

## A new plan for ARC-funded research, April 2025

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### 1. Does the proposed model provide a strong and clear basis for the NCGP over the next 20 years?

The [Australian Academy of the Humanities](#) welcomes the ARC Board's vision for bold reform of the National Competitive Grant Program (NCGP) to set a foundation for the next 20 years. In a period of geopolitical, social and technological instability, the ARC needs to provide both long-term funding security and capacity to adapt to unforeseen challenges. The ARC's strengthened legislation and governance are key to it delivering on its unique role in Australia's R&D system.

In our submission to the NCGP review, we called for a [review of the NCGP from first principles](#). The proposed model is strong and clear and goes some way towards that agenda, however more detail is required for a fully informed assessment. That noted, the Academy endorses:

- the Paper's view of the false dichotomy of basic and applied research;
- the simplification of grant programs and the streamlining of application and assessment processes;
- the commitment to Indigenous research – and we agree that the ARC's Indigenous Forum needs to work closely with the Board on conceptualisation, development and implementation across the NCGP;
- the focus on supporting early-stage research and Early Career Researchers (ECRs); and
- the Collaborate scheme as an important 'bridging' opportunity to build scale.

We agree with the Paper's assessment that the ARC 'cannot and should not try to do everything' and that commercialisation programs are not fundamental to the remit of the NCGP. Likewise, we see a role for government priorities in the NCGP but would be concerned if high fixed proportions of program expenditure were set against specific sets of priorities (such as Manufacturing Priorities) or overall public policy objectives, which may prejudice the capacity of the ARC to support investigator-led research that may in the long term deliver more benefits than nominated priorities. The history of 'picking winners' is a very chequered one.

We welcome the prospect of the Board setting a 10-year strategy to guide NCGP investment, to give clarity and build sector confidence. In informing its research strategy, we encourage the Board to draw on the unique expertise of the research-focussed staff who have been engaging with the sector, the Chief Research Officer and domain-area Executive Directors, as well as the College of Experts. To that we would add the collective intelligence and national and international networks of the [Learned Academies](#).

Three key gaps need to be addressed in our view: the lack of a set of guiding principles for the NCGP, built around the ARC's critical role as the funder of early-stage research across all disciplines; the lack of clarity about the new arrangements for research infrastructure support, in particular next-generation collaborative LIEF-type investments; and the integrity of the costing and modelling in the Paper. For instance, the Breakthrough scheme, which is pivotal to the 'bread and butter' of research, will not go far if only 300 are awarded annually across the nation.

### 2. Does the proposed model adequately address your concerns or those expressed in the initial consultations?

There is scant detail in the Paper about assessment processes and, specifically, composition of panels, areas we called out in our earlier submission as the key concerns for humanities research. Structural inequities in design and assessment have not been addressed and we recommend

more detailed consultation to refine the model. The shift to new programming requires a concomitant evaluation of the fitness-for-purpose of assessment practices and panels:

- The ambition to incentivise collaborative interdisciplinary research, will require evaluation of Selection Advisory Committees to ensure the relevant breadth of disciplinary and interdisciplinary expertise. While the Paper is supportive of interdisciplinary research there is no explanation of how it would be built into assessment processes. Given the difficulties faced by the ARC previously in adequately incentivising, managing and assessing interdisciplinary applications this is a major risk/gap.
- There are several programs within the current NCGP which are designed and assessed in a manner that is skewed towards scientific rather than humanities or social sciences research practices. Therefore, we are concerned that a major challenge the Paper does not consider is how to utilise the full complement of research capabilities to address national and strategic policy challenges, and specifically to incorporate the research potential of the HASS disciplines.

### 3. Do you foresee any unintended consequences or significant risks which have not been accounted for in the proposed model?

- **Assessment processes, disciplinary clusters and funding allocations.** There is little reference to the assessment and administrative processes envisaged, how disciplinary expertise will be organised, or how funding will be allocated to support the full range of disciplines. At present there is only an affirmation of 'peer review', which we strongly support. We also support the two-stage EOI process, but how this works at scale administratively, with College members potentially becoming more involved than Detailed Assessors, is a major issue.
- **Concentration of funding.** There is a strong likelihood that the withdrawal of salary funding, the reduction of fellowships, and potential effect of the embedded fellowships, will impact unevenly on universities depending on their capacity to support academic researchers with internal funds, salary top-ups, grant-funding packages, and continuing appointments.
- **The end of the research-only pathway.** The new model extinguishes what had been a narrow but still viable path for individuals to pursue a research-only career. Schemes like the Federation and later Laureate Fellowships gave our best researchers an unparalleled opportunity to do important work and it also attracted high-performing talent from overseas (often returning Australians). As currently framed, the Lead and Mentor scheme will not have the same capacity to attract international candidates. There is a further risk that Australia will not be able to offer sufficient opportunity to retain our best researchers.
- **Focus on ECRs.** While we welcome the clarity of focus on supporting early-stage research, there is concern about the possible consequences of what looks like a reduction in support for senior researchers doing discipline building research. This was core territory for the Discovery program, and the revised focus risks becoming an over-correction which could push funding away from this category of researcher. The humanities, arts and social sciences and some areas of science will be particularly exposed to risk where ARC funding is the primary/only source of research support.

The number (900 annually proposed) and length of Initiate projects (two years) puts the emphasis on universities to provide career pathways for ECRs. We are concerned that some universities will lack the financial capacity to meet the challenge. The example of DECRA's shows how unpredictable and disparate post-award practices are across the sector. We refer the Board to [SHAPE Futures EMCR Network's](#) submission for detailed advice and support the push for [more focus on gender equity](#), and ECR training and leadership opportunities.

