



# ACDS Submission to the ARC's Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program (NCGP)

## Introduction

The Australian Council of Deans of Science (ACDS) is the peak organisation representing the leadership of Australia's University Science Faculties, Colleges, and Schools, which are responsible for the strategic development and delivery of science teaching and research in our universities.

The ACDS welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the ARC's second consultation on reforming the National Competitive Grants Program (NCGP). We commend the ARC for its engagement with the sector and for proposing a bold new framework that seeks to simplify the grant structure, support a diverse research community, and strengthen the long-term impact of public investment in research. These reforms address several long-standing ACDS priorities.

In response to the Discussion Paper, we emphasise the following four points:

- **Support for Reforms:** ACDS supports the streamlined six-scheme structure including the mechanisms to support Early- and Mid-Career Researchers (EMCRs), such as Embedded Fellowships and opportunities through the Lead and Mentor grants.
- **Commitment to Indigenous Research:** We welcome efforts to strengthen Indigenous research and researcher capability.
- **Support for Research Translation:** The ARC's role in funding research with translational potential must be emphasised. We urge consideration of widening eligibility to include research providers beyond universities.
- **Monitoring and Review:** We recommend a formal review of the new model after five years to assess impacts on factors such as success rates and equity of access, to ensure the program is achieving its strategic objectives.

We elaborate on these points in our responses to the consultation questions.

## Consultation Questions and ACDS Responses

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

ACDS strongly supports the principles of the proposed NCGP model, particularly the streamlined six-scheme structure, which reduces complexity while maintaining diverse research pathways. However, we offer the following observations.

#### **Timeframes**

A 20-year timeframe is a long horizon for the NCGP, particularly given the dynamic and continually evolving nature of both the policy and research environments. While we welcome the greater certainty that longer-term planning can provide, we caution against any implication that the NCGP should be 'locked in' for 20 years without review.

#### **International research co-funding**

We welcome the Discussion paper's acknowledgement of the potential to foster international collaboration. We recommend that the ARC take an active role in funding joint research initiatives with international funding partners, through mechanisms such as Horizon Europe or bilateral arrangements with counterpart funding agencies. Arrangements should include safeguards to ensure that Australian funding supports research conducted in Australia, while leveraging the value of the international partners' co-investment. In an increasingly dynamic and uncertain geopolitical environment, establishing mechanisms to foster new international research collaborations is timely and important.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Commit to reviewing the effectiveness of the new grant program approximately five years after its implementation, with a view to making any necessary adjustments informed by the review's findings.
- Develop a dedicated international engagement strategy, to guide and prioritise investments through international research co-funding mechanisms.

### *2. Does the proposed model adequately address concerns raised in the first consultation?*

The new model addresses many key concerns previously raised by ACDS, particularly in:

- Simplifying the grants structure – A welcome shift from 15 schemes to 6.
- Supporting Indigenous researchers – The Realise Indigenous Capability scheme is a positive step towards long-term Indigenous leadership in research.
- Strengthening EMCR opportunities – The introduction of Embedded Fellowships and the Lead and Mentor scheme is a significant improvement.

However, while the Realise Indigenous Capability scheme is an excellent initiative, it must be backed by a policy commitment.

**Recommendation:** The ARC should commit to allocating at least 5% of total NCGP funding to Indigenous researchers and Indigenous-led or co-led research projects.

### *3. Do you foresee any unintended consequences or significant risks in the proposed model?*

We highlight several considerations below:

#### **Categorising research**

The Discussion Paper rightly questions the value of rigidly categorising research as either basic or applied for the purposes of funding or organising research activity. At the same time, both current R&D and higher education policy increasingly emphasise research translation (including policy, public engagement, and technological and social impact) and commercialisation.

We consider it essential that the ARC maintains a clear commitment to funding both discovery research and research with translational potential and sets explicit expectations around research impact. While the revised NCGP structure provides for this, we recommend that discovery, translation and impact be clearly embedded in grant guidelines and peer review processes as core considerations.

#### **Expansion of eligibility**

There may also be value in expanding eligibility for selected schemes to researchers from other sectors—potentially as ‘Associate Investigators’. These applicants could be eligible to serve as CIAs and lead projects, helping to encourage greater industry participation in collaborative projects that, otherwise, might only occur within universities.

#### **Embedded fellowships**

The ACDS supports the principle of Embedded Fellowships. However, the proposed changes to fellowship arrangements were among the most consistently raised concerns in our member consultations. Key issues are outlined below:

- We note a potential challenge for universities if teaching ‘buyouts’ are managed in a fragmented way, which would raise concerns about how teaching responsibilities would be covered. A more effective approach may be to offer a reduced teaching load for the duration of the fellowship—an existing arrangement that works well.
- The proposed two-year duration is widely seen as too short, offering limited stability and forcing ECRs to plan their next steps almost immediately. A three-year model may better support career development—both within academia and in preparing ECRs to transition to non-academic roles, including industry. Shorter fellowships may also be less attractive to top domestic and international talent, offering insufficient time and certainty to build strong, competitive research careers.
- Discontinuing ‘named’ fellowship programs like ‘Future Fellow’ risks diminishing the visibility of Australia’s leading researchers. The prestige and recognition associated with named fellowships are difficult to replicate through embedded roles alone.

We encourage reconsideration of the proposed model to manage these issues and to help universities address the risks more effectively.

#### **Modelling impacts of the reforms**

Finally, as the new funding model is implemented, we encourage the ARC to model its potential impact on success rates. Improving success rates will help reduce inefficiencies, better support researchers' time and effort, and boost morale—particularly for early- and mid-career researchers.

#### **Recommendation:**

- Model the impact of NCGP structural changes on key factors—such as applicant success rates and outcomes for key demographic groups—to monitor how reforms affect the diversity of grant recipients and research outcomes.

#### **4. What issues would need to be addressed in transitioning to the new model?**

The transition from the current system to the new model must be managed carefully to:

- Avoid funding gaps for researchers currently funded under existing schemes.
- Ensure clear communication with researchers across Australia's research ecosystem on eligibility, application processes, and changes to assessment criteria.
- Maintain and hopefully increase applicant success rates

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

##### **Additions:**

The best research outcomes are achieved when the value of diversity is explicitly recognised and embedded in funding mechanisms. In this context, we welcome the commitment to “provide more targeted support for under-represented groups...”. However, we urge the ARC to make an explicit commitment to supporting diversity in all its forms—including gender and broader cultural representation—when finalising the program architecture, scheme objectives, and peer review policies and processes.

We also encourage greater clarity on the ARC's ongoing role in supporting research translation. In this context, we would welcome mechanisms that promote stronger mobility between academia and industry, while maintaining the ARC's key role in funding foundational, curiosity-driven research

##### **Removals:**

- None – The structure is well-conceived, but policy settings need further refinement.

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

Overall, the six proposed schemes are well-designed and represent a substantial improvement over the current system.

## **Conclusion**

The ACDS welcomes the ARC's bold and constructive proposals to reform the NCGP. We strongly support the streamlined six-scheme structure, the enhanced support for Indigenous researchers, and opportunities for early- and mid-career researchers. To ensure the success of these reforms, we recommend a formal review after five years, and explicit commitments in key areas such as research translation and international collaboration.

We thank the ARC for the opportunity to contribute and look forward to continuing engagement with the ARC to support the successful implementation of the final reforms.