

ARC Discovery Program Consultation Paper

The Council of Deans of Arts Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) Response

1 December 2010

The ARC Discovery Program Consultation Paper is available at www.arc.gov.au

A new ECR award in the Discovery Program

Issues for specific feedback

1. Is the definition of 'early-career' as researchers who have between 0 and 5 years research experience since the award of their PhD (or equivalent research qualification or experience) appropriate?

Response:

While a presumptive five year limit post PhD award for an ECR is appropriate, DASSH would suggest that there needs to be clarity to applicants concerning the definition of "five years post PhD" -- in the consultation paper the wording relating to the date post PhD for the range of current and proposed awards varies between "awarded their PhD within 5 years of the closing date for proposals" (p5), "xxx years of research experience since the award of their PhD" (p7), "xxx years since the award of the PhD" (p 8), "between five and fifteen years research experience since completion of PhD" (p10), "years since award of PhD" (p14) "up to five years from award of PhD" (p18). In light of the variable time lag between submission of a thesis for examination and award of the PhD and the increased casualisation of the academic workforce, especially for recent PhD graduates, it will be important to provide clear criteria for ECR eligibility. If the language of "years of research experience post award of PhD" is used, then there needs to be clarity for ECR applicants about how to count years of research experience for those who are employed in teaching-focused positions or employed in short term teaching-only or teaching and research contracts with gaps between contracts or gaps between the completion (or award) of the PhD and the first (? non-casual) academic contract, and how career gaps due to parental or other carer duties is to be assessed. If the language of years since award of the PhD is used, then the eligibility criteria should specify how that date is determined--i.e. whether it is the date of the letter advising the applicant that their PhD has met all the requirements for the award of the degree, or the date of the graduation ceremony on which the award is formally conferred, or some other specifiable date. Regarding the upper limit of seven years (acknowledging carer or other career interruptions), DASSH would suggest that allowing ECR applicants to retain eligibility

for a third year following the award of the PhD to account for carer or other career interruptions may better address some of the gender equity gaps for early career researchers. In the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences ECR academics are more likely to be employed immediately post PhD in fractional teaching focused contracts or teaching and research roles on a sessional basis (than in full time research roles or non-ARC post-docs within a lab) and hence to experience a gap between award of the PhD and paid academic employment. DASSH recognises the need for a clear limit to the period of ECR status, but would suggest that a significant proportion of young researchers would have two or more children in during or immediately after their PhD candidature and that a third year of eligibility (where warranted by carer or other responsibility) would better reflect the impact of parenting two or more children at the start of a career.

2. Will the proposed new ECR award meet the needs of ECRs?

Response:

Assuming that the recommendation concerning the duration of the award full time three years or up to six years part time allows for a range of arrangements including fractional employment research-only (allowing the fellow to have time for parental or other non-paid activity) or full-time employment, with fractional fellowship/ fractional teaching roles over a longer period of time, then this would have two effects that would improve the research careers of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities academics. First it would fit well with the "return to work" policies held by universities, recognising parents' interest in a transitional period of part time employment following the arrival of a child. Second, given that the majority of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities academics depend on having had some teaching and curriculum development experience in order to secure continuing positions, the option of having a substantial period of time to "kick start" a research career, while also developing demonstrated teaching capacity, without the increasingly heavy teaching loads that many Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities academics experience would help to redress one aspect of the "leadership" gap in the Humanities that Graeme Hugo has articulated. The point here is that early career academics who win ECR awards and use the flexibility of the award to stretch out the period of the award while also undertaking limited teaching activity would be potentially more employable in continuing positions than those who lack teaching experience and that doubling the number of early career academics who have access to periods of research focus are more likely (than those who are employed as "teaching fodder" at the start of their careers) to plan out careers that brings teaching and research activity and excellence together. It is likely the proposed changes would mean that a larger proportion of ECR applicants will be successful and this increased success rate may also encourage more ECR applicants to apply, thereby returning the success rate to its current low rate. In the face of increasing workload pressure on Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities academics, low ARC success rates pose a significant challenge for Deans and Heads of Schools (Departments/ Programs) in seeking to increase the proportion of research active staff. While accepting that the proposed changes will not increase the total amount of money available to support research excellence, DASSH believes that ECRs would benefit from changes to the Discovery program that are designed to improve

the chances that excellent research is funded.

