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Submission to the Inquiry into Funding Australia's Research from the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE)

A submission to the House Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Training inquiry into the efficiency, effectiveness and coherency of Australian Government funding for research.

The Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) has been a national professional organisation of educational researchers in Australia since 1970. Our members include researchers from Australian universities; local, state and federal government departments; schools, early childhood education contexts, colleges and training organisations; organisations with an interest in education; and private research agencies. AARE works to advance scholarly inquiry into education; support the quality of education research; and promote and advocate for the positive impact of educational research on policy and practice in education and associated areas to enhance the public good. A core activity of the Association is to advocate for enhanced funding for educational research.

Educational research is focused on social benefit for all, and as such has significant national benefit and impact. Educational research is diverse and broadly focused. It works to improve understandings toward practical application; discovery and innovation; linkages, partnerships and translation to policy and practice; as well as formulation of new models and theories. All dimensions of the educational research enterprise require ongoing, investment if long-term national benefits are to be achieved. The appeal of supposed savings and improvements in efficiency must be balanced against inefficiencies that result from inadequate funding of research in Australia on a national scale.

AARE would like to make the following submission to the Inquiry into Funding Australia's Research. We have organised the submission on the basis of the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry.

- 1. The diversity, fragmentation and efficiency of research investment across the Australian Government, including the range of programs, guidelines and methods of assessment of grants;**

AARE strongly asserts that Australian research must be funded in a way that ensures there is equitable access to funding opportunities for all disciplines and fields of research. Any changes made to achieve efficiency gains must be balanced by strategies to improve access to funding for quality, significant research in the humanities and social sciences

disciplines. This is vital for the future of Australian society and our research standing on an international scale.

To ensure that our best, most significant research is funded and supported, it is crucial for there to be an appropriate balance of funding for discovery and applied research, as the impact of latter is dependent on the quality of the former. It is also important to retain programs that support specific underrepresented groups. AARE asserts that:

- *It is essential to maintain and adequately fund both blue-sky Discovery and applied Linkage grants in order for Australian research to be innovative and forward thinking, and also to inform policy and practice.*
- *The commitment to research funding in Australia must be increased, and schemes must ensure that funds are assigned to research in all disciplines, including equitable funding access for educational research.*
- *Programs that target specific underrepresented groups (e.g. Discovery Indigenous) must continue to be supported. So too must equity schemes that address current inequities in outcomes. The Kathleen Fitzpatrick and Georgina Sweet Fellowships within the Laureate Program are examples, but much more needs to be done to achieve parity.*
- *Australia's continued standing in international research depends upon funding schemes that enable effective succession planning and capability planning, and ensure pathways that encourage and support ECR and mid-career researchers (e.g. DECRA and Future Fellowship programs).*

2. The process and administrative role undertaken by research institutions, in particular universities, in developing and managing applications for research funding;

AARE recognises that there has been significant improvement in research management infrastructure in many Australian universities, with considerable review and refinement across all levels within those universities. However, there remains variation in the scope and quality of these improvements across universities.

Compliance and reporting costs can be burdensome and take away time and resources more appropriately spent on doing research. Urgent action is required to address the enormous compliance costs necessary to be successful in research funding. This is money spent on accounting and administration rather than research. The widening gap between funding provided and the direct and indirect costs required to conduct research adds to the complexities in this regard. The current situation continues to support inequities in opportunities for different universities and the researchers who work within them.

Recent policy shifts in research evaluation exercises (e.g. ERA) have led to an escalation of compliance costs for universities. This has obvious

implications for all universities, however it has particular financial consequence and imposes for equity of research funding in smaller and regional universities. The addition of ERA and EI exercises into a context where HERDC remains has increased compliance investment and complexity, and yet the impact of such exercises on the quality of research is yet to be demonstrated.

Any review of research evaluations should consider the resource intensive nature of processes such as ERA, in the context of understanding that the national and international rankings and comparisons that such processes provide are now available more efficiently through other means and metrics. AARE suggests that:

- *The impact of research compliance, and its consequences for research funding success for universities and researchers be considered in any inquiry into research funding.*
- *The impact of research quality evaluations on research funding be considered in any inquiry into research funding.*
- *The impact of inadequate funding of research should be considered as part of drives to improve efficiency in research funding schemes.*

3. The effectiveness and efficiency of operating a dual funding system for university research, namely competitive grants and performance-based block grants to cover systemic costs of research;

The current dual funding system tends to favour particular universities and particular disciplines. However, in order to maintain practices that allow and require universities to build capacity of early career researchers and promote ongoing development of research capacity some form of university infrastructure funding is required (as in the current block grant scheme). AARE suggests that:

- *Increased research funding and streamlining of processes is required in order to achieve an equitable approach across universities and disciplines in both infrastructure funding and research funding.*

A well-designed, consistent approach to how funds are distributed at the university level could potentially address some inequities in the current system. To further address this there could be – in addition to current university block grant allocations – the possibility of attaching some infrastructure funding to grant applications.

In terms of management and evaluation of grant applications, AARE strongly upholds the value of the current peer review system. It stands opposed to any moves to mandate universities to take a larger role in any formal, internal culling process. This would not only add further burdens onto universities, as such a process is resource intensive, it also works against the vital work of universities in the development of research capacity. AARE asserts that:

- *Universities must not be expected to be more responsible for rejecting applications. Universities must see their responsibility as building capacity and improving research.*

4. Opportunities to maximise the impact of funding by ensuring optimal simplicity and efficiency for researchers and research institutions while prioritising delivery of national priorities and public benefit.

The importance of defining national priorities is recognised; however their current scope foregrounds immediate benefits and applications, often signalling innovation as it can be understood from a scientific frame. To address this there are two important considerations. First, national priorities should be expanded to more comprehensively take account of social and education innovation. Second, a robust national research ecosystem depends on investment in a comprehensive range of research endeavours; national priorities cannot be funded to the detriment of investigator driven research. AARE suggests that:

- *Priority areas should be broadened to include a more diverse and wider range of translational outcomes and benefits.*
- *Addressing national priorities does not become the sole organising structure for submissions.*

It is critical that any adjustments made to processes in an attempt to increase efficiency in the award processes do not adversely impact on the integrity of the peer review process. Peer review is a vital part of ensuring quality of research. This has particular implications for the social sciences and humanities. AARE suggests that:

- *There is a critical need with regard to quality and equity to maintain the integrity of the peer review process.*

Streamlining of proposal requirements should be a priority, and any duplication addressed. This must be conducted in consultation with researchers, and with implications for facilitating international collaborations foregrounded. ROPE structures must continue to enable career interruptions to be recognised, and this should not be removed in the name of efficiency. This has particular implications for researchers in disciplines like education who are far more likely to come to academic careers after long and successful careers as teachers and educators, education leaders, and policy workers. The importance of updating forms and processes is recognised. However small, regular changes to online forms and application requirements create unnecessary administration work for universities and researchers. AARE suggests that:

- *A systematic review of forms and application requirements be conducted at set times, rather than continuous adjustments being made. This would allow universities and researchers some surety about requirements and formats of application processes.*