

The University of Tasmania welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on the Australian Research Council's (ARC) National Competitive Grants Program (NCGP) reforms. As a research-intensive institution with a commitment to research excellence, impact and equity, we recognise the significance of these reforms in shaping a robust and impactful Australian research ecosystem. We offer our feedback structured around nine thematic priorities, reflecting both institutional strategic priorities and broader sector-wide considerations.

Delay the NCGP reform design and recommendations to ensure alignment with the outcomes of the Strategic Examination of Research and Development (SERD)

Aligning the NCGP reforms with the outcomes of the Strategic Examination of Research and Development (SERD) will enable the ARC to operate within a cohesive and coordinated national framework, amplifying its ability to drive impactful research outcomes.

The University of Tasmania acknowledges the potential value of the NCGP reform however, we hold a significant concern regarding the timing of the NCGP reforms being conducted independently of, and potentially in conflict with, the broader research ecosystem, as it is currently under review through the SERD.

While several NCGP reform initiatives appear to present immediate, actionable benefits, these initiatives must be considered holistically. Their success and appropriateness should be contingent on and in alignment with the outcomes of the SERD and the resultant systemic SERD reforms. To ensure an aligned, coherent, and effective Australian research funding ecosystem, we strongly recommend that the design and implementation of any structural changes to the NCGP be deferred until the implications of the SERD are fully understood.

Enhancement of Basic Research

At the forefront of our recommendations is the preservation and enhancement of funding for basic and “discovery” research.

To effectively support basic research, Australia must prioritise dedicated basic research funding through the ARC and ensure integration within the broader research and development (R&D) ecosystem. Currently, basic research funding is limited, with the ARC and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) each contributing approximately 7% of government R&D expenditure. Given the considerable scale of the remaining 86% of R&D investment, the remaining 86% of the R&D ecosystem must also play their part in integrating and facilitating mechanisms for translating basic research across the Technology Readiness Level (TRL) pipeline. We strongly advocate for ARC funding to be prioritised towards basic research to ensure a strong national research ecosystem. The ARC's mission should not be to bridge the gap between basic and applied research – that is the role of non-ARC funding entities. Instead, the ARC should focus on pump-priming new knowledge creation, ensuring that it can be applied now and/or in the future.

By generating new knowledge, Australia secures first-mover advantage in applying discoveries for national benefit, including future export opportunities where appropriate. This approach strengthens sovereign capability and ensures that discovery research remains insulated from immediate commercial, political, or applied pressures. Protecting basic research from short-term influences is essential for fostering genuine exploration, where researchers must have the freedom to challenge established paradigms and expand the boundaries of knowledge. Many groundbreaking innovations have emerged precisely from such intellectual independence, highlighting the vital role of academic freedom in enabling transformative breakthroughs. A robust commitment to basic research ensures that Australia remains a global leader in innovation, empowering researchers to explore fundamental questions without constraint. Basic research and its ARC funding pathway must connect to the larger R&D system through anticipated SERD reform initiatives, guiding knowledge generated through the TRL pipeline and ensuring foundational discoveries continue to shape the future.

In addition, the ARC reforms should prioritise targeted investment towards fundamental disciplines such as biology, ecology, chemistry, physics, and mathematics. These disciplines form the foundation upon which discovery breakthroughs in areas such as environmental sustainability, medical advancements, and technological innovation can be built. While applied research must remain separately funded by the broader R&D ecosystem, a well-structured and targeted ARC funding towards fundamental disciplines will ensure that critical foundational knowledge is created.

We also encourage the humanities and social sciences to be explicitly embedded within ARC's basic research funding priorities to ensure a holistic approach to national and global challenges. These disciplines provide essential frameworks for understanding societal transitions, shaping identity adaptation, and informing strategic responses to economic and social transformations. By drawing upon philosophical, historical, literary, and artistic insights, Australia

strengthens its cultural understanding, reinforces its foundational values, and enhances its ability to navigate complex shifts with informed, contextually rich perspectives. Integrating these disciplines into basic research fosters interdisciplinary innovation and ensures that policy, governance, and technological advancements remain grounded in human experience, ethical considerations, and long-term societal impact.

If our recommendations to delay the NCGP reforms to ensure alignment with SERD and to prioritise basic research are not supported, please see below for further feedback on the proposed NCGP reforms.

Rebalancing grant durations and structures to support programmatic and interdisciplinary research

The world's most profound scientific and societal challenges, whether in climate science, artificial intelligence, biomedical research, or other frontier fields require sustained, iterative inquiry. Complex challenges, requiring multi-phase investigations, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the ability to refine theories and methodologies over time. Short-term funding cycles inherently restrict the ability of researchers to establish and execute ambitious, high-risk, high-reward projects, often forcing them to prioritise incremental progress over transformative breakthroughs.

