

Online submission

14 April 2025

**Australian Academy of Science EMCR Forum submission on the  
Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program Discussion Paper: A new plan for  
ARC-funded research**

The Early- and Mid-Career Researcher Forum (the EMCR Forum) at the Australian Academy of Science (the Academy) welcomes the goals and focus of the Australian Research Council (ARC) in encouraging high quality and creative early-stage research and recognition of the need to support early-career researchers (ECRs) and the research workforce.

As part of the broader sector consultation process, members of the EMCR Forum Executive Committee contributed to independent Academy submissions and those of their local institutions. This submission focuses on the proposed changes and their likely intended and unintended consequences on Australia's EMCR community.

The EMCR Forum recommends:

- That the ARC undertake further consultation with EMCRs in developing a framework and implementation plan that articulates how EMCRs will navigate and transition through the new schemes throughout their careers.
- The ARC define career stages clearly and incorporate these definitions into the modelling and evaluation of the new scheme to assess impact on researchers at different career stages. This includes acknowledging the different goals and challenges faced by three cohorts of EMCRs.

The EMCR Forum represents over 7,000 of Australia's EMCRs across science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine. It offers a unique perspective from Australia's emerging research leaders, innovators, and the future research workforce. As highly creative and productive contributors, EMCRs have the most to gain – or lose – under the proposed schemes intended to better support the research ecosystem over the next 20 years.

The principal concern of the EMCR Forum is whether the proposed scheme will provide sustainable career pathways for EMCRs. While the document suggests the proposed schemes will create more opportunities for ECRs, it lacks detail on the mechanisms that will deliver these outcomes. The document lacks clear definitions of career stages, making it difficult to evaluate the impact of the proposed changes on the EMCR community. EMCRs are a diverse group, spanning a wide range of backgrounds, caring responsibilities, contract types, research organisations and fields, career pathways, and aspirations. It is unclear whether this diversity was considered in the modelling and design of the schemes.

The EMCR Forum recommends considering three cohorts of Australian EMCRs, each of which faces unique challenges in navigating the transition period and future ARC schemes. The cohorts are outlined below, along with key questions for the ARC to consider in developing the new NCGP model:

- **Cohort 1: Newly awarded Australian PhDs**

Australian universities now produce around 10,000 PhD graduates annually, up from 4,000 in 2000. This growth is a critical factor as the proposed schemes aim to support Australian research into the mid-21<sup>st</sup> century. Current early-career fellowships do not adequately serve this cohort, with most ARC early-career fellowships awarded to researchers four to six years post-PhD. This highlights the importance of balancing assessor and panel behaviours with the intended goal of supporting EMCRs.

  - How will the recognition of senior PhDs or junior postdocs on Initiate or Breakthrough grants work in practice? Currently, many in this cohort are on short-term, fixed contracts, relying on single rounds of schemes and two-stage processes that can stretch over 12 months, as seen with the Discovery Project scheme. This is untenable for ECRs on short-term contracts, leading to a loss of expertise. Institutions also often restrict the naming of non-continuing academic staff on grants.

- Will the emphasis on shorter, two-year grants also lead to more frequent rounds and shorter assessment periods?

- **Cohort 2: More experienced ECRs**

This cohort includes researchers four or more years post-PhD completion, often on fixed-term contracts, seeking their next position or perhaps considering a career change. These highly productive researchers face a ‘valley of death’ in their programs and careers, similar to the challenges faced in research translation. They are familiar with the Australian research and funding landscape, having anticipated to apply for DECRA or Future Fellowships in 2026 and 2027. The document suggests that a growing number of EMCRs will move to short, two-year grants, such as Initiate or Embedded Fellowships.

- How will EMCRs with changing carer responsibilities navigate the short durations of grants? The need to re-apply annually could disadvantage and exclude this community without further consultation.
- How many applications can an EMCR submit that includes salary support? The unpredictable nature of grants and the often-political dynamics with senior researchers – who must be listed as investigators – can significantly impact careers, aside from merit-based assessment, capability, and feasibility.
- What happens if an ECR or MCR is compelled to move institutions, or if an SCR moves? Will salary funding remain with the EMCR, or remain with the senior investigator and institution?
- How will the new schemes ensure that EMCRs on fixed-term contracts are supported by institutions to be listed and recognised on non-fellowship grant applications?

- **Cohort 3: International EMCRs**

This cohort includes EMCRs trained overseas who seek to relocate to Australia but who have limited familiarity with ARC schemes and the Australian research ecosystem. This group is central to ensuring Australia has access to talented researchers and remains at the forefront of research, innovation, and development. Without a dedicated fellowship scheme or category, the new schemes risk creating unintended barriers for these researchers. At first glance, a two-year Initiate grant, similar to European Marie Curie Action Fellowships, may seem like an attractive option. However, closer analysis of the Australia research ecosystem suggests that the timeline and lack of subsequent sustainable pathways will ultimately deter international EMCRs from engaging with the new schemes.

- How will the new schemes impact EMCR mobility?
- How will the new schemes encourage EMCR diversity in the research workforce?
- How will the new schemes be evaluated and adapt to changes in the global research system and needs of EMCRs?

The EMCR Forum is concerned about how the proposed schemes will improve pathways for sustainable and diverse careers for Australian EMCRs.

- How will the new schemes encourage EMCR diversity in the research workforce?
- How will the Lead and Mentor scheme be different to other grants that include elements that typically train and mentor PhD candidates and/or EMCRs? With the removal of EMCR fellowships, the ‘laureate light’ of Lead and Mentor risks being a self-serving instrument for rewarding SCRs, with the added cost of limiting pathways for EMCRs to demonstrate increasing independence.
- How will the timing of rounds and cross-scheme eligibility intersect to either restrict or enable EMCR-led research?
- How will the new larger schemes of Breakthrough, Collaborate, and Prioritise support Australian and international EMCR recruitment, retention, and sector wide development of EMCR career pathways?

Details matter, and the discussion paper lacks important information. The EMCR Forum looks forward to ongoing dialogue-with the ARC to ensure the new schemes are fit-for-purpose and effectively support Australian EMCRs.

This submission was prepared on behalf of the EMCR Forum by the Executive Committee. To discuss or clarify any aspect of this submission, please contact Ms Penny Brew, EMCR Program Manager at [emcr@science.org.au](mailto:emcr@science.org.au).