3. How do we maximise international and national mobility in designing this scheme?

Response:

DASSH has previously commented to the Minister about problems caused by extended delays in the immigration process when appointing academics from overseas. International mobility would be enhanced by reduction in visa restrictions and delays for migrants coming to Australia for academic positions, including ECR awards. National mobility of researchers could be enhanced through explicit recognition of the research links between researchers at distinct institutions who may form part of the research environment of a project. For example, an ECR whose former PhD supervisor has close research connections (e.g., explicit research collaboration evidenced by a grant or publications, or may less direct collaboration, such as where the two have organised workshops or conferences together or whose publications critically engage with each other) with a researcher who is at another university is more likely to consider applying for an ECR award through the institution of their supervisor's collaborator, if that background can be recognised in the application. A similar argument could be made for recognising the contribution of the institutional research environment, relating to relevant cognate research groupings in different universities. In the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, an ECR is more likely to seek out (and be sought by) a different university from the one where they completed their PhD if the ECR knows (and can demonstrate that) that their research focus articulates well with (and will contribute to the research activity of) known researchers, research groupings or research facilities at that second university. National and international ECR researcher mobility will be heavily influenced by the availability of funds to assist in covering relocation costs and the potential for security of employment in the new institution beyond the grant. Institutions are more likely to be able to provide clear advice to ECR award applicants if the articulation of ECR award and standard EB conditions is undertaken nationally. International mobility of ECRs could be strengthened by promoting the ECR awards internationally (e.g. through institutions previously involved through PIs or International Collaborative Awards).

4. Is \$25,000 per annum an appropriate amount for additional project support (noting if more was offered fewer awards could be funded)?

Response:

For most Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities projects \$25,000 per annum would be an appropriate amount of additional project support. DASSH would suggest there is good reason to review how that support can be expended to best support ECR projects. For example, many ECRs in Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities would benefit greatly from the opportunity to travel overseas to participate the key conferences in their area of research in order to get critical feedback during the formative stage of their project. Similarly, using funds to host focused workshops and to pay for travel costs to allow key international researchers to participate in these workshops may provide important critical

input into proposals that are analytic or conceptual, rather than experimental. Indeed, one way in which the ARC could strengthen ECR international collaboration would be to specifically support use of the \$25,000 project funding to support travel or research (archival or fieldwork) across national, linguistic or cultural differences.

5. Are the selection criteria appropriate?

Response:

Two key changes to the proposed assessment process are likely to improve the chances of ECR proposals being evaluated favourably: the changes to the selection criteria which place greater emphasis on the project relative to the research performance of the applicant and (perhaps more importantly) separating the assessment of ECR applications from the bulk of the Discovery Projects and Discovery Fellowships (QEII, Professorial Fellows). Assessors are more likely to objectively assess the research records and proposals of ECRs if these are not mixed in with Professorial Fellowships and Discovery applications from established researchers. Similarly, by focusing the project and its significance and method, rather than the researcher's publication record, there is better chance for ECRs who have just completed a PhD to be compared appropriately with those whose PhD was awarded two or three years earlier. Given the publications patterns of the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, where a higher proportion of research is published as books or book chapters and where many journals have slow review processes, it is likely that ECRs in these disciplines will take longer to demonstrate their research performance than in those areas where publication is primarily in journals with rapid review processes. Therefore, the reduced emphasis on research record relative to the proposal will be well received in these disciplines. The criterion of "institutional commitment" could disadvantage applicants from Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities disciplines in all but the wealthiest universities, if that commitment had to be demonstrated through financial commitments. Arts Faculties are less likely than Science faculties to have uncommitted resources to expend on the research effort, because most universities use research funding models that reproduce the distorting effects of the government research funding models. Where a Faculty's share of the University's research resources disproportionately reflects the research and consultancy income of the Faculty, this privileges those disciplines where research outcomes depend on expensive infrastructure at the cost of those that depend on academics research time. Therefore, those faculties that require less expensive research infrastructure to conduct research receive both less funding for research infrastructure and less funding to support the workload of researchers to conduct research. To avoid reinforcing the effects of these funding models, then "institutional commitment" could be better understood flexibly, in terms of the research environment (e.g. the number and standing of colleagues working in related research areas, or relevant research groupings at the institution, access to specialist research collections, capacity to provide high quality mentoring and collegial support) as well as financial commitments.