The University of Tasmania acknowledges the ARC's efforts to adjust the structure of the NCGP in a manner that enhances research flexibility and impact. However, the current balance of grant durations remains skewed towards short-term funding, which poses significant limitations for research requiring sustained investment. We strongly recommend that the ARC adopt a fundamental shift toward enabling longer-term programmatic research that can truly shape the future. Adopting a more decisive approach in supporting longer-term funding schemes will enable meaningful programmatic research that fosters continuity, scalability, and sustained innovation.

Programmatic research, which involves coordinated efforts across multiple teams and disciplines, relies on well-structured grant schemes that ensure financial stability over extended timeframes. Without long-term funding assurance, interdisciplinary collaborations can result in fragmented incremental efforts that fall short of their transformative potential, limiting their potential to drive paradigm shifts and address humanity's most pressing challenges. The proposed NCGP framework does not sufficiently accommodate these needs, potentially undermining the ARC's broader objectives of fostering high-impact, transformational research outcomes.

We recommend the introduction of longer-duration schemes that explicitly support programmatic and interdisciplinary work. Specifically, increasing the availability of five to seven year grants within the NCGP framework will provide the stability necessary to develop innovative, high-risk, high-reward research initiatives that evolve over time. Furthermore, interdisciplinary integration should be a core design principle within this scheme.

Equity, Diversity, and Early Career Researcher (ECR) support

Our institution is deeply committed to advancing equity and diversity within the research workforce. Addressing systemic barriers faced by underrepresented groups, including women, Indigenous researchers, Early Career Researchers (ECRs), and non-binary individuals, is critical for creating an inclusive, equitable, sustainable and self-rejuvenation research environment. The proposed NCGP reforms must include targeted mechanisms that foster greater participation and representation. We recommend reserving specific funding allocations for underrepresented groups, modelled on NHMRC Gender Equity Strategy 2022–2025 initiatives¹.

To mitigate systemic biases in funding assessments, we recommend refining the application requirement for Career-Best Research Outputs, reducing the selection from ten to five of the applicant's most relevant publications. This adjustment promotes a more equitable evaluation by minimising advantages linked to longer publication histories, which disproportionately benefit those with extended tenure. By prioritising research quality and relevance over volume, this approach fosters fairness for women, early-career researchers, and individuals entering academia later, advancing a more inclusive, merit-based funding system.

The introduction of two-year Initiate scheme whilst beneficial for some short and sharp high risk reward projects, whilst well-intentioned, risks excluding some innovative projects that require longer timeframes and exacerbating job insecurity for ECRs who would be competing with all academic levels. Instead, creating an additional targeted ECR Initiate scheme and expanding the duration to a range of two to three years will align better with the realistic timelines of research projects and the developmental needs of ECRs.

We caution that a major challenge remains; short-term ECR and Mid-Career Research fellowships may not provide the solutions that researchers at these career stages need, including skill development, job certainty to take appropriate risks, and flexibility for family and career breaks. For example, the financial burden of relocating and re-

settling for a three-year period, which may not be ongoing, can already be prohibitively expensive, adding another layer of complexity to career mobility.

Importance of substantive equality

The University of Tasmania welcomes initiatives aimed at advancing Indigenous Peoples self-determination, engagement, equity, and inclusion in research. As an institution committed to fostering meaningful collaboration and promoting fair practices, we recognise the importance of these initiatives in driving positive change across the research landscape. Ensuring robust protections for Indigenous data and intellectual property needs to be a critical priority. The Ma'amayri Wingara Data Sovereignty Principles direct us to understand and ensure that the rights of Indigenous Peoples are central to establishing good Institutional Indigenous Data Governance and Indigenous Data Sovereignty processes. We believe that Indigenous Peoples rights to access, ownership and control over their own data must be implemented not only within the NCGP but also needs to be an Institutional requirement. We strongly advocate for the adoption and integration of established governance frameworks, including the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance, which provide a pathway for strengthening Indigenous control, stewardship, and agency over data. We recommend targeted measures to increase awareness, capacity-building, and the systematic implementation of these principles across the research ecosystem, ensuring their practical application beyond nominal endorsement.

Additionally, we urge the NCGP reforms to explicitly align with and mandate adherence to Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property principles to safeguard the rights of Indigenous communities, ensuring they remain the primary guardians, interpreters, and decision-makers regarding their cultural heritage and knowledge systems. Further, embedding Free, Prior, and Informed Consent as a fundamental requirement across all research activities impacting Indigenous knowledge and resources will empower Indigenous peoples with genuine agency over decisions regarding their land, culture, and intellectual property. We also strongly advocate for the inclusion of and alignment to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the WIPO Copyright Treaty on Intellectual Property, Genetic Resources and Associated Traditional Knowledge to ensure nationally funded research grants protect Indigenous knowledge and the rights of Indigenous people to determine how their data is used including for research findings, patents and other uses.