There are unintended consequences or risks at the scheme level, which could impact on the integrity of the whole:

**a. Initiate:**

- a. While we understand the two-year timeframe is intended to increase the number of grants allocated, we question whether this provides sufficient time for a project to be set up, completed, and for the publication of outcomes. It would certainly not be long enough for meaningful engagement with Indigenous communities, for example. We strongly prefer a three-year timeframe.
- b. DECRA showed 'bracket creep' over time and Initiate could be pulled in different directions. In catering to MCRs returning to the workforce, it is not clear how the assessment of applicants from diverse career stages will be managed.
- c. There is a strong likelihood that opening these projects to those not already employed in a university will result in successful candidates completing their project but still finding themselves unemployed at the end.
- d. The aspiration to fund 'risky' or 'unproven' projects is acknowledged but what does that mean in practice? It is hard to see how a privileging of risk can be managed within a peer review process that is about quality and potential. Risk has both negative and positive dimensions, and so greater consideration of how this principle might be operationalised is necessary.

**b. Embedded Fellowships.** These are akin to the Australian Post-Doctoral fellowships that used to be built into the Discovery program. The greater flexibility about how the two years of funding can be managed is welcomed, but we note that these fellowships will likely concentrate research funding around already successful teams of researchers rather than generating a greater diversity of projects and participants.

**c. Prioritise.** The risk with this grant program is that it will be entirely captured by the national research priorities which government nominates. To avoid politicisation and short-termism, the structure which generates the ARC's priorities for this grant category should ensure significant capacity to respond to research community-led priorities, trends and blue-sky activities.

**d. Lead and Mentor/Breakthrough.** It is possible that there would be some overlap between what is offered through the Lead and Mentor program and what would be available through a Breakthrough project that was supplemented with Embedded Fellowships.

**e. Infrastructure.** The LIEF scheme filled a gap in Australia's national research Infrastructure (NRI) landscape and the proposal for infrastructure support in the new NCGP is underdeveloped. We note that:

- a. there is potential for collaborative infrastructure bids through the Collaborate scheme though it is not clear how these would be assessed alongside non-infrastructure applications; and
- b. criteria need to be developed for how infrastructure supported by ARC is managed post-award.

We also encourage the ARC to take a view as to how its support for NRI fits in the overall landscape. The NCRIS program is an asset, but the system is disconnected and has not until the 2021 Roadmap invested in HASS and Indigenous research capabilities.

**4. What issues would need to be addressed in the transition from the current NCGP schemes to the new model?**

We strongly encourage the ARC to adopt a 'no surprises' approach, so that the sector is not taken unaware with grant scheme pauses/cancellations (as has recently occurred with the Laureate Fellowship scheme). Key issues that need to be addressed:

- We recommend staggering the introduction of the schemes, and so we are concerned about pre-emptive or premature changes before this review has delivered its final model to the Minister. Uncertainty about funding and routine programming should be recognised as a major risk to the system.
  - Applications to the various Fellowships involve years of preparation and consultation. While it may be possible to more quickly transition from Discovery to Initiate or Breakthrough, a more extended period (perhaps two years) is advisable for phasing out the Fellowships.
  - Transitional arrangements for CoEs are unclear. Given the recent success rates of existing CoEs re-bidding for a second term (around 50%), the abolition of the program is likely to have significant consequences. Current CoEs are at different points in their funding envelope, so a one-size fits all solution is not appropriate.
- A high level of transparency and direct engagement with the sector will be essential. This should allow plenty of time for feedback and iteration, trouble-shooting problems, and involve a thorough flow of information from the ARC to the wider research sector through outreach by its Executive Directors. There is lots of ‘devil’ in the detail to be resolved to achieve the clarity and confidence required for implementation to be successful.
- Learning from current EOI process will be useful. There are significant efforts and investment of time in managing and mentoring the proposals. What’s best practice; how can we minimise administrative burdens? What are the effects that universities have observed in the current two stage process? Some, for instance, have reported an increase in applications, and in success rates.
- Embed a formal process for the review and evaluation to pilot the new grants program, and fine-tune as necessary. There needs to be a watching brief on impacts (at system, institutional, discipline and researcher levels), and the ability to course correct.

**5. Are there any features that you would add to, or remove from, the model?**

The Lead and Mentor program stands out as ill-fitting as currently scoped. It may be better conceived as a ‘cross-cutting’ funding source akin to how research infrastructure is being designed, so an eligible expense for relevant schemes. At present it seems to be a hybrid of existing Laureates and something new, but is not well articulated or costed, with the suggestion of \$250K for postgrads or postdocs barely able to cover rising costs across the sector.

**6. Do you have any feedback on the proposed grant schemes and their likely effectiveness.**

The Initiate scheme is well targeted at ECRs. We welcome a funding range that will better accommodate the needs of the humanities, but we consider the designated funding period too short. The Collaborate scheme is what, for some years, we have been calling for – a mid-size centre of excellence, to build partnerships and scale research before launching to a full-scale Prioritise bid. This promises to be highly effective initiative for the humanities.

The actual research purpose of the Lead and Mentor scheme is less clear than it is for the other schemes. It appears to be more focused on funding the researcher, rather than the research. Further, it is not clear how it would work in practice -- how the mentoring role, say, will be assessed. It is worth considering the merits of folding the money allocated to the Lead and Mentor program into the Breakthrough program, giving the latter a chance of generating stronger success rates.

Finally, we wish to restate our view that while we support the broad ambition of this redesign of the NCGP, the success of the new model will depend on elements not so far outlined: the detail of the assessment process, the allocation of funds across disciplines, and the administrative structure within the ARC. It is important that the ARC continues to consult with peak bodies and other stakeholders as they develop the further detail of these plans.