



Submission to The Administration of Government Grants: Inquiry into Auditor-General's Reports 5 and 12 (2019-20)

Context: Our Organisation

The International Australian Studies Association (InASA) was founded in 1995 as a multi-disciplinary body for academics, teachers and all others with intellectual, pedagogic and scholarly interests in Australian issues. InASA provides a professional network for Australian studies centres and cognate academic associations internationally. Beyond the academic sector, it promotes initiatives that will encourage the visibility of Australian Studies in educational and cultural settings. As of December 2019, InASA had over 175 members from around the world within Humanities, Creative Arts and Social Science fields including history, cultural studies, cinema studies, literary studies, creative writing and political science.

In addition to circulating regular announcements about conferences, new publications, exhibitions and other items of interest, InASA publishes the quarterly *Journal of Australian Studies*; is affiliated with the major book series, 'Australian Studies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives', by the publisher Peter Lang Ltd.; hosts a biennial conference; offers a series of publication prizes, HDR bursaries and Early Career Researcher (ECR) publication subsidy grants; works with the Australia-Japan Foundation to facilitate the search and selection of the University of Tokyo Visiting Chair in Australian Studies; works with regional organisations including the Chinese Association for Australian Studies in China and European Association for the Study of Australia to organise special panel sessions at the respective association conferences and to undertake joint-publication projects; provides academic advice to the Foundation for Australian Studies in China and assesses the applications for the Foundation's Australian Studies Program funding.

As the professional body representing Australian Studies as a multidisciplinary field of research nationally and internationally, InASA offers the following submission to the parliamentary inquiry examining the administration of government grants. **Our submission relates to 'Auditor-General Report No. 5 (2019-20) Australian Research Council's Administration of the National Competitive Grants Program' and focuses especially on the report's ramifications for Australian Humanities, Social Sciences and Creative Arts scholars.**

The inquiry terms of reference invite comment on 'any items or matters in those reports, or any circumstances connected with them.' As such, we have shaped this submission around key matters relating to the administration, rules and scope of the Australian Research Council (ARC) grants schemes.

1. POSITIVE POINTS RE: ADMINISTRATION OF ARC GRANTS

InASA first wishes to acknowledge the hard work performed by staff at the ARC and appreciates various aspects of how they have administered the grant schemes within the set rules. The ARC does an excellent job managing conflicts of interest, and the appointments to the College of Experts have been scholars well recognised in their fields for research excellence. In the Humanities, Social Sciences and Creative Arts, we also see a conscious effort to ensure gender balance among members of the College of Experts (InASA is not qualified to comment on other fields).

We also note that the ARC has made significant efforts to reach out to academics and be transparent about the administration process of its grants. Workshops facilitated by the ARC at various universities and other public forums have done a great job explaining the step-by-step process in how assessors, the College of Experts, and the ARC together work to evaluate the grants. **We recommend that more workshops should be run across Australian universities more often and in other forums (e.g. at conferences such as InASA's biennial conference or associations like the Australian Historical Association and Association for the Study of Australian Literature).**



2. MINISTERIAL VETO

Recommendation: that the *Australian Research Council Act 2001* be amended to remove the right of the ministerial veto

Although the ARC meticulously follows its own rules, there is scope for improvement in these rules and the legislation governing them. First and foremost is the problem of the ministerial veto. It has been well publicised that in 2017, then-Minister for Education Simon Birmingham exercised his right as minister to veto eleven ARC grants (six Discovery, three Early Career Researcher Awards and two Future Fellowships), all in the Humanities, Social Sciences and Creative Arts. None of the investigators on these grants was made aware that their grant had actually passed all of the scholarly hurdles of assessment and it was merely the minister who did not approve of some aspect of their project.

When news of the ministerial veto broke in October 2018, the researchers tied to the eleven vetoed grants were devastated. Academics and associations across Australia, including the learned academies, all expressed outrage at the political interference. It was clear that the minister was applying political values which did not reflect the rules of the ARC grant eligibility or assessment criteria. The veto contradicts the principle of academic freedom (both for the researchers involved and for the ARC College of Experts), which derives from the long tradition of Western civilisation. The ministerial veto has only happened once before in Australia, in 2005, and was also applied to Humanities, Social Sciences and Creative Arts grants.

