

17 March 2023

The following advice was provided to the ARC Discovery Grant Process Review by the EMCR Forum in response to a request for feedback. This review took the form of a survey.

Discovery Program Grant Process Review (2023 Edition) – Survey to External Stakeholders

The purpose of this survey is to canvass your views on the key considerations for the review of the Discovery Program grant process, as well as broader policy issues which might inform the Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program. The Discovery Program Grant Guidelines cover the following schemes:

- *Australian Laureate Fellowships*
- *Future Fellowships*
- *Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DECRA)*
- *Discovery Indigenous*
- *Discovery Projects.*

Consultation question 1-3: demographic questions.

Consultation question 4: What key issues and reforms do you think should be considered in the upcoming Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program (NCGP)?

1) Integrity of review process: Re-assess review process for NCGP to ensure that integrity is maintained and safeguarded. Many EMCRs across all career stages, backgrounds, disciplines and institutions tell that ROPE sections are not taken seriously by reviewers, and that feedback from reviewers are incongruent with the grant outcomes. This signals that there may be structural and systemic issues within the NCGP review process which warrants further assessment.

2) Workload per application: Revamp the Linkage and Discovery programs to reduce workload for both applicants and reviewers. These programs could employ a 2-stage review process similar to that proposed during in the Industry Fellowships Program consultations.

3) Feedback to unsuccessful applicants: Continue developing systems and structures that ensure grant applicants receive high quality feedback with sufficient resolution to allow making meaningful improvements. In many ARC schemes, applicants receive feedback of the reviewers and not of the panel who made the decision, with many unsuccessful applicants receiving feedback that is incongruous with the ranking of the application. Feedback from ERC starting grants and Marie Skłodowska Curie Fellowships are good examples, as strengths and weaknesses of the applications are provided.

4) Focus on fundamental research: Reverse the current trend of funding more translational research at the expenses of fundamental research. Fundamental research produces crucial knowledge that transcends commercial interests, and is the backbone to which future research – commercial or otherwise – can be undertaken. Fundamental research provides the knowledge base needed to address future questions and generational challenges; it is imperative that this base not be eroded for short term financial gain. We recommend that:

the ARC introduces a minimum quota for fundamental research, and/or announces the proportion of funding dedicated to fundamental research publicly; the Discovery Program reaffirms its primary focus on fundamental research, given that industry-based schemes co-exist.

5) Increase of funding pool: Lobby harder for increased governmental research funding (where possible within the limits of ARC's charter), either directly, or indirectly through driving public demand for publicly-funded research. The latter could be done through targeted marketing and communications of high-profile research successes.

6) Distribution of funds: Develop mechanisms to broaden the distribution of research funding to reduce the concentration of funds towards a small number of highly cited senior researchers. One possible method would be to stratify schemes into junior/senior categories (e.g. ECR, MCR, Senior; or Academic levels B-C and D-E; or similar). The metrics show successful researchers belonging to underrepresented groups are numerically uncompetitive relative to those in more privileged positions. Accordingly, a dedicated scheme for those with career disruptions would be valuable to support disadvantaged researchers to re-enter the workforce.

7) Diversity in reviewers and experts: Expand on the diversity of the reviewers and College of Experts. Ensure the pool of assessors is balanced over a number of intersectionalities (e.g. LGBTQIA+, people with disability, indigenous people, people of colour, Asian people, carers, etc.) and at various career stages. Ensure international expertise at both expert and reviewer levels to reduce the risk of reviewer bias and cronyism.

8) Redefinition of success: Broaden measures to evaluate research excellence in order to improve research quality, impact and sustainability. Possible additional criteria include: research integrity; collaborations; quality of supervision provided; indirect research contributions (e.g. science communication, community engagement); contribution to a positive and equitable research culture; sustainability practices. Due to lack of space, we will discuss this point further in the last section.

Consultation question 5: *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 feedback the EMCR Forum has received is that the Discover Program Grant documentation is clear and concise. Other feedback of parts that have worked well and should not be changed include:

- Having the grant submission system interlinked with research profile database, allowing easy importing of personal details, publications, etc.
- While the assessment of ROPE can be significantly improved, the core principle of having an assessment of ROPE is laudable, and should be maintained.
- The ability to submit a rebuttal to the reviewers' comments via the rejoinder is a positive aspect of the grant, and should be maintained (or improved).
- The limitation of no more than 2 Discovery grants being held by any one researcher at any point in time is positive, as it assists in the broader distribution of funds.

