

Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program submission

11 April 2025

Key takeaways:

1. ATN Universities commends the Australian Research Council for addressing key structural challenges, including streamlining processes, increasing support for early-career researchers, and strengthening Indigenous research engagement.
2. The ARC can foster a more inclusive and impact-focused research system by embedding broader impact metrics, enabling flexible co-funding requirements with industry partners, and supporting sustainable careers across the research lifecycle.
3. The NCGP should be integrated with the broader R&D funding ecosystem to ensure its relevance in a rapidly evolving policy landscape.

The Australian Technology Network of Universities (**ATN Universities**) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program (**NCGP**) Discussion Paper.

ATN Universities commends the Australian Research Council for addressing key structural challenges, including streamlining processes, increasing support for early-career researchers, and strengthening Indigenous research engagement

As a network of universities committed to applied research and industry collaboration, we support reforms that improve accessibility, equity, and impact in research funding. We commend the Australian Research Council (**ARC**) for conducting a thorough review of the NCGP. The proposed changes address key concerns raised in ATN Universities' previous submission, particularly eliminating the artificial divide between basic and applied research in NCGP funding, ensuring balanced funding across disciplines, enhancing Indigenous research support, incentivising industry collaboration, and critically, reducing scheme complexity.

While the proposed reduction from 15 to 6 schemes is welcomed in principle, it does not necessarily guarantee simplification. Several of the existing schemes already function as unified categories, and the wider indicative funding ranges and strategic foci under the new model may in fact introduce additional complexity. Importantly, this review coincides with major national policy processes, the Australian Universities Accord (**the Accord**) and Strategic Examination of Research and Development (**SERD**), both of which highlight the need for a cohesive, strategically aligned, and impact-driven research funding system. While the NCGP discussion paper responds to some of these priorities, ATN Universities is concerned that its scope is overly narrow, focusing on program efficiency without fully considering its place within a broader national research and innovation strategy (further expanded below).

ATN Universities supports the principle that Indigenous-led research should be appropriately recognised and resourced within the NCGP. Where Indigenous-specific grant opportunities are offered, appropriate cultural protocols and community expectations should be respected. We also recommend that grant assessment processes recognise the value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation across the full research team, not just among Chief Investigators. Applications demonstrating meaningful, sustained engagement and leadership by multiple Indigenous researchers should receive appropriate consideration.

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Additional areas for consideration include ensuring that streamlining efforts go beyond application processes to encompass simplified post-award reporting and compliance requirements, as recommended in the SERD discussion paper. Support for early career researchers (**ECRs**) should also be prioritised, focusing on offering longer-term embedded fellowships that promote sustained career development and greater recognition of non-linear research trajectories, particularly for individuals returning from industry roles or career breaks. Furthermore, developing more flexible co-funding models for small and medium enterprises (**SMEs**) and start-ups and enhanced incentives for industry-academia partnerships, such as tax benefits or recognition of in-kind contributions, would help strengthen collaboration and innovation across sectors. Ultimately, the success of this reform will depend on its ability to integrate with the emerging frameworks proposed through SERD and the Accord.

The ARC can foster a more inclusive and impact-focused research system by embedding broader impact metrics, enabling flexible co-funding requirements with industry partners, and supporting sustainable careers across the research lifecycle.

ATN Universities strongly supports the ARC's commitment to expanding research assessment criteria, however the discussion paper does not explicitly address how research impact beyond traditional publications will be assessed. ATN Universities recommends the incorporation of impact assessment metrics such as patents, industry partnerships, policy impact, and community engagement, reflecting the societal, economic, and cultural contributions of research. This shift will ensure that research excellence is measured not only by traditional academic metrics but also by its ability to drive innovation, inform public policy, and create real-world change. In turn, this will strengthen research collaboration across industry and government. Enhancing data collection and analytical capabilities will enable the ARC to better track and communicate the long-term outcomes of publicly funded research, aligning the NCGP with international best practices and strengthening public accountability. Both SERD and the Accord call for a national impact framework and improved research tracking across agencies; the NCGP should play a central role in delivering on that objective.

