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19 November 2014

Australian Academy of the Humanities
Submission to ARC *Centres of Excellence* scheme for funding commencing in 2017

Dear Aidan,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Centres of Excellence consultation in the lead up to the 2017 round. Given the very short time for consultation, our submission offers only initial advice on the scheme. The Academy urges the ARC to consult with the humanities sector more widely, and we would be pleased to assist in this process.

Overall, there is a widely held view among our Fellows that, while it is a very valuable programme, the Centres of Excellence scheme has not served the humanities sector well. It is a model more suited to the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines. Again, the Academy considers that further consultation with the sector is needed to discuss ways of improving humanities participation in the scheme.

At this point in the process we have largely restricted our feedback to questions raised in the consultation paper but will seek to consult further with the ARC on more strategic issues. As well, the Academy was alerted to some issues around the start-up and sign-off of new Centres, and some difficulties with respect to intra-institutional agreements, that we might also discuss with you at a later date.

1. The humanities are under-represented in the Centres of Excellence scheme

The Centres of Excellence scheme has a vital national function to build critical mass in discipline areas. However, the Humanities and Creative Arts (HCA) fields have had limited participation in the scheme, and as a consequence limited success, securing only three of a total of the 44 Centres of Excellence (CoE) awarded over the period 2002–14.

As noted in the *Mapping the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences in Australia* report (2014), it is probable that the "'problem-based' model for the ideal CoE does not fit some of the

HASS disciplines as well as those from STEM; a 'theme-based' model might be more typical of the large scale programmes of research likely to come from the HASS fields" (p. 57). Furthermore, the "apparent lack of fit with the prevailing research model does seem to discourage HASS researchers from applying to this scheme, and there is a perception that it disadvantages them when they do" (p. 57).

The Academy has been exploring ways in which national capacity building schemes like the Centres of Excellence might deliver on the objective of building critical mass and distribute these benefits more evenly across the research sector. In the humanities, a network-funding approach has been very successful in the past (ARC Research Networks). Again, this would be a useful point of discussion in a further targeted consultation.

In the UK a number of initiatives are proving transformational for humanities researchers. The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) has been funding a smaller number of large projects, under particular research themes – for example, Digital Transformations.[1] Another model of note is a new Centre for Doctoral Training in Science and Engineering in Arts, Heritage and Archaeology (SEAHA). Funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) the programme is training up to 80 students.[2]

In its recent submission the Academy made to the review of the Cooperative Research Centres (CRC) programme, we noted that there was merit in the prospect of introducing flexibility in terms of scale and funding arrangements (in the case of the CRC programme these were recommendations made in the 2008 review by Professor Mary O'Kane).[3] A similar principle, with respect to diversity of scale, may well apply in the case of the Centres of Excellence programme.

The other key point we would make in reference to humanities representation in the scheme extends to the assessment process. Humanities expertise is under-represented on the Selection Advisory Committee (SAC). Examining the Committee membership for the 2005 and 2011 programmes, we note that the 2004-05 Committee included one HCA member out of a total committee of 12; and in 2009-10 there was only one HCA representative on the ten-member committee.[4]

It is vital that combined panels be attuned to the often very different research practices and cultures across disciplines; a lack of humanities expertise on the SAC risks narrowing the scope of its advice. The Academy would urge the ARC to consider including more humanities expertise on the panel for the 2017 round.

2. Objectives of the scheme

1. Are these objectives still appropriate for the *ARC Centres of Excellence* scheme?
2. What, if any changes would you suggest?
3. Should some indication of planning for research impact be included in the objectives for the *ARC Centres of Excellence* scheme?

One of the current objectives of the programme that could be strengthened is objective 'g'. The existing wording that CoEs "serve as points of interaction" between sectors is quite vague. There needs to be stronger emphasis on building partnerships with the not-

for-profit sector, as well as public sector and cultural institutions (such as libraries, galleries, museums). This is certainly an area where humanities research does well – partnering with such institutions to extend the influence of the research and broaden its relevance.

