

# AARE Submission to Discussion Paper: A New Plan for ARC Funded Research

The Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program Discussion Paper.

AARE is the premier professional association for educational researchers in Australia. Established in 1970, the Association has provided support for successive generations of educational researchers from Australian universities, governments, schools, and private research agencies. Its objectives centre on advancing scholarly inquiry in education, enhancing quality in educational research, and seeking to promote the effective and positive impact of educational research on policy and practice in education and associated areas of society. We forge connections with all those concerned about education research and its translation and have long-established links with similar organisations internationally. We have a strong record of providing support and capacity building to education researchers from a wide range of areas, organisations, and disciplinary specialisations, holding an annual conference, and a full calendar of seminars, workshops and cross-sector forums.

The following comments and recommendations reflect the concerns and remit of AARE as a national member-driven association for educational researchers.

## **Strengths**

Overall, we strongly support the commitments to improving and streamlining the processes for grant application and assessment and to strengthening the suite of schemes available to researchers at different career stages.

We welcome the refinement of schemes designed to advance the breadth of Indigenous research and build the Indigenous research workforce.

We note the important shift proposed in the Discussion Paper by tackling unhelpful oppositions between applied and discovery research. This is especially relevant to education research where research studies and programs are often positioned along a continuum from discovery to applied that is, to research with social benefits or educational impact. However, it is imperative that new schemes are designed such that they also fully enable discovery and bold blue-sky research to flourish in ways that do not always harness it to short-term translational imperatives or immediate social impact. This is a hallmark of some of the most prestigious schemes internationally, such as those from the European Research Council where priority is accorded to the

development of new knowledge, and to ambitious, risk-taking agendas. The Discussion Paper's recognition of the value of 'early-stage' and exploratory research is important in this regard.

### **Specific issues to be addressed**

#### ***Appropriateness of the National Competitive Grants Program to Education***

As acknowledged, the ARC is the primary source of competitive research funding for many research fields and most notably for the HASS disciplines. More specifically, while Education has high potential for professional and social impact, and is crucial to future national prosperity, it remains under-resourced relative to other fields.

#### **Recommendations:**

1. The design and resourcing of new schemes are appropriate for the HASS disciplines and enable them to grow and flourish
2. The funding pool is distributed in ways that do not disadvantage HASS disciplines
3. Diverse academic track records are recognised, especially for areas such as education where professional and practitioner experience is relevant.

#### ***The Role of National Priorities***

The identification of National Priorities must be inclusive of the full range of disciplines and research fields. Education is one of largest areas of government spending and is critical for Australia's economic success, intellectual capacity and social cohesion, in addition to being a major export industry. Yet education is not a National Priority. Nor does educational research align easily with existing priorities.

#### **Recommendation:**

4. The funding of research that falls outside specified National Priorities be retained and strengthened as this underpins a robust research ecosystem that supports and protects the breadth and diversity of research.

#### ***Distribution and structure of grant schemes***

The number of Breakthrough grants relative to Initiate grants is too small. The current plan risks diminishing the benefits anticipated to follow from early-stage research. Support for early-stage research and for early career researchers is vital. However, the schemes as outlined – and the proposed number of awards in each category – provide only modest support for mid-career researchers despite the mid-career workforce being crucial to sustain and build research into the future. Further, and crucially, there are likely to be negative impacts based on gender and for those who follow non-linear academic pathways. For many academics – and notably in the field of education and other professional fields – academic careers follow a different tempo. For women and those with caring responsibilities, the early career stage may not be the optimal time.

A two-year timeline for projects is likely too short to allow for the completion of certain types of research. For example, the application process is lengthy for human research ethics and especially for approval from Departments of Education/other sectors to conduct research in schools. Two years may also be too short to demonstrate the kinds of benefits required by the application.

Recommendations:

5. Provide additional opportunities at different career stages. An increase in the number of breakthrough grants could assist in this regard.
6. Allow greater flexibility in grant timelines.

***Recognition of field variation of partner resources and partnership models***

As proposed, the Collaborate grants are not realistically available to the field of education, given the high threshold for partner contributions. The risk of this approach is that a major field is excluded from a major funding stream. Proposed schemes may inadvertently serve to further entrench funding asymmetries across disciplines and disadvantage the HASS field. Given the documented benefits of collaborative initiatives, these schemes need to be designed to be more inclusive of the full range of research fields.

In education, partnerships are extremely important and additional incentives and structures are needed to strengthen partnerships with diverse stakeholders and with education systems in particular. In many cases, these partners are not able to provide the substantial cash contributions available to other fields of research.

Recommendation:

7. Collaborate grants and partnership contributions should be scaled more realistically to facilitate the participation of HASS researchers.

AARE is grateful for the opportunity to respond to this Discussion Paper on the new plan for ARC funded research and looks forward to participating in a fair and fortified system of grants inclusive of all disciplines.