comments and recommendations to assist in:

1. Positioning Australian researchers for the future
2. Positioning Australian research for the future
3. Positioning Australia within international research, and
4. Reinforcing the ARC's position as a trusted international leader of research.

We make 11 recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1:** Work with universities on sustainable ways to improve longer-term security and sector mobility for researchers, as well as to prevent unintentional consequences of the renewed NCGP, particularly in light of broader discussions about university funding models and national R&D.
- **Recommendation 2:** Set a minimum threshold on embedded fellowships of 0.5FTE for at least 12 months.
- **Recommendation 3:** Create flexible but precise NCGP components to offer:
 - A training scheme for recently completed higher degree by research students/very early career researchers to support technical and soft skills development, experience working in project teams, and networking opportunities

¹ Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (2022, 14 December) '[Academy submission to the review of the Australian Research Council Act 2001](#)'; Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (2024, 13 May) '[Academy submission to the Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program](#)'.

- A training scheme for early- and mid-career researchers (EMCRs; who are not yet attached to institutions), to develop independent track records, and/or
- A research-intensive period for EMCRs (who are attached to institutions) leading or embedded within a successful project.
- **Recommendation 4:** Take further steps to improve outcomes across the NCGP for researchers from under-represented groups by exploring targets and testing additional evidence-based approaches.
- **Recommendation 5:** Affirm the NCGP's focus on investigator-led discovery research and, in implementing the new schemes, engage stakeholders to balance critical funding of early-stage research with essential requirements for translation and contribution to societal benefit.
- **Recommendation 6:** Explicitly support a range of team sizes and types via the NCGP.
- **Recommendation 7:** Implement the *Statement of Support for Interdisciplinary Research* in new NCGP schemes, administrative processes, and evaluation.
- **Recommendation 8:** Ensure that proposed models of research reporting and evaluation align with the proposed model of research investment.
- **Recommendation 9:** Develop support provisions for international collaboration, with appropriate constraints, including for research partnerships and projects, large-scale consortia, and targeted bilateral and multilateral research initiatives.
- **Recommendation 10:** Pursue a set of agreements in Europe, Asia and elsewhere to promote and enable strategic, long-term international connections and collaborations that benefit Australia's research and researchers.
- **Recommendation 11:** Establish a comprehensive, fit-for-purpose monitoring and evaluation framework that informs the ARC's continuous positioning as the premier influence on Australian research.

To discuss any matters raised in this submission, please contact Dr Honae Cuffe, Policy Director on 0434 636 748, or honae.cuffe@socialsciences.org.au.

Positioning Australian researchers for the future

The Academy strongly supports the ARC's aim to build the next generation of world-class researchers. The proposal to move from a smaller number of longer-term fellowships to a larger number of shorter-term embedded fellowships could assist and enhance the research workforce, and is consistent in principle with the Academy's earlier recommendation to undertake a comprehensive evaluation of the Fellowship Programs.² However, the plan does not compel universities and other research employers to address the precarity problem for EMCRs in a sector dominated by casualisation.³ Moreover, allowing embedded fellowships to take the form of short-term teaching buyouts will only contribute to the casualisation of university employment, creating a potential divide between those who can secure more extensive embedded fellowships and those who make do with short-term teaching buyouts.

Existing fellowship schemes have shaped university investment in their research workforce, although ARC-funded fellows often do not hold continuing appointments despite significant co-funding or in-kind investment from institutions. These fellowships have provided researchers with essential career development opportunities and the Academy supports efforts to spread this value further. However, if only researchers already attached to universities are eligible to apply for embedded fellowships and if these fellowships are less than two years (e.g. within the *Initiate* scheme), Australia may struggle to retain or attract the best national and international talent.

² Recommendation 7, Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (2024) '[Academy submission to the Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program](#)'.

³ Department of Education (2023) '[Australian Universities Accord: Final Report](#)', Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

Recommendation 1: Work with universities on sustainable ways to improve longer-term security and sector mobility for researchers, as well as to prevent unintentional consequences of the renewed NCGP, particularly in light of broader discussions about university funding models and national R&D.

Recommendation 2: Set a minimum threshold on embedded fellowships of 0.5FTE for at least 12 months.

Recent outcomes for the Discovery Early Career Research Award show that the largest proportion of successful applicants were more than four years post-PhD.⁴ There is a gap in the training pipeline between the end of the PhD and postdoctoral funding. By targeting the *Initiate* scheme to both early career researchers (ECRs) and mid-career researchers (MCRs), the new plan may inadvertently preference more senior researchers who are seen as more competitive. Additionally, solely embedding EMCR training opportunities within projects, often led by more senior colleagues, may limit mobility and autonomy and disadvantage equity groups.