The ministerial vetoes damaged Australia's international reputation in the research and higher education sector. It also meant the loss of highly trained experts to overseas institutions (e.g. at least one of the vetoed project investigators moved to Europe). No comparable international grants body (e.g. Social Science and Humanities Research Council in Canada; European Research Council; New Zealand Marsden Fund; UK Arts and Humanities Research Council) has ever had grants vetoed by a minister.

As an important sidenote – in the 2018 application round, four of the grants which had been vetoed were successful and in the 2019 application round at least five were successful. While they may have changed the language and updated the grant proposals, the substance of the projects was no different. This, in itself, is proof that the 2018 vetoes were unnecessary and about politics rather than effective administration of the ARC grants scheme. This political decision, while not unprecedented, eroded trust in the ARC process both within Australia and internationally by bringing the impartiality of the grant scheme into doubt (see <https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/abr-online/archive/2018/233-december-2018-no-407/5217-the-arc-controversy>).

The new Minister for Education, Dan Tehan, made two important reforms to the ARC grants process: 1. An undertaking to notify researchers when their grants were denied due to ministerial veto, and 2. The introduction of 'national interest' as part of the assessment criteria. Even these reforms are problematic, though, because the minister still wields the power to veto grants, rather than to accept the assessment of the College of Experts. As such, we at InASA hold the view that it is vital that the ministerial veto be repealed. Repealing the ministerial veto will ensure trust and confidence is restored, nurtured and maintained between researchers, their institutions, and the ARC, while also enhancing the transparency, impartiality and international respectability that the grant scheme was known for prior to the 2018 revelations about the ministerial vetoes. **In advocating for the ministerial veto to be repealed, we recommend that concerted effort to rebuild relationships of trust between researchers, the ARC, and government should be a key priority in the future planning of the ARC grant scheme, particularly if research projects in Humanities, Social Sciences and Creative Arts are to be delivered effectively.**



3. RESEARCH PRIORITIES

Recommendation: amend the ‘Science and Research Priorities’ back to the title ‘Strategic Research Priorities’ and include priorities relating to the Humanities, Social Sciences and Creative Arts

Until 2015, the predecessor departments to the present Department of Industry, Innovation and Research published a set of ‘Strategic Research Priorities’. In the ARC application process, it is beneficial to align an application to one of the research priorities because those grants have higher success rates. Until 2015 there was always a research priority around ‘Securing Australia’s place in a changing world,’ with strategic goals that could align well with Humanities, Creative Arts and Social Sciences scholarship. In 2016, the ‘Strategic Research Priorities’ were renamed the ‘Science and Research Priorities’ and, as the name suggests, all of them are centred around the sciences. This is extremely disadvantageous to scholars in the Humanities, Social Sciences and Creative Arts. Moreover, it expresses an explicit devaluing of their research, even though creative industries, social research and other fields like education make up significant portions of the Australian economy. Indeed, the Australian Academy for the Humanities is currently undertaking a three-year project titled ‘Future Humanities Workforce’ and preliminary work has highlighted the importance of humanities research experience for Australia’s jobs and economy (see <https://www.humanities.org.au/advice/projects/future-workforce/>). In addition, the Australian Academy of the Humanities noted in a media release last year the need to abandon ‘the siloed approach’ to Australia’s research culture by better integrating STEM and HASS research, while also ‘returning \$4.2M stripped from ARC research funding to the humanities’ (see <https://www.humanities.org.au/2019/05/01/our-8-point-plan-to-humanise-the-future/>).

We were pleased to see Minister Tehan’s 27 January 2020 announcement about a Special Research Initiative of \$12 million in research funding for approximately forty projects. We hope that this will not be at the expense of other Humanities, Creative Arts and Social Sciences projects normally funded through the ARC. It is also vital that this Special Research Initiative not be a one-off, and that the Strategic Research Priorities are updated to ensure the viability of such research projects into the future.