We encourage the NCGP reforms to be bolder by prioritising Indigenous research across all the of new schemes not just within the Realise Indigenous Capability scheme. Specifically, we endorse the following priorities:

- Ensuring fair compensation for Indigenous Elders and other community members, acknowledging their vital contributions to research. Establishing funds and standardised rates for such engagement would guarantee equity and transparency.
- The targeted hiring of Indigenous researchers in all research settings.
- Dedicated funds for integrating traditional knowledge into research projects that will assist in ensuring Indigenous perspectives and cultural insights are valued and meaningfully incorporated.
- Establish training and information sessions for the Discovery Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Award.
- A requirement for Indigenous Chief Investigators on any project, in any scheme, that is Indigenous focused research.

Absence of NCGP scheme selection criteria and weightings

The University of Tasmania recommends that the ARC explicitly address the selection criteria and the weighting of each scheme within the NCGP reforms. The absence of specific guidance on this matter in the current discussion paper presents a significant gap that could impact the success and overall outcomes of the NCGP.

Clearly defined selection criteria and their respective weightings are essential to ensuring transparency, consistency and fairness in the evaluation process and the intended outcomes. They play a crucial role in shaping the behaviour of applicants and assessors, aligning proposals with the program's overarching objectives. Furthermore, the weighting of criteria must reflect the strategic priorities of the NCGP, including fostering research excellence, promoting equity and diversity, and enhancing societal and economic impact.

A critical consideration in the evaluation process is the definition of "highest-quality research". Research "quality" indicators vary across disciplines and across basic and applied research, requiring nuanced assessment mechanisms. Without a clear definition, differing interpretations between research activities may lead to unintended consequences, potentially disadvantaging certain disciplines or distorting funding allocations. The ARC should articulate a framework for assessing research quality that acknowledges these distinctions and mitigates the risk of perverse outcomes.

We recommend that the ARC provide clarity on the intended selection criteria and respective weightings for sector understanding and input. We recommend prioritising and including criteria that support innovation, interdisciplinary approaches, and Indigenous engagement, while recognising the unique needs of Early Career Researchers and underrepresented groups. This approach will ensure that the NCGP delivers equitable outcomes and maintains the integrity and impact of Australian research.

Streamlining operational processes at both the application and post-award stages

The ARC needs to prioritise implementing real changes to reduce the administrative burdens at both the application and post-award stages to ensure researchers and institutions can focus on delivering high-quality outcomes rather than being entangled in cumbersome compliance processes. Streamlining operational procedures will enhance efficiency for researchers, institutions, and the ARC itself, facilitating a more effective funding ecosystem.

For example, complex budget submissions and compliance requirements can divert valuable resources away from research activities and hinder efficiency. The ARC reforms should aim to streamline these processes, adopting best practices from other funding bodies such as the NHMRC.

We propose the adoption of fixed funding amounts for successful applications to simplify budgeting procedures. Furthermore, removing the need for signed letters of support for both Institutions (Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Research letter of support) and all collaborators at the application stage and transitioning to certifications within the Research Management System (RMS) will significantly enhance efficiency. Introducing automated compliance checks and early minimum data deadlines for applications will not only improve accuracy but also help institutions manage workloads more effectively during peak submission periods.

In addition, post-award compliance should be optimised to reduce ongoing administrative demands. Flexible reporting mechanisms, simplified project and budget variations, removal of contract signing requirements where all collaborators regardless of their contribution level into the project must sign the Collaboration Agreement prior to the project commencing can have significant delays to project commencement times. Post-award efficiencies will allow researchers and institutions to focus on achieving impactful outcomes rather than navigating cumbersome administrative tasks.

Supporting research talent development

Investing in research talent development is critical to ensuring Australia's future research capacity and competitiveness. The NCGP reforms should include measures that enhance career development opportunities for researchers at all levels while addressing workforce challenges specific to underrepresented groups. We encourage a greater focus of PhD candidates within the proposed schemes with a focus of embedded PhD candidates within SMEs and/or clusters, where appropriate, which can provide dual benefits of knowledge generation, industry-linked career pathways and workforce development in SMEs and key sectors.

Transfer of research infrastructure funding accountability to National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS) funding

The University of Tasmania strongly advocates for a clear delineation of responsibilities between the ARC and the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS) to ensure optimal allocation of research funding and infrastructure investment. ARC-funded infrastructure currently is positioned to complement the existing NCRIS-supported initiatives.

However, NCRIS plays a foundational role in sustaining Australia's research infrastructure landscape, ensuring researchers have access to world-class facilities that underpin high-impact discovery and applied research. To maximise efficacy of ARC funding mechanisms, we strongly advocate for the expansion of NCRIS's mandate, enabling it to assume a more comprehensive role in funding research infrastructure currently supported by the ARC. Such a transition would facilitate greater strategic alignment and reduce fragmentation across national funding ecosystem. Strengthening these distinctions between ARC and NCRIS will enable a more targeted, efficient, and effective prioritisation of research infrastructure investments, ensuring that researchers and institutions can access the facilities and resources they need to deliver long-term sustainability and driving research excellence.

We welcome further discussions and remain available to assist with the development of the NCGP.

ⁱ [NHMRC Gender Equity Strategy 2022-2025 | NHMRC](#)