A fit-for-purpose EMCR training scheme should provide targeted and equitable skills development and opportunities based on career stage to support researchers to join and remain in the research workforce. Training schemes could be co-funded with universities and/or industry bodies, potentially conditional on future employment, and explicitly modelled on the Vitae Researcher Development Framework.⁵ The Irish Research Council's Postdoctoral Fellowship Scheme, where Training and Career Development Plans form 25 per cent of the overall assessment, provides an international example of a successful model for embedding researcher development within competitive grant schemes.⁶

Recommendation 3: Create flexible but precise NCGP components to offer:

- A training scheme for recently completed higher degree by research students/very early career researchers to support technical and soft skills development, experience working in project teams, and networking opportunities
- A training scheme for EMCRs (who are not yet attached to institutions) to develop independent track records, and/or
- A research-intensive period for EMCRs (who are attached to institutions) leading or embedded within a successful project.

We support the dedicated *Realise Indigenous Capability* scheme and applaud the commitment to maintaining named grants for mentorship by women leaders.⁷ However, these and other equity measures do not adequately address the systems-change needed to fully overcome structural disadvantage. The National Health and Medical Research Council requirements for gender parity amongst fellowship awardees offers one effective model for redressing structural disadvantages in access to opportunities that can influence funding outcomes.⁸

Recommendation 4: Take further steps to improve outcomes across the NCGP for researchers from under-represented groups by exploring targets and testing additional evidence-based approaches.

⁴ Australian Research Council (2024) ['Selection report: Discovery Early Career Researcher Award 2024,'](#) Australian Research Council, accessed 4 March 2025.

⁵ Vitae (2025) ['The vitae researcher development framework,'](#) Vitae, accessed 4 March 2025.

⁶ Irish Research Council (2025) ['2025 Government of Ireland programmes.'](#)

⁷ Recommendation 12, Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (2022) ['Academy submission to the Review of the Australian Research Council Act 2001,'](#); Recommendation 8, Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (2024) ['Academy submission to the Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program'.](#)

⁸ Department of Health and Aged Care (2023, 15 December) ['Gender equity achieved for major \\$379 million health research grant program,'](#) Press Release, The Hon Mark Butler MP, Minister for Health and Aged Care.

Positioning Australian research for the future

The Academy strongly supports the NCGP as the unique and primary funder of Australian basic research across all (non-medical) disciplines, especially as the Strategic Examination of R&D is underway.⁹ The ARC has and should continue to fund research at its earliest stages, building fundamental knowledge for later R&D, and we welcome the greater appetite for exploration and risk in research. However, the move away from the Discovery/Linkage schemes and the related basic/applied research distinction, and the focus on the role of industry and other end-users may inadvertently limit bold choices in research.

Recommendation 5: Affirm the NCGP's focus on investigator-led discovery research and, in implementing the new schemes, engage stakeholders to balance critical funding of early-stage research with essential requirements for translation and contribution to societal benefit.

We caution against the assumption that breakthrough ideas directly align with research scale and the kinds and composition of teams. Indeed, an analysis of 65 million papers, patents, and software products from 1954-2014 found that "smaller teams have tended to disrupt science and technology with new ideas and opportunities, whereas larger teams have tended to develop existing ones".¹⁰

Recommendation 6: Explicitly support a range of team sizes and types via the NCGP.

The Academy welcomes the broad focus on collaboration with end-users and proposals for project- and funder-level collaborative initiatives. However, we encourage a stronger commitment to interdisciplinarity, consistent with the ARC's 2024 *Statement of Support for Interdisciplinary Research*.¹¹ This could include dedicated schemes or elements to encourage interdisciplinary collaboration. There are successful international examples of funding for emerging and unexpected collaborative and interdisciplinary research from which the ARC can learn.¹²

Recommendation 7: Implement the *Statement of Support for Interdisciplinary Research* in new NCGP schemes, administrative processes, and evaluation.

We welcome the ARC's aspiration to identify and marshal research excellence in broad priority areas, as well as to leverage its data and analytical capabilities to inform its strategic directions. However, if the renewed NCGP is to change the culture, behaviour, and outcomes of Australian research and researchers, then scheme-level, portfolio-level and next-generation national research assessment practices must align. The ACOLA *Research Assessment in Australia: Evidence for Modernisation* report provides an evidence-based blueprint for this alignment.¹³

Recommendation 8: Ensure that proposed models of research reporting and evaluation align with the proposed model of research investment.