Consultation questions 6-16 asked respondents to select the importance of topics in preparation for question 17. Scale: Not at all important, Not very important, Neutral, Important, Very important.

6. Streamlining and shortening Grant Guidelines
7. Clarifying and/or simplifying project limits
8. Reviewing grant amounts
9. Reviewing funding duration
10. Refining the objectives and intended outcomes for each scheme
11. Streamlining the application form
12. Reviewing Assessment Criteria and weightings for each scheme.
13. Investigating measures to increase opportunities for recently graduated DECRA applicants
14. Allowing Chief Investigator (CI) salaries for Early Career Researchers (ECRs) for Discovery Projects and Discovery Indigenous
15. Allowing/requiring partners and/or additional unnamed researchers on Fellowship applications
16. Altering the application process for Discovery Program schemes

Consultation question 17: Of the issues described above, which three would you rank as the highest priority for the ARC to address?

The EMCR Forum ranks the following three as highest priority:

- **Streamlining the application form** – The Discovery Program application form (including budgets and ROPE) is too long, requests information multiple times, or asks for detail which is not required for assessment. The form could be streamlined to reduce administrative burden for applicants, reviewers and the ARC.
- **Allowing Chief Investigator (CI) salaries for Early Career Researchers (ECRs) for Discovery Projects and Discovery Indigenous** – the current ARC policy of not allowing ARC-funded salaries for CIs as an eligible expenditure item for project funding, but allowing salaries for unnamed Post-Doctoral Research Assistants, may disadvantage ECRs who do not have stable employment. The ARC should consider allowing CI salaries for ECRs for Discovery Projects and Discovery Indigenous (to allow ECRs to be a named participant on grants and receive a funded salary).
- **Altering the application process for Discovery Program schemes** – the workload involved in submitting a full application is extensive, and success rates are relatively low. The ARC should investigate new application and assessment options, which could include a 2-stage application process to identify the most competitive applications to proceed to full review.

Consultation question 18: *Do you have any further comments regarding your responses to the priority issues described above?*

It should be noted that the proposal to allow partners and/or additional unnamed researchers on DECRA and Fellowship applications has a range of ramifications which makes this proposal difficult to assess in isolation. A disadvantage of allowing DECRA applicants to name partners is that it will likely feed the cycle of researchers chasing high-citation figurehead partners, which is counter-productive to the aims of the grant scheme. However, by contrast, allowing Laureate Fellowship applicants include partners – particularly where the partners' track record are not taken into account in the grant evaluation – may promote collaboration and collegiality, while also instilling important leadership skills to the applicant.

Should the ARC decide to work on the various issues raised above, we highly recommend consulting with the broad research community, prioritising underrepresented groups and EMCRs whose career and productivity are often most significantly affected by those issues.

Consultation question 19: *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?*

Most of the feedback received by the Forum is that the administration of grants is conducted by the research offices (or equivalent) of universities, and that most of the administrative burden is either borne by, or created by, the universities themselves. However, there have been some instances where researchers were provided with inconsistent or inaccurate information by the research offices. While the ARC is not directly responsible for this, miscommunication and/or lack of clarity of funding rules can be reduced through improved communication between research offices and the ARC.

Consultation question 20: *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?*

Following recommendation 8) provided above (Redefinition of success) we suggest that the ARC could work with entities who have expertise in working with the above criteria including a) Learned Academies (e.g., the EMCR Forum, the Australian Academy of Science), b) professional networks (e.g., the National Indigenous STEM Professional Network, Universities Australia), c) organisations advocating for equity, diversity and inclusion (e.g., Science in Australia Gender Equity, Diversity Council Australia, Queers in Science) and d) state/federal Chief Scientist offices, together with DVCRs of universities, to identify appropriate measures and how new and broader criteria can be assessed and captured. The EMCR Forum is currently in a process to developing a framework for identifying, measuring and promoting research success utilising multiple assessment dimensions.

In line with the other comments we have provided above, some ideas may include mechanisms to:

- ensure that ROPE assessments are taken more seriously by reviewers, and/or that reviewers are accountable to their ROPE assessments

- ensure that applicants receive higher quality feedback, and that feedback is consistent with the resulting score and ranking of the proposal
- prevent proposals involving fundamental research only to be disadvantaged relative to industry based projects and/or projects with clear commercial pathways
- ensure that underrepresented groups are not systematically disadvantaged in their opportunities to obtain research funding