6. Should there be limitations on the number of times an applicant may apply?

Response:

Given the time limit post PhD award proposed for the DECRA, it is unnecessary to limit the number of times an applicant can apply (realistically few would be able to apply more than four times). From the perspective of DASSH, the number of times that an applicant can apply is less important than the clarity of the feedback from the ARC concerning whether an unsuccessful application was competitive. Assuming that the success rate is likely to be around 20-25% and that there will be more applications that are deemed to be worthy of funding than are actually funded, it would be very useful for applicants to be advised whether their application was within range of being fundable or not, so that they can be given clear advice within their institution about the value of focusing research time on further applications or on accessing the modest resources generally available within Faculties and School in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences to support ECRs.

7. Given that some of the current cohort of potential applicants for ARF/QEII Fellowships may apply to the new ECR award but those seeking a second ARF/QEII Fellowship will need to apply to the *Future Fellowships* scheme, should the current restriction on ARF/QEII applying for *Future Fellowships* be relaxed?

Response:

DASSH notes the improving application and success rates for SBE and HCA applications in the second round of Future Fellowship awards, and would hope to see that trend continue into the future. In deploying the new awards regime, it would be desirable to reduce the risk of disadvantaging excellent researchers who would otherwise be eligible for a second ARF/QEII Fellowship. It is likely that excellent researchers who are currently ineligible to apply for Future Fellowships would be strong applicants for Future Fellowships and so, in the process of phasing out ARF/QEII awards it would be desirable to make transitional arrangements to avoid disadvantage.

8. Are the proposed flexible arrangements adequate?

Response:

Please see the comments made above in respond to question 2.

Issues for general feedback

The ARC also welcomes feedback on any other aspect of proposed new arrangements to support early-career researchers.

Response:

The Council of Deans of Arts Social Sciences and Humanities welcomes the proposal to establish a larger number of ECR fellowships are better able to capture the needs of arts, humanities and social sciences academics and notes the clear articulation of the proposed range of fellowships awards. DASSH welcomes the efforts by the ARC to address the gendered effects of the existing APD award and the integration of the APD and ECR DP evaluation within the assessment of DPs generally.

A targeted and simplified *Discovery Projects* scheme

Issues for specific feedback

1. Are the weightings of the selection criteria appropriate?

Response:

The discussion paper does not indicate whether there will be any changes to the weightings of the selection criteria for DP applications but states that there "will be greater emphasis on the assessment of the research proposal". It is unclear whether this is meant to indicate that the relative weighting of the investigator (40%), significance and innovation of the proposal (30%), approach (20%), and national benefit (10%) are to be reviewed to as to put more emphasis on the proposal rather than the research performance of the investigator(s). The chief advantage of the proposed separation of fellowships from Discovery project applications would presumably be that all proposals will be evaluated and ranked independently of the evaluation of applications for senior researcher wards, but it isn't clear from this consultation paper how that process would occur (what would be the role of the peer assessors relative to the college experts, and so on?). The current balance between the quality of the researcher, proposal and national benefit is appropriate when comparing researchers in light of their research opportunities after they cease to be ECRs.

2. How might we simplify the application process further?

Response:

While DASSH welcomes the move to the RMS system as a clear improvement in the application process for applicants, increased simplification of the application process would be welcomed. Currently, the requirements for details and full budget costings appear to be unrelated to the importance of those budgets in the assessors' evaluation and the level of funding that is made available, simplification of the budget process (retaining the justification of the relative emphasis of key budget items, without requiring fine detail on precise dollars) would provide clear evidence that investigators have thought about how to complete the project without then asking them to produce a finely balanced budget which will, if the investigator is fortunate enough to have funded will be slashed by 1/3. The amount of time spent in University and Faculty Research Offices in reviewing and refining budgets could much more usefully be spent in supporting researchers to develop clear proposals for projects that will address important questions.