With regard to the question of impact, there has not been enough time for the Academy to canvass widely within its Fellowship on this issue. Given there are very limited details in the consultation paper about what the inclusion of 'impact' in the scheme objectives would entail, or how 'impact' might come in to play across the scheme (budget, selection criteria, etc.), it is very difficult to comment. With those caveats in mind, the Academy would make the following observations at this point:

- The Academy considers that there is reasonable emphasis already on 'research impact' within the existing funding guidelines in the outcomes and linkages assessment criteria which is weighted at 20%, and would not, therefore, support its inclusion in the objectives of the programme without further consultation being undertaken by the ARC.
- As a general principle, the Academy prefers the word 'benefit' rather than 'impact'. Public investment in research should be guided by the principle of delivering cultural, social and economic benefits. The word 'benefit' more accurately captures the intention of the scheme and addresses the positive outcomes of research.
- The Academy is aware of proposals to include impact metrics in future research assessment processes, and the prospect of "reshap[ing] research grant incentives" to encourage research-industry collaboration.[5] Our concern is that these initiatives risk narrowing the meaning of impact and tying research to short-term agendas.
- Achieving and assessing 'impact' – or 'benefits' – within research fields and beyond academe needs to be attuned to discipline-specific practices.

3. Application process and selection criteria

4. What aspects of the application and selection process worked well for CE14?
5. What aspects of the application and selection process could be improved for CE17?

Overall the Centres of Excellence process is generally sound, but the Academy received a number of suggestions aimed at streamlining the application process as follows:

- It can be an unnecessarily costly and complicated application process. One option to reduce such cost burdens on the sector would be for more efficient vetting at the EOI stage across the board.
- Some of the requirements of the EOI are often difficult to detail at this stage in the application process. Given time frames it is often difficult, for instance, to get all the budgetary details in place across several universities. It is possible that this phase could simply include details of the project; the curriculum vitae of the Chief Investigators (CIs); the agreement of the universities and partners, and an estimated budget, with the full budget to be provided if the application makes it to full proposal.
- It would also be helpful to have more clarification from the ARC about expectations around industry partnerships.

6. Should the EOIs also be externally peer reviewed? If such assessments for EOIs are sought by the ARC, would you support a rejoinder process for this initial assessment phase?
7. If externally reviewed should EOIs be reviewed externally only by the ARC College of Experts or by assessors on the ARC assessor database?

The Academy supports the inclusion of external peer review at the EOI stage. This is seen as especially vital given the lack of feedback in the 2014 round (a point we take up below). The proposal that external peer review be undertaken by the College of Experts is a good, workable solution.

8. For CE17 should the ARC change the EOI selection criteria from a subset of full Proposal selection criteria with different weightings for the EOI stage?
9. What are your views on the selection criteria and the weightings?

Overall the selection criteria are sound, although we did receive feedback about one issue needing attention: the risk of over-emphasising the director as a single figure – i.e. the governance criteria needs to assess across key leadership team.

In terms of the EOI selection criteria and weightings, it would be helpful to simplify these to 80% for research programme (quality and innovation) and 20% investigators. These weightings are more manageable at the EOI stage.

With regard to the weightings at full proposal stage the Academy received feedback that these need to be revisited. The criteria with the highest weighting should be the research programme – we would suggest this be weighted at 30%, with investigators at 15%, institutional support at 15%, governance at 20%, and outcomes at 20%. What matters most is that the research programme is outstanding, the other criteria are effectively in support of the quality of the overall research programme.

10. Should the ARC provide basic details of all shortlisted EOIs to other Administering Organisations leading shortlisted EOIs to allow opportunities to develop joint full proposals?
11. How much variation in personnel/research program between EOI and full Proposal is acceptable?

The Academy understands the attraction of the proposal for the ARC in streamlining its activities, but generally would not support this as a practice. While some projects may overlap, combining shortlisted EOIs generally does not lead to successful bids. Unless there are two applications that are virtual duplicates, this might give false hope and lead to a flurry of activity within institutions.

