

## **Submission from the Australian Association for Research in Education to the NCGP Review and Discussion Paper**

The Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Australian Research Council (ARC) and Department of Education's Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program (NCGP).

AARE is the premier professional association for educational researchers in Australia. Established in 1970, the Association has provided support for successive generations of educational researchers from Australian universities, governments, schools, and private research agencies. Its objectives centre on advancing scholarly inquiry in education, enhancing quality in educational research, and seeking to promote the effective and positive impact of educational research on policy and practice in education and associated areas of society. We forge connections with all those concerned about education research and its translation and have long-established links with similar organisations internationally. We have a strong record of providing support and capacity building to education researchers from a wide range of areas, organisations, and disciplinary specialisations, holding an annual conference, and a full calendar of seminars, workshops and cross-sector forums.

The following comments and recommendations are provided in response to areas identified by the Discussion Paper for feedback. It is necessarily a selective and targeted response that reflects the concerns and remit of AARE as a national member-driven association for educational researchers.

1. We note the key role of the ARC in supporting basic research within a research landscape which recognises the interdependence of basic/discovery research and applied research. As is widely argued across the research sector, without appropriate investment in basic research scholarly innovation is imperilled and this in turn puts at risk future potential applications of research and its varied social and economic benefits. As the leading Australian program, the NCGP should provide stability and support for basic research as part of advancing the long-term interests of the nation.
2. It is essential that the funding ecosystem is properly balanced and attuned to supporting the breadth of scholarship across disciplines as well as types of research along the spectrum of discovery to applied. We emphasise here the dire need for improved support in the form of adjustments to existing funding schemes and the creation of new schemes that are aligned to supporting HASS fields of research, a cluster of diverse disciplines that relies predominantly on the ARC for funding. This is particularly the case for basic discovery research in HASS disciplines. Further, these fields of research require an inclusive conception of research impact and national benefit to ensure that scholarly impact and innovation remain not only legitimate outcomes of research funding, but essential and driving purposes of funding schemes directed to supporting basic research. Finally, the vital contributions that HASS disciplines make to the nation need to be reflected in the identification of national research priorities. We recommend greater engagement of research leaders from HASS disciplines in processes for identifying national research priorities. This will help in ensuring that humanities, arts and social science scholarship has

a strong and explicit profile in national research priorities so that they can benefit from any corresponding funding schemes and special research initiatives that are linked to national priorities.

3. Education is typically classified as part of the social sciences, albeit with a wide range of disciplinary specialisations, for example from mathematics education to history of education, from psychology to policy studies. Within the ARC assessment structure, education research is typically located within the SBE panel, noting some applications are assessed across two panels and can require an interdisciplinary assessment process. Accordingly, in this submission we call out the urgent need for appropriate schemes that build workforce capability and strengthen scholarly excellence across the social sciences.
4. National research schemes should additionally ensure that funding is allocated across the life course and career stage of researchers, and the overall pipeline of research activity, in such a way that builds the capability of early and mid-career researchers and appropriately resources basic research. Recent new schemes and funding allocations have disproportionately focused on the applied end of the spectrum and industry-facing collaborations. While the latter undeniably bring benefits and are an important part of the funding landscape, resourcing them should not be privileged at the expense of prioritising sufficient funding for basic research. Indeed, a considerably greater proportion of funds should be earmarked for basic (discovery and fellowship) research than is currently the case. This would give recognition to the essential role of basic research and also acknowledge the availability of other funding schemes to support linkage and external partnership projects.
5. Recalibrating the allocation of funding would also contribute to a substantial strengthening of support for and investment in the future of social sciences and wider HASS fields. Applied and industry-focussed research bring crucial national and economic benefits. However, insights and knowledge generated by social science and broader HASS research are also crucial for understanding social and ecological futures and national benefits and indeed for securing the social licence for change. This was patently clear during the pandemic where social and cultural understandings were critical for achieving public health and economic reforms.
6. Where partnership schemes exist, they need to be designed to more explicitly promote collaboration with a wide range of external parties, and to take account of the level and type of contributions different partners can reasonably be expected to make. This includes recognising the contributions and importance of partnerships with community-based or not-for profit organisations, small organisations and enterprises, cultural sector groups and institutions and NGOs, among others. Using a generic term such as 'industry' to capture the diversity of potential external partners is unhelpful and can serve as a disincentive for researchers to seek out other partners, and also for the involvement of potential partners who need to see themselves in the scheme guidelines in order to understand the benefits of partnering.
7. The field of education research, as with many other fields, faces immediate challenges in growing the future research workforce. This means that schemes are urgently needed and/or adapted to better support and build the research capability and future research

leadership of our early and mid-career scholars. Given constraints on funding and no new foreseeable injections of funding, this will mean some repurposing is required. Accordingly, we recommend the ARC consider ways of skewing funding to ECRs and mid-career researchers. This is acknowledged as a delicate matter as we do not wish to undermine the standing of senior researchers; however, there is scope to adjust existing schemes for senior researchers and create more opportunities for ECRs/MCRs to participate in and benefit from national funding programs. We need to keep an eye on the present but also look ahead to immediate and longer-term future of our national research workforce capability. Possible initiatives include: making it more feasible for ECRs to take lead roles in Discovery and other schemes; reviewing the number and structure of early career fellowships, including reviewing the length of them (e.g reducing the length of time could allow more fellowships to be made available).

8. This a crucial time to develop schemes that support the growth of the Indigenous research workforce; this is a key priority for AARE. The Discovery Indigenous program is one example, but there is scope to expand, to develop additional schemes in consultation with Indigenous researchers and to consider the introduction of quotas, learning from how other schemes and agencies have managed this.
9. Ensuring greater diversity across the research workforce is critical and urgently needs to move from in-principle rhetoric to targeted schemes and interventions. The NHMRC's recent interventions to improve significant gender disparities in grant outcomes is one example of a deliberate intervention whose outcomes can be tracked. There is also a documented need to strengthen representation of culturally and linguistically diverse groups in Australian research and to ensure greater diversity in career stage representation.
10. Data on outcomes from research schemes needs to be made more accessible and capture a broad range of factors. Time series data is particularly important to track the impact of any scheme redesign and needs to be presented in ways that are accessible and meaningful for a wide audience. This is an essential part of accountability and transparency processes for the fair and responsible use of public monies.

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