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Australian Academy of Science submission on the *Discovery Program Grant Process Review*

The Australian Academy of Science welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Australian Research Council's *Discovery Program Grant Process Review*.

The Academy recommends:

- Reviews of the National Competitive Grants Program (NCGP) and the Discovery Program to restore and safeguard the role of the ARC in supporting fundamental research.
- Improving the efficiency and fairness of the grant application process by introducing smaller or staged applications, reducing the amount of superfluous information required and introducing expression of interest stages.
- Rather than taking a piecemeal approach to identify "priority issues", the ARC should commit to a Discovery scheme that actively facilitates discovery research, and address all aspects needed to meet this goal.

[Policy review of the National Competitive Grants Program](#)

As the ARC reforms the NCGP, it must consider the critical role of the program in the research sector, and how the program's policies and processes support this. Any changes to the NCGP will materially affect Australia's ability to conduct research.

In its [submission](#) to the review of the *Australian Research Council Act (2001)* (the ARC Act) the Academy recommended that the Australian Government commission an independent science and research system review. Such a review will ensure strategic coherence within the system and ensure that Australia's approach to funding science is fit-for-purpose. The NCGP policy review can support this goal by considering the broader impacts of its policies and clearly articulating the NCGP's place in the research ecosystem.

The policies and processes which underpin the NCGP must support the ARC's role as an enabler of research, and not present unintended barriers to researchers. These barriers include:

- Excessive administrative burden. The requirements for researchers, reviewers and research organisations are disproportionate given the size of the grants and the very low success rates. Reducing administrative burden should be a priority.
- Inequitable access. The above-mentioned administrative burden, as well as other factors, disproportionately impact on researchers with interrupted careers, culturally and linguistically diverse researchers and researchers with non-traditional pathways. In streamlining processes, diversity principles and equity of access must be maintained.
- Poor communication of outcomes. When researchers receive inconsistent or unclear comments from reviewers and assessment panels, they are unable to refine future applications. Delayed and inconsistent announcements also have negative impacts on research planning, recruitment and retention and research operations.

The policy review should also consider the issue of the full costs of research. National Competitive Grants funding does not cover the full direct cost of research, meeting only a proportion of the total costs associated with research. The policy review should consider this issue as important to the effectiveness of ARC competitive funding.

As outlined in the Academy's submission to the review of the ARC Act, the policy review of the NCGP should also consider the following issues:

- Restore the focus of the Linkage program on collaborations between researchers, with separate programs focused on industry engagement and commercialisation run by a different agency
- Reinststate the Learned Academies Special Projects program to support discipline and strategic planning
- Support open access for all publications from ARC grants through policy mechanisms and grant structures
- Mandate compliance with FAIR/CARE principles, publication of metadata or data, strengthening existing policies about the publication and sharing of data resulting from ARC funding
- Enable a continuous and healthy pipeline of researchers
- Identify and address biases and barriers faced by underrepresented groups in the STEM sector using data-driven approaches.

[Specific considerations for the Discovery Program grant process review](#)

The ARC Discovery Grant Program review consultation survey seeks to identify “priority issues” to be addressed. Rather than taking this piecemeal approach, ARC should commit to a Discovery scheme that actively facilitates discovery research, and address all aspects needed to meet this goal.

The Discovery Program and its remit to support fundamental, or ‘blue sky’, research is critical to acquiring new knowledge. Fundamental research supplies the knowledge base to draw upon for applications, innovation and solutions to challenges. ARC should seek to strengthen the objectives and processes of the Discovery Program to restore focus on fundamental research.

To discuss or clarify any aspect of this submission, please contact Mr Chris Anderson, Director Science Policy at Chris.Anderson@science.org.au.