Comparable funding bodies internationally all have strategic research aims or programs which align with the Humanities, Social Sciences and Creative Arts. For instance the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council has five funding focus themes: Open World Research Initiative, Care for the Future: Thinking Forward through the Past, Digital Transformations in the Arts and Humanities, Science in Culture and Translating Cultures (<https://ahrc.ukri.org/research/fundedthemesandprogrammes/themes/>).

The Humanities, Creative Arts and Social Sciences not only enhances the cultural competencies of the nation; they provide foundational skills of a competent and agile workforce. Workplaces value problem solving, adaptability and creativity, critical thinking, ethical judgement and the ability to appreciate multiple points of view as crucial skillsets. **If Australia wants to take itself seriously as a nation of innovators, that includes adequately supporting strategic research in the Humanities, Social Sciences and Creative Arts, then the Department of Industry, Innovation and Research should set priorities for the ARC that reflect this aim.**

4. GRANT ANNOUNCEMENT DATES

Recommendation: that when grant applications open, the ARC announce a fixed date when all successful grants in that scheme will be announced publicly

Traditionally, the ARC process begins with a call for applicants and a timeline advising deadlines and rough periods estimating when the grants will be announced. While there have always been times when the ARC has had to adjust its calendar for grants announcements, in 2019 this was particularly problematic. Instead of



posting all successful grants on the Research Management System (RMS) page at the same time, the Minister for Education and/or parliamentary members made staggered announcements about individual grants over several weeks. In some grant schemes it was weeks between the first media release and the final public announcement of all successful grants. For the Future Fellowships and Laureate Fellowships, it was nearly a month. This suggests that some political advantage was sought in this process. It is worth noting that no Humanities, Creative Arts or Social Sciences grants were announced in advance, implying a devaluing of the innovative, cutting-edge research Australian scholars are conducting in these fields. The second process issue relates to the inconsistent application of the embargo on publicising grant outcomes. The ARC has always notified university research offices in advance about grant outcomes so that they could prepare press releases, but with strict instructions that the outcomes were embargoed. Until 2019 the time lag between university notification and public announcement was usually a matter of days. The new announcement process delayed the publication of all grant outcomes. The ARC, to its credit, authorised universities to advise applicants of their grant outcomes but with strict instructions not to publicise. This, too, was problematic, as researchers within and across universities were subjected to inconsistent practices; some research offices informed applicants, while others did not.

ARC applicants spend months putting together research grants then must await the outcomes for months. The wait makes it difficult for forward planning for the individual researchers as well as for university departments and research offices. Given the College of Experts makes its decision in a timely manner, there is no reason that the outcomes should not be released almost immediately. InASA therefore recommends that the *Australian Research Council Act 2001* be amended to require the ARC and Minister to determine a fixed date annually for the release of all successful outcomes.

5. RESEARCH FUNDING

Recommendation: Increase the funding pool available for ARC grants and more equitably distribute funding to Humanities, Social Sciences and Creative Arts

The ARC is the only source of Humanities, Social Sciences and Creative Arts research funding on the Australian Competitive Grants Register. While the success rate among Humanities and Creative Arts project applications is similar to other fields, the *proportion of funding* for these areas of research is consistently low, as evidenced in the most recent round of ARC Discovery outcomes:

Funding Scheme	# of HCA projects approved	% of total approved projects	\$\$ of approved HCA projects	% of total approved funds
Discovery 2020	70	10.6%	\$23,356,618	8.2%
DECRA 2020	29	14.5%	\$11,732,812	14.3%
Discovery Indigenous 2020	4	57.1%	\$2,924,186	62.3%

In Canada, over the past five years the government has significantly boosted funding to the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). The 2018 Canadian budget gave the SSHRC the biggest single funding boost in the organisation's history (<https://www.canada.ca/en/social-sciences-humanities-research/news/2019/07/government-of-canada-invests-in-more-than-6900-social-sciences-and-humanities-researchers-and-graduate-students-across-canada.html>). These funding increases had flow-on effects: there are higher success rates for SSHRC grants, which now are on a par with the success rates of the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

While research in the Humanities, Social Sciences and Creative Arts is generally less expensive than scientific and medical research, still there is scope for more projects in these fields to be funded if there is an



increase in funding to the ARC and allocations are divided more fairly across the different College of Experts panels. Australia should adopt a similar approach as Canada and boost funding so that Humanities, Social Sciences and Creative Arts projects are a larger proportion of successful grants.