The research personnel and programme should be in place with only variation on outputs and external partners.

12. Should there be a minimum time commitment for CIs, and is the proposed 0.2FTE appropriate? If not, could you suggest an alternative proposal?

Yes a minimum 0.2 FTE is reasonable, given the structure of CoEs.

13. The ARC is proposing that Associate Investigators (if known) may be listed in the full Proposal, but that there will be no regulation of their involvement by the ARC. What are your views on this?

Yes, it is reasonable to list Associate Investigators at the full proposal stage. However, the Academy would caution that there may be a high chance of 'big names' being listed without any real buy-in or serious commitment. The focus of assessment should be on the leadership team.

4. Feedback on proposals

14. Feedback at all stages in CE14 reflected the selection criteria. What is your view on the feedback process that was undertaken in CE14?
15. What is your view on the proposed feedback process for CE17?
16. What other suggestions for feedback would you suggest the ARC could undertake?
17. Generally feedback at the end of the selection process is focused on unsuccessful proposals. Would providing feedback on successful Proposals be helpful? If so, what form should this feedback take?

The proposed arrangements for feedback are welcome, especially the proposal to provide more extensive feedback at EOI stage. This was a noted deficiency of the 2014 round, and we recognise the ARC is looking to upgrade this part of the process for future rounds.

In the 2014 round comments returned to EOI applications were very basic and certainly not sufficiently detailed as to why the proposal was ranked as it was; nor was there assistance generally on how to improve the proposal. It would help to make it clear what elements make up a successful CoE application, or at least what the best applications did *not* do.

It would be more constructive to provide peer reports, rejoinder and ARC written feedback, especially at the EOI stage, but also at the full proposal stage. However, if resources are limited, the Academy would suggest that the ARC prioritise a process for more extensive feedback on unsuccessful proposals.

5. Funding arrangements

18. Would you support an increase in the maximum funding allocation per annum? Do you have any other feedback on matters relating to *ARC Centres of Excellence* budgets?

One improvement that could make a difference is to build in further flexibility in budgets so that a range of deliverables may be accommodated, maximising the range of outputs especially in the HASS fields.

19. What are your views on this proposed change to contribution commitments?

That proposed change to contribution commitments is acceptable.

We would be very pleased to elaborate on any of the observations contained in this submission. The Academy would also welcome being involved in further consultation on the Centres of Excellence scheme.

In the first instance, please contact our Executive Director, Dr Christina Parolin, via email to christina.parolin@humanities.org.au or phone on (02) 6125 9860.

Yours sincerely,

Emeritus Professor Lesley Johnson AM FAHA
President

[1] Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK), Digital Transformations research theme http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/Funding-Opportunities/Research-funding/Themes/Digital-Transformations/Pages/Digital-Transformations.aspx A listing of current awards is available from http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/Funding-Opportunities/Research-funding/Themes/Digital-Transformations/Pages/Current-Awards.aspx

[2] SEAHA: Centre for Doctoral Training in Science and Engineering in Arts Heritage and Archaeology, http://www.seaha-cdt.ac.uk/

[3] Turner, G and Brass, K (2014) *Mapping the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences in Australia*. Academy of the Humanities, Canberra. Available from http://www.humanities.org.au/PolicyResearch/Research/MappingtheHumanitiesArtsSocialSciences.aspx

[4] Australian Research Council, *Annual Report 2004-05*, p. 242; Australian Research Council, *Annual Report 2009-10*, p. 250.Available from http://www.arc.gov.au/about_arc/annual_report.htm

[5] Both options are canvassed in the *Boosting the Commercial Returns from Research* Discussion Paper, jointly released by the Departments of Education and Industry. Available from https://submissions.education.gov.au/Forms/higher-education-research/Documents/Boosting%20Commercial%20Returns%20from%20Research%20%20-%2024102014.pdf