3. Are there any issues about eligibility we should address?

Response:

The ICAs go some way to addressing the value of international collaborations involved in research in the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, however, the restrictions on Partner Investigators and the demand for substantial contributions by partner

investigators' institutions still inhibits international collaborations that do not depend on shared lab space or other infrastructure, but rather involve collaborations in analysis, critical understanding, and exchanges of ideas. All of these collaborations involve time and opportunities to meet for critical communication (for example focused workshops). Ideally the criteria for eligibility of Partner Investigators could be addressed so as to encourage these kinds of international collaborations, which are more characteristic of research in the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences.

4. Is the rejoinder process useful?

Response:

It seems likely that the rejoinder process adds an unnecessary step in the process for applicants whose proposals are assessed by the reviewers as being clearly either at the very top of the fundable proposals or in the bottom 60%. A process that provided clear feedback to uncompetitive applicants (i.e. investigator not competitive, significance poorly defended, method flawed, etc) at the point when the assessors' reports are available would provide researchers with time to significantly improve their applications prior to the next round of applications being due. For the majority of applicants whose applications are in the bottom 60%-70% of ranked applications (i.e. those whose applications are clearly uncompetitive), the late announcement and lack of feedback makes it very difficult for those applicants to substantially improve their chance of success from year to year and so improvements to applications are incremental. For those applicants whose proposals are deemed to be close to or just below the fundable range, then it appears that the rejoinder process is useful as an applicant may be able to clarify confusions about method or aims, or to assist the panel in determining how to interpret assessors' comments where there are substantial differences in the assessment. The rejoinder process is most useful where it allows investigators to provide new information to support their proposal that may be considered by the panel in the final ranking of fundable applications.

5. Do you have comments on the current eligibility criteria for *Discovery Projects* CIs, in particular, and the provisions for researchers holding 50% appointments at Eligible Organisations?

Response:

The current eligibility criteria may limit the ability of successful researchers who are transitioning out of full-time employment to contribute to important research proposals. Given the importance of developing strong research teams to address important research problems, it is likely that these criteria reduce the overall Australian research capacity, given the demographics of researchers in the Social Sciences and Humanities, as has been noted by Graeme Hugo. Nonetheless, the absence of a FTE minimum appointment at around 50% could lead to the situation where academics have miniscule appointments at a number of institutions (or hold a very small appointment at one institution) simply to be able to apply for grants through each institution. DASSH recommends retaining a

minimum FTE appointment at an Eligible Organisation for DP CIs, at around 50%.

6. How might we improve feedback to unsuccessful applicants?

Response:

Please see the response above to question 4. Unsuccessful applicants whose proposals are deemed uncompetitive early in the process would benefit from clear advice about the areas of weakness of their applications, rather than simply knowing the band within which they fall. Unsuccessful applicants whose proposal is closer to the band of funded applications would benefit from receiving some indication of the relative aggregate weighting (either by assessors or the panel) of their proposal (e.g. a grading of A-E on each of the criteria areas).

Issues for general feedback

The ARC also welcomes feedback on any other aspect of proposed new arrangements for the *Discovery Projects* scheme.

Response:

The Council of Deans of Arts Social Sciences and Humanities welcomes the proposal to increase researchers' access to teaching relief as part of their discovery application. In Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities disciplines, the majority of researchers are primarily involved in making a substantial contribution to teaching and learning in their discipline area. At the same time, for many researchers in these disciplines, what is needed most in order to complete research is the availability of concentrated periods of time to complete research: amassing research sources, critical reading and analysis, construction of argument, theoretical critiques, execution of artistic practice and writing. The proposal to increase researchers' ability to request and access teaching relief through the ARC would substantially improve the capacity for Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities researchers to contribute to the national and international research effort. If the period of grants is reduced to three years, then teaching relief will be necessary in order to allow researchers sufficient time to complete major research projects. DASSH also welcomes this suggestion of creating a single mid- late career "senior" research fellowship that may be awarded to investigators who have been awarded a Discovery project proposal. This development is not spelled out in any detail in the consultation paper, but appears to be a valuable means of addressing the gap between the proposed ECR awards, Future Fellowships and Laureates, and the current ARF/QEII and APF awards as recognition of the different research careers of research intensive versus research and teaching academics.