6. GRANT SCHEME RULES

Recommendation: Amend the rules for the DECRA Awards to oblige universities to offer an ongoing position to any successful DECRA recipient.

The guidelines for the ARC Discovery Early Career Research Award (DECRA) program indicate that the scheme's objectives are to:

- a. support excellent basic and applied research by early career researchers;
- b. support national and international research collaboration;
- c. enhance the scale and focus of research in Australian Government priority areas;
- d. advance promising early career researchers and promote enhanced opportunities for diverse career pathways; and
- e. enable research and research training in high quality and supportive environments.

DECRA grants are highly competitive with a success rate of 16% in the most recent 2020 round. The recipients are fully funded with a salary and research costs for three years. As the objectives suggest, the idea is to attract and reward promising ECRs. However, many DECRA recipients face uncertainty about their careers after completion of the grants. Many must spend the final year going through job application processes with no certainty as to the outcomes. While a DECRA grant is prestigious and recipients are competitive, not all DECRA recipients have a continuing job when their project finishes.

Recipients of ARC Future Fellowships – which fund salary and research costs for mid-career researchers – used to face similar challenges. There were cases of Future Fellows being unemployed upon completion of their grants, which contradicted the aims of the scheme. Commencing in 2014, though, the ARC Future Fellowship rules were updated: universities were now obliged to offer a continuing position to any successful Future Fellowship recipient. This was a welcome change, and **we recommend that the ARC extend the same logic to DECRA recipients to oblige universities to offer continuing positions to any successful DECRA applicant.**

7. NEW GRANT SCHEMES

Recommendation: that the ARC design a new, small grant scheme to support ECRs in the Humanities, Social Sciences and Creative Arts

Recommendation: that the ARC examine other opportunities for small grant schemes, looking to equivalent bodies like Canada's SSHRC, New Zealand's Marsden Fund or the European Research Council for examples

As reflected in the above figures, research in the Humanities, Social Sciences and Creative Arts is less expensive than research in the sciences, engineering and health. Conducting research in many Humanities and Social Sciences fields represented by InASA is also becoming even more cost-effective due to the digital revolution. For instance, historians can access many archival materials online, or when they visit archives they can use apps to scan documents rapidly rather than spend weeks working with the documents at the archives. This does not mean that scholars in Humanities, Social Sciences and Creative Arts can conduct their research without funding; rather, it is to say that there are opportunities for scholars in these fields to design projects which are more cost-effective, if given the right rules and assessment criteria.



Until 2001, the ARC ran a Small Grants Scheme (websites with the guidelines are archived on the National Library of Australia's Pandora Web Archive). After the ARC disbanded this scheme, some universities subsequently allocated funds for internal small grants to help build grant writing skills and track records, especially for ECRs. This is by no means consistent across the sector, with some universities offering no internal funding schemes at all. This inconsistency likely entrenches the disadvantage between Go8 and non-Go8 and regional universities. While InASA is not privy to why the ARC terminated this scheme, we agree with a 2010 recommendation from the House Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation that the value of small grant schemes be investigated with a view to reinstating this important funding.

We also encourage the ARC to consider other new grant schemes which would be accessible for Humanities, Social Sciences and Creative Arts researchers. For instance, when the Canadian government provided additional funding to SSHRC, they set up a new grant scheme called Insight Development Grants. Valued at between \$7,000 to \$75,000, they are described as follows: 'Insight Development Grants support research in its initial stages. The grants enable the development of new research questions, as well as experimentation with new methods, theoretical approaches and/or ideas. Funding is provided for short-term research development projects of up to two years that are proposed by individuals or teams' (https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/programs-programmes/insight_development_grants-subventions_de_developpement_savoir-eng.aspx).

We recommend that the adoption of similar seed grant schemes in Australia would contribute substantially to the nation's innovation agenda and provide cultural, economic, social and environmental benefits to Australia. It would also provide ECRs with access to small research grant funding, with potentially large returns to the nation and to scholarship.