Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities
Australian Council of Research Discovery Program Grant Process Review (2023 Edition)
Submitted 17 March 2023

What key issues and reforms do you think should be considered in the upcoming Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program (NCGP)?

Different forms of research have hugely varying funding support needs. The current minimum amount requirements mean that small amounts of funding which can have significant impact in HASS disciplines are not available. DASSH recommends that National Competitive Grants should have a much more diverse ecosystem of grant programs from multi-round small grant programs, such as that of the British Academy, to large scale multi-year programs like the Discovery and various Fellowship schemes.

There should also be some emphasis placed on interdisciplinary research – in particular the potential for HASS and creative researchers to 'add value' to a project's design and dissemination. For example, could there be a financial incentive in non-HASS applications to add a HASS researcher to help further innovate research design and/or engagement and dissemination?

Full funding for research projects and variable expectations of assessors regarding universities capacity to cross-subsidise (eg provision of cash, in-kind funding) as a measure of commitment.

DASSH strongly endorses a two-stage application process with a first short sharp EOI round followed by a more detailed application with higher success rates. This will reduce the significant amount of wasted effort put in both by applicants and assessors.

More explicit guidance to accessors and COE regarding consideration of ROPE. This could also include an institutional relative to opportunity statement (some smaller, regional universities cannot be considered as creating the same level and nature of academic and logistical support as a large well-established metropolitan university).

DASSH would like to see the ROPE section of all ARC scheme submissions reduced to one page based on outputs. This is more conducive to clear evaluation by the assessors. In general, most grant submissions are short and to the point. We would like the ARC to reduce the complexity of the submission just as they did with the fellowships.

A reformed grant program should also have a much better understanding, recognition and support for creative, practice-based, practice-led research methods and projects.

More support for complex research projects that employ transdisciplinary teams to truly embrace innovation and linked to the above. Feedback from our members reports significant frustration about inter and transdisciplinary research that is assessed from a singular disciplinary perspective and suffering as a consequence. There appears to be insufficient expertise in the ARC for evaluating interdisciplinary collaboration The ARC needs to recruit Council of Expert members who are specifically experienced in interdisciplinary collaboration in the humanities. Alternatively, it needs to create a new grant scheme that is specific to this kind of activity, without necessarily being industry-focused as in the Linkage scheme.

In research programs that support the breaking of new ground a better balance between the record of established research and creative new ideas, methods and approaches needs to be struck. Currently there is too much emphasis on track record and not enough on fresh thinking and potential. Revisit the peer review process, which can often feel compromised in terms of conflicts of interest or not related to the proposed research.

There needs to be a transparency of College of Expert scores during the assessment process.

DASSH strongly recommends establishing more targeted funding to support Indigenous researchers. Currently there is the Discovery Indigenous program. This should entail

Three new ARC grant schemes to support nurture and promote Indigenous led research (research where at least the first named Chief Investigator is Indigenous Australian):

1. ARC Indigenous Linkage Scheme;
2. ARC Indigenous Future Fellowship Scheme; and
3. ARC Indigenous Laureate Fellowship Scheme.

Given the limitation of government funding for research, it should not be permitted for researchers to hold several ARC grants at once, nor to receive them serially for 10-15 years as is currently the case. This practice has created a fulltime researcher cohort that consumes most of the public funding that is denied to the majority of academic teaching researchers, contributing to the loss of holistic teaching-research nexus in universities.

It should not be permitted for current applicants to assess applications in the same round - - judging one's own direct competitors. This should be considered a conflict of interest since it reduces the reliability of their assessments.

What parts of the Discovery Program Grant Guidelines, and associated application and assessment documents and processes, do you think work well and should not be changed?

The guidelines themselves are clear and helpful. There may be considerations to streamline the application document and attachments through, for example, more robust integration with ORCID, limiting the number of PDF uploads required and revisiting the multiple components of Section F needed.

Assessment should be more greatly focused on the idea and proposed outcomes of the research, rather than who/where is making the proposal. Currently the ARC's system is weighted toward the reputation of the researchers, not the potential value of the research.

Often there is too much overlap and repetition of text included under INVESTIGATORS/CAPABILITY [PART D) and PART F – the ROPE. The ROPE sections can be too long. For example 5 pages for F 17 plus another page for F18 and then the research outputs. F18 seems redundant and does not add more information and F17 is too long.

Often A5 is not very helpful, as the objectives are couched fairly generally, and the PROJECT AIMS and BACKGROUND set out the aims/objectives more clearly and better embedded in the whole project description.

We should not accept that 50% of a DECRA project's weight is determined by an investigator's capability. It is very likely to exacerbate nepotism/elitism. A DECRA project's quality and innovation are now weighted at only 25% together.

