

Submission to the Inquiry into Funding Australia's Research

Dear Committee,

I am a Senior Lecturer at the Australian National University. I submit to this inquiry based on my own opinions, not those of my employer. I think that Australia's research funding system works well in some regards, but is needlessly bureaucratic in others: a lot of time and money could be saved by streamlining the system.

Length of applications: A standard Discovery Project application is at least 100 pages (and may be significantly longer) – a lot of this information is frankly “filler” that contains little useful information. However, this information takes a very long time to write, it then requires a large group of administrators in university research offices to check it has been written in a manner compliant with the rules, and must be read by several expert assessors as well as the College of Expert members. This is particularly wasteful given that 80+% of applications are not funded.

I suggest that applications should be reduced to 10–20 pages total – this would allow for a 4–5 page research proposal, a 2 page CV for each investigator, and a page each to detail the budget and any career interruptions. Publications could be provided by a web-link to a central database such as ORCID (ARC applicants already have profiles on these databases). This would save a huge amount of researcher time, allowing them to focus on conducting research and teaching. It would also potentially reduce the number of administrators required to administer and support the programme.

Base funding: In my field (chemistry), many researchers do not want to apply for a huge amount of money, but need ~\$25–30,000 a year to pay for chemicals and equipment and access to instruments to support PhD students who are funded by other schemes. However, it is felt that Discovery Project applications that request less than \$100,000 a year are not taken seriously by reviewers and so are almost never funded. I suggest that it may be useful to have a two-tier scheme within the Discovery programme, where relatively small amounts of money (*e.g.* up to \$40,000 p/a) can be requested with a short application and high success rate, while more ambitious programmes that want larger sums of money (\$100–300,000 p/a) need a more detailed application and have a lower success rate. Alternatively, the block funding of universities could be altered to ensure that funding is explicitly directed to researchers so that they have enough money to pay for basic equipment and consumables.

Fellowships: The Discovery Early Career Research Award (DECRA) and Future Fellows (FF) schemes are excellent and a real lifeline for early and mid-career researchers. These should definitely be retained. If more funding could be found to increase the very low success rate of the DECRA scheme, that would be great! The vast majority of funded Discovery Projects are still led by senior researchers – if a way could be found to increase the amount of Discovery Projects that go to more junior researchers, this would be very beneficial.

Centre of Excellences: While the Centre of Excellence programme sounds appealing: targeting the very best Australian researchers doing cutting edge science, I am not convinced this is accurate. In effect, I think this scheme rewards small groups of researchers who can tell a compelling story in a massive and very bureaucratic application process. These researchers are then given a huge amount of money to do research that they probably would have done anyway. I suggest the funds from this be re-allocated to Discovery Projects instead. This would simplify ARC procedures and help to increase the very low success rates in the Discovery Project scheme.

Caps for NHMRC and ARC: Currently, a researcher may hold a maximum of two ARC grants to ensure they have time to fully commit to the work. For similar reasons, a researcher may hold a maximum of two NHMRC grants. However, a researcher may hold up to four grants if they apply to both schemes. This seems like a loophole – I recommend the rules be adjusted so that researchers may have a *total* of two grants from either scheme.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to comment,



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