

29 January 2021

Hon Michael Sukkar MP  
Assistant Treasurer  
Minister for Housing  
Minister for Homelessness, Social and Community Housing

Hon Alan Tudge MP  
Minister for Education and Youth

## ***No-or-low cost opportunities for a better, fairer research grant system***

Dear Ministers Sukkar & Tudge,

We write to outline six opportunities for significantly improving the certainty, efficiency, fairness and security of the Australian Research Council's (ARC's) grant system, with **no cost (or extremely low cost)**:

1. Fixed dates for ARC Outcomes
2. Streamline ARC proposals
3. Improved system for responding to peer reviews
4. Consequences for inappropriate and unprofessional reviewer comments
5. Research Management System security
6. Direct outcome notification to applicants

The **1007** [signatories](#) below are researchers in Australia (or with close ties to Australian research). Many have extensive experience with the ARC's National Competitive Grants Program, having served on ARC selection committees or having held prestigious ARC Fellowships: among the signatories, **22** have held the ARC Australian Laureate Fellowships, and **109** have held ARC Future Fellowships. And while **430** signatories are senior researchers (Professors and Associate Professors), most others are researchers whose future careers depend critically on ARC funding. Together, we present this Pre-Budget Submission to assist in strengthening the ARC system to optimise the tax-payer funding that fuels discovery and innovation in Australia.

We look to your new leadership and responsibility for the ARC to implement these **simple-but-high-impact measures to provide much greater certainty for Australian researchers, university support staff, their families and collaborating industries**. Indeed, opportunities 1, 2 & 4 require no new funding, and we would welcome them as soon as possible as the university research sector struggles to directly support research during the ongoing pandemic. **Although very modest, implementing these changes would represent the most significant improvements in the ARC process for researchers in the last decade or more.**

Yours sincerely,

**Prof. Matthew Bailes**, 2015 ARC Australian Laureate Fellow, Director of ARC Centre of Excellence for Gravitational Wave Discovery, Professor of Astrophysics

**Prof. Jodie Bradby**, 2014 ARC Future Fellow, Professor of Physics

**Prof. Michelle Coote**, 2017 ARC Georgina Sweet Australian Laureate Fellow, Professor of Chemistry

**Prof. Tamara Davis AM**, 2018 ARC Australian Laureate Fellow, Professor of Astrophysics

**Prof. Peter Goodyear**, 2010 ARC Australian Laureate Fellow, Professor of Education

**Prof. Peter Harrison**, 2015 ARC Australian Laureate Fellow, Professor of History

**Prof. Lesley Head**, 2009 ARC Australian Laureate Fellow, Professor of Geography

**Prof. Nalini Joshi**, 2012 ARC Georgina Sweet Australian Laureate Fellow, Professor of Mathematics

**Prof. Geoffrey McFadden FAA FASP FASM**, 2017 ARC Australian Laureate Fellow, Professor of Malaria & Marine Biology

**Prof. Belinda Medlyn**, 2019 Georgina Sweet Australian Laureate Fellow, Professor of Ecosystem Modelling

**Prof. Craig Moritz**, 2011 ARC Australian Laureate Fellow, Professor of Biology

**Prof. Lynette Russell AM**, 2019 Kathleen Fitzpatrick Australian Laureate Fellow, Professor of Australian Indigenous Studies

**Prof. Martina Stenzel**, 2020 ARC Australian Laureate Fellow, Scientia Professor of Chemistry

**Prof. Chris Turney**, 2011 ARC Australian Laureate Fellow, Professor of Earth Science and Climate Change

**Prof. Enrico Valdinoci**, 2019 ARC Australian Laureate Fellow, Professor of Mathematics

**Prof. Toby Walsh**, 2020 ARC Australian Laureate Fellow, Scientia Professor of Artificial Intelligence

## Executive Summary

The research grants provided through the Australian Research Council (ARC) are a vital lifeline for the non-medical research sector in Australia, particularly at this time of heightened uncertainty and even scarcer resources due to the COVID–19 pandemic. In a highly competitive international research landscape, even small uncertainties, barriers or disadvantages can set Australian researchers considerably behind the cutting edge. Now, more than ever, it is important to streamline the ARC grant process, removing unnecessary uncertainties and administrative burdens where possible.

