

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY AUSTRALIA

POLICY SUBMISSION

6 NOVEMBER 2023

AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH COUNCIL ACT 2001 PROPOSED AMENDMENTS

Science & Technology Australia is the peak body for the nation's science and technology sectors, representing 139 member organisations and more than 115,000 scientists and technologists.

Science & Technology Australia commends Education Minister Jason Clare and the Australian Government for accepting all recommendations of the Expert Panel in *Trusting Australia's Ability: Review of the Australian Research Council Act 2001*.

We thank the Department of Education for this opportunity to respond to the consultation paper on how these recommendations will be implemented in amendments to the *Australian Research Council Act 2001* (the ARC Act).

It will also be essential for the sector to see the proposed wording of the amendments as the new legislation is drafted, and **we strongly urge the Department to issue an exposure draft of the proposed amendments with appropriate time for the sector to provide feedback.**

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY AUSTRALIA RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Department of Education should release all proposed amendments in an exposure draft.
2. Amendments to the Australian Research Council Act 2001 must enshrine dedicated funding to support Australia's discovery research capability – through legislating a minimum of 70% of NCGP funding be allocated to the Discovery Program.
3. Amendments to the ARC Act to establish an ARC Board, which will be supported by an ongoing ARC Advisory Committee, must clearly delineate the roles and purposes of both the Board and the Advisory Committee.
4. Members of the proposed ARC Board must be appointed for skills and expertise, as well as ensuing the Board and Advisory Committee reflect the research sector's full diversity.
5. The amended ARC Act should require successful grant applicants be notified under embargo within 21 days of Board approval.

ENSHRINING A CLEAR PURPOSE FOR THE AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH COUNCIL

Science & Technology Australia supports enshrining a clear purpose for the ARC in the ARC Act that reflects the ARC's roles and responsibilities to support Australian research.

The proposed amendment to include in the Objects of the ARC Act that the ARC is to 'administer funding of excellent pure basic, strategic basic and applied research' is critical to fulfil this recommendation.

Safeguarding funding for discovery research – the knowledge-creating research that underpins all future applied research and innovation – must be enshrined in the amendments to the ARC Act.

Science & Technology Australia recommends amendments to the ARC Act include a minimum component of NCGP funding be allocated to discovery (pure basic and strategic basic) research – through a minimum 70:30 split between the Discovery and Linkage Programs. This would be a strong measure to safeguard Australia’s crucial discovery research capabilities.

The consistently low success rates for Discovery schemes, indicative of extremely strong demand, means this shift is compelling and urgent. The long-term nature of Linkage funding allocations would require this to be staged over a 3-year period.

ESTABLISHING AN AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH COUNCIL BOARD

Science & Technology Australia supports establishing an ARC Board to strengthen independence and enhance governance. The Board should include governance skills and expertise covering the breadth of the research sector.

The proposal to also maintain the Advisory Committee to support the Board is sensible. Further detail on how the Advisory Committee will be structured and operate in the future is needed to ensure a clear delineation of the Board’s and the Advisory Committee’s roles. This will be essential to ensure clarity of governance and avoid duplication of expertise.

Both the Board and the Advisory Committee must also reflect the research sector’s full diversity – deliberate protocols to ensure gender equity and representation from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as well as other underrepresented groups should be developed for appointing members. Disciplinary background and geographical diversity are also important considerations.

CEO APPOINTMENT AND ROLE

Science & Technology Australia supports the proposed amendment to devolve the ARC CEO appointment process to the Board, in consultation with the Minister.

APPROVAL OF FUNDING RULES

Science & Technology Australia supports the proposal for the ARC Board to give the Minister advice on funding rules (grant guidelines), and for these to be disallowable legislative instruments. This is a sensible move that provides appropriate scrutiny of funding arrangements.

APPROVAL OF GRANTS

Science & Technology Australia strongly supports the proposal for funding decisions on individual grants within the NCGP to be approved by the Board.

Given this process will enable greater agility in the grant approval and announcement process, Science & Technology Australia recommends that the Act be amended to legislate that successful applicants be notified under embargo within 21 days of Board approval.

Retaining Ministerial approval of large grants for ARC Centres of Excellence, Industrial Transformation Training Centres and Industrial Transformation Research Hubs is reasonable, given these investments’ scale and strategic nature.



FUNDING ARRANGEMENTS

The proposal to change the Special Appropriations arrangements – which currently require an amendment to the ARC Act to be passed every year to allow for indexation on appropriation amounts – to allocating funds that include indexation to the ARC in the annual Budget appropriations is sensible and will reduce legislative burden.

This proposed change would also remove from the ARC Act the requirement for the Minister for Education to ‘split funding between different categories of research programs’.

Removing this requirement will allow greater flexibility in administering funding within the NCGP. However, **it is critical that amendments to the ARC Act include measures to safeguard funding for discovery research**. The proposed removal of the requirement for funding to be split between the Discovery and Linkage programs without ensuring adequate provision to protect discovery research funding runs the risk of undermining Australia’s capability to perform this essential work.

Science & Technology Australia recommends the amendment explicitly legislates that the ARC Endowment Fund is to be used to support pure basic, strategic basic and applied research, with a minimum proportion of 70% dedicated to the pure basic and strategic basic research funded through the Discovery Program.



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