

Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities

Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program

Australian Research Council and Department of Education

Submission

The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback on the Australian Research Council's National Competitive Grants Program Policy Review. DASSH represents more than 250 academic leaders from nearly every university in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. We support our members, advocate for our disciplines and provide feedback to key bodies through policy advice and submissions. DASSH members provided feedback on the NCGP discussion paper through a formal consultation process.

The discussion paper sets a vision for funding bold and innovative research. We welcome the emphasis on meaningful end-user and partner involvement in research. DASSH strongly supports the trend towards funding these types of initiatives, programs and projects. We also welcome the encouragement of risk taking and adventurous or curiosity led research.

DASSH Members' primary recommendations include:

- Addressing the precarity of support for early-career researchers,
- Reassessing the ratio of specific grant programs to expand access to collaborative projects and address short-term funding implications for ECRs,
- Addressing the potential unintended consequences of aligning research funding with priorities of government and the National Science and Research Priorities and maintaining a clear focus on fundamental research.

Members also posed several questions about specific features of the grant model and considerations during implementation.

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

Broadly speaking the proposed model does provide a strong and clear basis for the NCPG over the next 20 years. DASSH members are particularly supportive of the support for Indigenous researchers and the shift in focus to bold and innovative research. Our members are also supportive of embedding early-career researchers within research projects as the previous Fellowship model sometimes created siloed investigators.

DASSH members identified a few issues that could be addressed to improve the long-term outcomes of the model. Shorter grants for early-career researchers (ECRs) could have unintended consequences. DASSH members would like to see greater support for ECR careers through longer term grants. Removing the Future Fellows scheme which has been a vehicle for investing in post-doctoral researchers could have unintended consequences for Australia's research ecosystem long-term.

Long-term v short-term grants and ECRs

Concerns have been raised about the length of the Initiate program. The reduction of some longer-term opportunities has the potential to institutionalise precarity for post-doctoral researchers and does not reflect the reality of conducting HASS research. We acknowledge the Breakthrough scheme allows for more time than the Initiate program. Increasing opportunities for ECRs to undertake longer term research projects would be beneficial.

DASSH recommends a review of the ratio of Initiate to Breakthrough grants with a view to increasing opportunities for longer term research for early-to-mid career researchers.

Senior fellowships

Questions were raised about the mechanics of senior fellowships and changes to the Future Fellows program by our members. Members are seeking clarity on how this will be implemented and what this will look like in practice. These changes are likely to impact on mobility – particularly in attracting people back to, or to, Australia.

DASSH recommends the ARC considers impact changes to fellowships and Laureate programs will have on the mobility of senior researchers.

Collaborative funding

There is strong support for the collaborative grant model. It is well conceptualised and there is non-cash contribution eligibility which has previously been a barrier for HASS research. Linkage has been a key strategy for many researchers. However, the total number of Breakthrough grants is very low given its significance. This approach will have an impact almost immediately on research strategies and affect long-term outcomes.

DASSH recommends an increase in the number of grants for collaborative projects.

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

Several DASSH recommendations are reflected in the discussion paper as noted in our introduction. DASSH members welcomed the recommendations set out on page 18 of the discussion paper.

DASSH recognises this is the second stage of consultation of the ARC NCGP Policy Review and wish to acknowledge the broad adoption of several of our key recommendations made in the first round. We are pleased to see several of them reflected in the discussion paper.

Some of our key recommendations included:

- Providing funding across pure and applied research
- Implementing grants with shorter and longer timeframes
- A greater recognition of broader researcher impacts beyond a narrow view of commercialisation
- Expanding the largely STEM-based research priorities within industrial transformation schemes
- Increasing opportunities for early and mid-career researchers

- The importance of ensuring the eligibility and assessment criteria for funding schemes properly aligns with the different stages of academic careers
- A more systematic incorporation of Indigenous Knowledges within all aspects of the academic enterprise

There is some concern among members that it is not clear how the ARC will frame or define 'underrepresented groups' as outlined on page 18.

DASSH recommends greater clarity on 'underrepresented groups'. Are these discipline specific?

Previously DASSH has called for greater funding opportunities for HASS curiosity-led research emphasising broad cultural benefits.

DASSH welcomes the discussion paper's foregrounding of curiosity-led research as 'adventurous' research.

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

DASSH members, while supportive of the shift in focus of the ARC's NCGP, highlighted a number of potential unintended consequences associated with the proposed model.

Precarity for ECRs

Noting the recommendation made in question one, one of the foremost considerations is the potential impact of these changes on ECRs. Limiting the Initiate program to two years will have a detrimental impact on ECRs within the HASS disciplines due to the long-term nature of many projects. There are also questions around institutional vs ARC funding for post-doctoral researchers and potential job security implications. This could impact the pipeline of future researchers.

DASSH recommends Initiate grants are extended to three to four years in length.

Research and government priorities

We acknowledge the ARC Board will be involved in setting priorities. However, aligning research funding with the national research priority statements and government priorities could risk limiting research funding to the fluctuating and at times politically motivated priorities of changing governments. It also may limit to issues of the day where researchers are connected to the international and long-term evolutions in the field and can propose lines of inquiry that have global relevance and forward implications. Steering away from the role of Centres of Excellence could have negative consequences. HASS research also plays a critical role in achieving the National Science and Research Priorities but this is not reflected in the statement.

DASSH recommends a version of the Special Research Initiatives be incorporated to allow the Minister to set priorities with Centres of Excellence building on those over time.

DASSH recommends that if research funding is to be aligned with priority statements they should acknowledge the role of HASS research or it should be explicitly stated elsewhere.

Investment in Indigenous researchers

Members raised concerns about the lack of sustained investment in Indigenous researchers. There is a view that growing researchers requires sustained investment over time and the Realise Indigenous Capability grant program does not appear to address that. In this way it reflects some of the issues outlined above regarding ECRs. The primary concern is that the aim of growing Indigenous workforce won't be achieved under this scheme. Cultivating and growing the Indigenous workforce may not be achieved under as there is also a risk funding will go to established researchers.

DASSH recommends a proportion of the Initiate grants be directed towards Indigenous researchers.

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

Fundamental shifts in approach will lead to issues that need to be addressed through any transition process. Members identified several questions:

1. Will the same panels be assessing grants?
2. How will the ARC ensure a strong peer review process going forward?
3. Will senior researchers be quarantined in terms of funds allocation under the new scheme?
4. Can the ARC provide a clear timeline for the implementation of the new scheme?
5. How can the ARC support researchers to undertake the significant shift towards a collaborative model including working with industry, not for profits and other disciplines?
6. Will the ARC provide clarity around co-funding arrangement for industry and for universities?
7. How will the ARC address the potential funding constraints faced by smaller and regional universities in funding Future Laureates in the absence of a dedicated scheme?

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

The connectivity and dialogue between schemes was raised by members as a significant consideration. Rather than making a recommendation members posed three questions:

1. It is not clear how the different schemes will be in dialogue with each other over a 20-year period. Members asked how a coordinated package is to be managed and how adjustments will be made over time?
2. Similarly, members raised the question how will the larger grant schemes be able to see what has come before them as a way to make judgements about connection for continuing research? How can schemes look to prior research that has been done under the old model to ensure research grant applications are not being assessed in isolation?
3. Can the ARC give an indication of how this new scheme will breakdown in terms of support for colleges? Is this a competition across all colleges? Is the grant model of the different discipline programs going to continue and what will the financing approaches be?

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