The overall application process is too long and cumbersome given the success rates. As noted above we strongly recommend a two-stage process with a short EOI process acting as a first cut of applications and only those clear the EOI should proceed to a full application.

DASSH would like to see the ROPE section of all ARC scheme submissions reduced to one page based on outputs. This is more conducive to clear evaluation by the assessors. In general, most grant submissions are short and to the point and it would be good for the ARC to reduce the complexity of the submission just as they did with the fellowships.

There should be a limitation on who can apply for DECRAs. If these are meant as early career, it makes no sense of Level C and above academics to apply for them. The bar should be not only years from PhD but academic level.

Of the issues described above, which three would you rank as the highest priority for the ARC to address?

- Reviewing Grant Amounts
- Reviewing Assessment Criteria and weightings for each scheme
- Altering the application process for Discovery Program schemes to a two stage process

Do you have any further comments regarding your responses to the priority issues described above?

Equity factors should be central to the development and assessment of grant funding applications in order to support more equitably outcomes in universities and therefore society more generally as academies are the makers and shapers of culture/s.

Exploring greater scope to provide feedback, especially on near-miss applications, which the ARC are already trialling.

Potentially also standard release of the full lot of scores currently available upon request to the ARC but not provided as standard. This would help applicants to see how the Assessors' feedback (in those schemes where it is provided) sits in relation to the actual scores they provided, as well as how the CoE considered the application within the larger pools of applications they have to rank.

What changes should the ARC make to its pre- and post-award processes (including application, assessment and post-award management) to reduce your administrative burden and improve your overall experience in interacting with the Discovery Program?

The post award process has increasingly been streamlined over the years. Pre-award could be more streamlined particularly in terms of the requirements of the application and the UI of the application system. Integrating elements (for example the do not access) may also help streamline.

As noted above the Discovery and cognate schemes we recommend a two-staged process: The first EOI process would involve academics/teams submitting an abridged application. Summarised feedback on the application is provided, including a decision determining if a full application can be prepared and presented, or if a fuller application is not invited. The second stage is open only to academics/teams who had been invited to submit a full proposal. There would be no expectation that full proposals will be funded, but that the full application will be considered. This would significantly reduce the time spent on developing full grant applications.

There is excessive reliance in the DP assessment on the general assessors who are themselves on the Council of Experts. The role of the Council members should not be control who wins grants and who does not, but rather to select specialist reviewers and rank the applications under their carriage, directly informed by the specialist reviews.

The Researcher Capability section in the Project Description of the DP scheme is a duplication of the ROPE. It takes up space in the Project Description that would be better used to explain methodology. It makes it very difficult to give adequate detail about the project if it has multiple researchers involved as they all have to be discussed in this section, consuming a large chunk of the Project Description.

Are there any other key issues and/or changes that you think the ARC should consider when preparing for the next rounds of Discovery Program schemes opening in 2023?

Consideration of the funding envelope notionally allocated to each panel (hence discipline), particularly to provide more equitable support across disciplines.

The development of a grant stream designed to attract and preference transdisciplinary teams and projects (including academics and lenses from HASS disciplines and fields) so that factors of research translation, impact of and on humans and societies of research process and focus are privileged, and the human condition and human flourishing are centralised in research focus, scope, design, implication and application.

Gender equity and other forms of equity, diversity and inclusion policy and strategy is required to support the epistemological justice required to address the more complex or wicked problems we face and which academics seek to address.

Examples include:

There is an expectation that women constitute at least 30% of a research team of three or more and applicants are required to identify if or why the research team does not include gender diversity.

'Institutional relative to opportunity statements required' so that regional universities can provide a contextualised application that engages the specific barriers and catalysts to undertake the research within and for regional, rural and remote Australia.

The ARC adopt a policy similar to that adopted in the UK where research funding was linked to gender equity activity/success. Research funding bodies have used research funding mechanisms as a lever for change by embedding consideration and actions on gender inequality into funding applications processes. For instance, the European Commission has

mandated that institutions applying to the Horizon Europe research and development program have Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) in place (European Commission, 2021); and the body that convenes the research Councils in UK (UK Research Institute) has stated that it expects those in receipt of Research Council funding to embed equality and diversity in aspects of research practice (UK Research Institute, 2022). As a result, many research and higher education institutions have introduced GEPs as vehicles to support gender equity.

Most HASS research projects do not require large amounts of funds. It would be helpful to have several schemes of different sizes. Currently, the most successful HASS researchers win far more money than they need, while the majority of researchers, particularly those outside the G08, struggle to gather the basic fieldwork materials or research assistance they need to advance their research.