Simplifying industry engagement is crucial to fostering collaboration between universities and businesses, particularly SMEs and start-ups that often face barriers to participation. The SERD discussion paper specifically highlights the need for scalable and flexible investment models to encourage broader business participation. The NCGP should introduce more flexible co-funding requirements, allowing in-kind contributions, such as expertise, data, or equipment, to count toward matched funding obligations. This approach would lower financial barriers and encourage broader industry participation. Further support for translational research programs and commercialisation pathways is also essential to bridge the gap between fundamental research and industry application. Strengthening co-investment models and providing targeted support for SMEs will ensure that research collaborations translate into economic growth, technological advancements, and broader societal impact.

We note that the structure of the new NCGP model appears to place less emphasis on the types of modest-scale, industry-engaged research projects that were previously supported under the Linkage Program. These included projects requiring modest cash contributions, often spread over multiple years, an approach that enabled meaningful engagement by SMEs, scale-ups, and start-ups. While the new scheme structure hints at a stage-gated approach, it remains unclear whether pathways between schemes such as *Initiate*, *Breakthrough*, and *Collaborate* will offer a clearly defined continuum. ATN Universities encourages the ARC to ensure that successful early-stage projects can transition seamlessly between schemes, enabling research partnerships to grow and deepen in response to national priorities. Innovation is rarely linear, and effective support must accommodate continuity, scalability, and long-term engagement.

Supporting researchers at different career stages is another vital component of a successful NCGP. The Accord highlights the importance of longer grant durations and sustainable career pathways, while SERD calls for greater mobility and recognition of diverse research trajectories. A growing concern among our member universities is that some ECRs are opting for teaching buyouts rather than Fellowships due to challenges in reintegration post-fellowship. Fellowships must offer clear and supported pathways into ongoing research careers. The NCGP must ensure that career development is supported across the research lifecycle, with promotion frameworks that value both academic and industry-engaged research. ATN Universities recommends that the ARC retain three-year fellowships as a standard, particularly for ECRs, who rely on sufficient time to build research momentum and demonstrate impact.

The NCGP should be integrated with the broader R&D funding ecosystem to ensure its relevance in a rapidly evolving policy landscape

The Accord provides a clear blueprint for reforming Australia's research ecosystem, with an emphasis on stronger support for foundational research, longer-term funding commitments, and a coordinated approach to developing the research workforce. The NCGP's decision to leave strengthened funding outside the scope of its review, focusing solely on "maximising the efficiency and effectiveness of the program" represents, in ATN Universities' view, a missed opportunity. Given the significant overlap between the NCGP discussion paper and other major consultation processes currently underway, including the Accord and SERD, this narrow focus risks duplicating effort, without adequately addressing or building upon prior feedback and recommendations.

This lack of coordination risks consultation fatigue across the sector and undermines the opportunity for evidence-based reform. Without meaningful integration, the NCGP may diverge from the directions already outlined in the Accord and anticipated through SERD. In addition to policy misalignment, a rushed transition could impose unforeseen costs and administrative disruption across the sector, diverting attention from long-term goals such as research impact evaluation and workforce development.

As Australia's research and development ecosystem places greater emphasis on innovation, translation, and industry engagement, it is appropriate for the ARC to prioritise alignment as a key focus of this review. Strengthening coordination across the R&D landscape, guided by a clear national strategy, will be critical to ensuring that publicly funded research delivers maximum economic and societal impact. Stronger alignment is needed between the NCGP and other government research funding initiatives, including those led by CSIRO, the Department of Industry, Science and Resources, and the National Reconstruction Fund.

To enhance coordination and maximise research impact, ATN Universities recommends the development of a nationally coordinated Innovation Framework, which will clarify how different funding mechanisms, such as ARC, CSIRO, NHMRC, CRCs, and ARENA, interact and complement each other. Establishing joint funding calls and shared application processes between ARC and other major government research funders would help reduce duplication and administrative burden. Additionally, enhancing data-sharing and reporting mechanisms between agencies, such as the Accord recommended National Research Evaluation and Impact Framework, would improve the ability to track research impact across different funding programs, ensuring a more integrated approach to national research priorities.

Taken together, the implementation of these measures would create a more efficient, transparent, and strategically aligned research funding ecosystem, ensuring that publicly funded research delivers maximum value to Australia's economy and society.

ATN Universities supports the proposed NCGP reforms as a vital step toward a more streamlined, impactful, and collaborative research funding system. Aligning funding with national priorities, reducing complexity, and embedding broader impact measures will strengthen Australia's research ecosystem and maximize the value of public investment. ATN Universities welcomes the opportunity to continue working with the ARC and other policymakers to shape an effective, sustainable, and forward-thinking R&D ecosystem for Australia.

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