

Review of the Australian Research Council

Terms of Reference

The Australian Research Council (ARC) is a Commonwealth entity within the Australian Government. It was established as an independent body under the *Australian Research Council Act 2001*. The ARC reports to the Australian Government Minister for Education.

The ARC is responsible for administering the National Competitive Grants Program (NCGP), assessing the quality, engagement, and impact of Australian university research, and providing advice and support to the Minister on research matters. Through the NCGP, the role of the ARC is to support excellent research and research training for the benefit of Australians across all disciplines, awarding funding based on a competitive peer review process.

The ARC Act has not been reviewed since it was established in 2001 and does not reflect the range of functions now being undertaken or provide the framework required to support the evolution of the agency. Over this time, several major initiatives have been added to the ARC's responsibilities which are not referenced within current legislation, including the national framework for research ethics and integrity, and the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) and Engagement and Impact (EI) assessments. More recently the ARC has taken on the role of delivery partner for a number of government agencies that utilise its systems and processes to deliver programs.

The March 2022 outcomes of the Senate Inquiry into the private members bill (the Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill) called for a wide-ranging review of ARC governance. The Education and Employment Legislation Committee viewed the legislation as prescriptive, inflexible, and outdated, and noted a high level of old-fashioned administrative and legislative burden that has since been removed in other similar legislation.

Against this backdrop, expectations from the research community have increased and become multi-faceted. Successive governments have wanted to see demonstrable value for research investment and that areas of national significance are adequately funded and reap dividends for society and the economy. At the same time, industry and the broader community has increasingly looked to the research community for answers to complex problems.

In this environment, the Minister for Education will provide a new Letter of Expectations to the CEO of the ARC. The expectations in the letter will address a number of areas not in scope of the Review, including the effective functioning of grant processes, program review and funding.

Objectives of the Review

The aim of the Review is to consider the role and purpose of the ARC within the Australian research system so it can meet current and future needs and maintain the trust of the research sector.

The Review will consider how the ARC's legislation can be aligned with comparable research agencies in Australia and overseas, current and proposed activities, and develop a clear focus on objectives and processes to drive renewed ambition within the organisation.

The Review will also consider whether the scope of the current legislation is sufficient to support an effective and efficient university research system and provide recommendations.

Review Panel members

Professor Margaret Sheil AO (Panel Chair), Vice Chancellor, Queensland University of Technology
Professor Susan Dodds, Senior Deputy-Vice Chancellor (Research & Industry Engagement), La Trobe University
Professor Mark Hutchinson, Director – Centre for Nanoscale BioPhotonics, University of Adelaide

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In a review of the *Australian Research Council Act 2001*, consider:

1. whether the role and purpose of the ARC as set out in the legislation remains relevant, including consideration of the contribution the ARC can make to identifying reforms to its programs to actively shape the research landscape in Australia and better align with comparable research agencies;
2. the ARC governance model and management functions and structures to ensure they are contemporary, fit for purpose, and meet the needs of stakeholders;
3. opportunities to improve the legislation to better facilitate globally competitive research and partnerships, reduce unnecessary administrative and legislative burden and increase agility; and
4. how the legislation could be revised to reflect the breadth of functions of the ARC and its evolution, including the measurement of the impact and excellence of Australian research and advise on contemporary best practice for modernising and leveraging these measures.

Process

The Review will address the Terms of Reference through an analysis of the ARC's current functions and activities, the learnings from administration of the agency and the limitations of the legislation.

The Review should compare the ARC with other similar international bodies and make recommendations on learnings that could be adopted.

The Review will undertake consultation with universities, publicly funded research organisations, peak bodies, researchers, and research end-users and collaborators.

Reporting timeframe

The Review will commence on 5 September 2022. An interim report will be delivered to the Minister for Education by 31 December 2022, with a final report due by 31 March 2023.

Secretariat

The Commonwealth Department of Education will provide secretariat services to the Review Panel, with support from the Australian Research Council.

More information on the ARC Review can be found on the department's website at education.gov.au.