

14/04/2025

National Competitive Grants Program (NCGP) Panel
Australian Research Council
Emailed to ARC-PolicyReview@arc.gov.au

Dear NCGP Review Panel,

ACOLA's response to the Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program (NCGP)

The [Australian Council of Learned Academies \(ACOLA\)](#) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Australian Research Council (ARC) Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program (NCGP).

ACOLA is the forum whereby Australia's Learned Academies¹ come together to contribute expert advice to inform national policy and to develop innovative solutions to complex global problems and emerging national needs. Through the Learned Academies, ACOLA has access to more than 3,200 of Australia's greatest minds to bring together multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary critical thinking and evidence to inform robust policy decisions.

Complex science-based problems that are being considered in Australia's national economic, social and security interests (including through alignment with the National Science and Research Priorities) cannot be addressed in isolation nor by a single discipline; they need multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research expertise including from beyond our shores, as global and regional issues will have domestic impact.

ACOLA encourages the ARC, as the largest grant funder² in Australia, to consider contemporary national and international collaboration funding models that enable maximum engagement for interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary science from across all research levels and at various career stages, that contribute to broaden and deepen Australia's research capability. There is an opportunity for the ARC to explicitly explore partnership funding mechanisms to identify emerging research problems and attain a global perspective on future domestic challenges. ACOLA acknowledges that these models are not without risk nor complexity, however the resulting net impact and return on investment to Australia's research sector and economy could be significant. This framework has been demonstrated by funding agencies across several countries including Japan, United States, United Kingdom and the European Union.

- The United States' [National Science Foundation](#) (NSF)³ forges international cooperation for interdisciplinary use-inspired research to address global issues, such as through [Partnerships for International Research and Education \(PIRE\)](#) which involves over 13 international funding agencies including the World Health Organisation; the [Global Centers \(GC\)](#); and the [Quad AI-ENGAGE Collaborative Research Opportunity](#) that provides multilateral research opportunities in AI and robotics for agriculture.

¹ Australian Academy of Science, Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, Australian Academy of the Humanities, Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering, and Australian Academy of Health and Medical Sciences.

² Largest funder not relating to health and medical research

³ The NSF is the primary US federal agency for promoting scientific research and education.

- The [UK Research and Innovation](#)⁴, and UK Research Office which encourages work with various EU-funded projects including through the [Horizon Europe program](#), one of the world's largest research and innovation programs that proactively look to address global challenges with multidisciplinary international research teams and closely aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals⁵.

ACOLA urges the ARC to consider models that bring together research funding agencies to provide diverse perspectives and build Australian research capability and global competitiveness for greater domestic impact. While developed some years ago, ACOLA's ARC-funded study, [Making Interdisciplinary Research Work – Achieving a Sustainable Australia](#), provides a comprehensive framework for assessing interdisciplinary research. The framework addresses critical questions such as:

1. *Interdisciplinary research for what and for whom, in other words what is the interdisciplinary research aiming to achieve.*
2. *What is being 'combined': which disciplines? which practitioner knowledge? which end-user perspectives? different epistemologies, languages, cultures?*
3. *The context in which the interdisciplinary research is occurring, ranging from political and other drivers for action to the scale at which the interdisciplinary research is planned.*
4. *By whom, in other words what is the decision-making process in the interdisciplinary research.*
5. *How is the interdisciplinary research being undertaken, including the theoretical underpinning, the starting point, the methods used, transparency and accountability.*
6. *The impact of the interdisciplinary research, in other words did it achieve its aims and were there other positive and negative outcomes.*

ACOLA's study identified a lack of accepted methodologies for undertaking different types of interdisciplinary investigations, and in turn, there is no systemic method of reporting or evaluating this. The report discusses the debate over current assessment mechanisms, such as the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative or the ARC's grant schemes. With the debate of interdisciplinary research continuing, and evidence largely anecdotal, ACOLA's study offers a foundational approach that the ARC can build upon for the NCGP Policy Review.

ACOLA has extensive experience in interdisciplinary research and collaboration, including convening interdisciplinary panels and peer review processes, such as through the ARC-supported Securing Australia's Future Program and the Horizon Scanning Series. The series drew on the deep expertise from Australia's Learned Academies to navigate change and highlight opportunities for the nation, and exemplifies how findings from ARC-funded work can support decision-making processes and assist government, policy makers, industry stakeholders and the community to assess the impacts of imminent scientific and technological change.

⁴ The UKRI is the largest investor of taxpayers' money in research and innovation.

⁵ There are 17 [SDGs](#) that provide a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet.

We encourage the Panel to read the Learned Academies' responses to the NCGP Policy Review, which contain several recommendations on ensuring the NCGP is an innovative, responsive and world-leading program:

- [Australian Academy of Science](#)
- [Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering](#)
- [Australian Academy of Humanities](#)
- [Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia](#)
- [Australian Academy of Health and Medical Sciences](#)

ACOLA would be pleased further to discuss our interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research and assessment approaches.

Yours sincerely,



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CEO, Australian Council of Learned Academies