Positioning Australia within international research

Australian research exists in a global marketplace, where there is both increasing competition for talent and resources and promising opportunities through greater knowledge sharing. High risk-high reward investment in research that is potentially transformative may be more successful and influential when it occurs at the depth and breadth allowed by

⁹ Department of Industry, Science and Resources (2025) [Strategic Examination of R&D Discussion paper](#), Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

¹⁰ Wu L, Wang D, Evans JA (2019) 'Large teams develop and small teams disrupt science and technology', *Nature*, 566(7744): 378–382, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-019-0941-9>.

¹¹ Australian Research Council (2024) '[Interdisciplinary research: ARC statement of support for interdisciplinary research](#)'.

¹² Unusual Collaborations (2025) [Centre for Unusual Collaborations](#), accessed 31 March 2025; Tan A (2020, 11 December) '[Record \\$25 billion for research and innovation over next 5 years to secure Singapore's future](#)', *The Straits Times*, accessed 31 March 2025.

¹³ ACOLA (2023) [Research assessment in Australia: Evidence for modernisation](#), A report to the Office of the Chief Scientist, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

genuine internationalisation. The Academy supports more and larger-scale international collaborative projects, especially via the proposed *Collaborate* and *Prioritise* schemes. We encourage the ARC to further enhance the international positioning of Australian research through collaboration-oriented support. Provision could be made, for example, to allow principal investigators to be based overseas, as is the practice in several international schemes and grants.¹⁴ An increase in bilateral and multilateral agreements also would help Australia to signal and deepen its commitment to international collaboration. This could involve matching some of the system-wide innovations in inclusive assessment, strategic allocations, or holistic evaluation of outcomes used internationally, which will also support a more resilient, high-quality Australian research ecosystem.¹⁵

Recommendation 9: Develop support provisions for international collaboration, with appropriate constraints, including for research partnerships and projects, large-scale consortia, and targeted bilateral and multilateral research initiatives.

Recommendation 10: Pursue a set of agreements in Europe, Asia and elsewhere to promote and enable strategic, long-term international connections and collaborations that benefit Australia’s research and researchers.

Reinforcing the ARC’s position as a trusted international leader of research

We support efforts to reinforce the ARC’s position as a trusted leader in shaping excellent Australian research and researchers, as well as to position the NCGP internationally as highly strategic, innovative, agile, and evidence based. We are particularly supportive of the ARC’s commitment to reduce the administrative burden and simplify processes (e.g. eligibility and application requirements).¹⁶ However, maintaining and strengthening the ARC’s position requires a culture of ongoing improvement.

While the Discussion Paper indicates that new processes will build on “well-received reforms and streamlining efforts undertaken by the ARC in recent years”, different measures will influence research in different but consequential ways.¹⁷ Thus, trial and evaluation best practice should be embedded into the implementation of the renewed NCGP.

We also restate the importance of monitoring and evaluation to measure and track the effects of research investment over time, beyond just the efficiency and effectiveness of new NCGP processes.¹⁸ The plan asserts the renewed NCGP will reduce individual, project-level “post-award reporting requirements where appropriate, while maintaining the ability to report on compliance and outcomes”. The Academy supports this in principle, while highlighting the need for reporting that is targeted to the most appropriate unit of analysis (e.g. scheme- and portfolio-level) and is workable and optimal for intended outcomes. This is particularly pertinent to understanding the lifecycle of value for research investment, including downstream benefits of ARC-funded research to end-users in government, industry, and elsewhere. As the ARC implements bold reform, now is the time to consider a whole-of-lifecycle approach to investment tracking, which is strategic and fit-for-purpose.

Recommendation 11: Establish a comprehensive, fit-for-purpose monitoring and evaluation framework that informs the ARC’s continuous positioning as the premier influence on Australian research.

¹⁴ Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (2022) '[Academy submission to the Review of the Australian Research Council Act 2001](#)'.

¹⁵ ACOLA (2023) '[Research assessment in Australia: Evidence for modernisation](#)'.

¹⁶ Recommendation 11, Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (2022) '[Academy submission to the Review of the Australian Research Council Act 2001](#)'.

¹⁷ Kaiser M and Gluckman P (2025) 'Are scientific assessments and academic culture impeding transformative science?', *Sustainability Science*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-025-01631-9>.

¹⁸ Recommendation 4, Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (2024) '[Academy submission to the Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program](#)'.