We the undersigned present **six simple opportunities to considerably improve the certainty, efficiency, fairness and security of ARC’s research grant system:**

1. Fixed dates for ARC Outcomes (no cost)
2. Streamline ARC proposals (no cost)
3. A fairer, more efficient system for responding to peer reviews (no or low cost)
4. Put inappropriate and unprofessional reviewers on notice (no cost)
5. Update Research Management System security (no or low cost)
6. Notify applicants directly of outcomes via email (no or low cost)

**Most of these opportunities require no new funding.** Some may require very small amounts of additional administrative or IT funding for the ARC, but **we estimate implementing all solutions would require less than (approx.) 0.4% of the ARC’s operations budget in the first year (approx. \$100k),** with likely no ongoing costs (or extremely little).

## Opportunities

International leadership in research requires efficient, supportive funding systems. Direct support for research through the ARC is crucial, and COVID–19 has put a fine point on this: universities’ ability to fund research has evaporated, so ARC funding for non-medical research has become more important than ever. Yet **aspects of the ARC’s process involve unnecessary, additional uncertainties that complicate and burden Australia’s research sector** compared to systems in other research-intensive countries. This often **leads to the best researchers leaving Australia or staying away, cutting short and diminishing the Government’s previous investments** in their education and Australia’s universities and research system. Even seemingly simple, no-or-low cost improvements can boost Australian researchers’ competitiveness in cutting-edge international research.

The community of researchers signing this Pre-Budget Submission have identified several simple, **no-cost (or extremely low cost) opportunities** that will increase certainty in the ARC process and reduce waste across the research sector. These may seem small, but **taken together – and multiplied across the thousands of applicants to ARC grant schemes – they will strengthen Australia’s research sector,** in these difficult times, by

allowing universities and researchers to plan and focus on the research that tax-payers have funded.

The opportunities are summarised below. More detail is provided for some opportunities in the following section ("[Further details](#)").

### 1. Fixed dates for ARC Outcomes (no cost)

ARC grants directly fund research. Knowing when funding will be available, should a grant proposal be approved by the Minister for Education and Youth (hereafter, the Minister), is absolutely critical information for planning a huge range of activities related to research: committing capital and staff resources to that project, hiring, pursuing supporting funding opportunities, declining alternative research directions, focussing staff on specific tasks, university support staffing, etc. Planning these activities would increase the competitiveness of Australian researchers. Contingency planning in case ARC funding is not approved is just as important, especially for planning to improve or redirect efforts to secure funding, or refocus on other projects.

However, Australian researchers cannot optimally plan in these ways – and therefore lose competitive edges internationally – because the dates on which ARC outcomes are to be released are not known in advance. **The research sector would gain enormous certainty, and ability to plan and optimise its competitiveness, if the date each grant scheme's outcomes would be announced was fixed and advertised when that scheme first opened (or before).**

**No funding is required to implement this.** The only requirement is a commitment from the Minister to the ARC about the time period required to approve the ARC's recommendations for funding. See "[Further details](#)" below.

### 2. Streamline ARC proposals (no cost)

Proposals for ARC funding have become extremely long. For example, **a typical Discovery Project grant proposal requesting just \$500,000 to hire a single person for 3 years will be approx. 80 pages long.** Of course, in a competitive grant system, where reviewers attempt to discern the best 20–30% of proposals, some room is needed to explain the core importance and significance of the proposed research. However, ARC proposals have become far too long to write, and too long and complex for 4–7 reviewers to comprehensively read and compare to others in any efficient way. This wastes time but is also detrimental to quality and fairness: reviewers often do not read the proposals fully, so unconscious biases prevail.

There are many ways in which ARC proposals could be streamlined. **We recommend that the ARC be tasked with conducting a community consultation about the best ways to do this, with a genuine commitment to reducing the quantity of written material to be assessed by reviewers by at least 30%.**

Comparison with highly-performing international systems, such as Switzerland's<sup>1</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> The main grant scheme administered by the Swiss National Science Foundation, for example, includes simplified budgets (with many standardised items, like researcher hiring costs) and very brief

would also be beneficial. The ARC conducts various community consultations each year, so this measure is no-cost. However, the ARC should genuinely and directly seek input from researchers instead of only university research offices and/or members of the ARC College. Further comments about this proposal are made in the [“Further details”](#) section below.

**3. A fairer, more efficient system for responding to peer reviews (no or low cost)**

Upon receiving peer reviews of their grant proposals, applicants may submit a rejoinder to address the reviewers’ concerns. The rejoinders are available to the ARC staff and ARC College members who ultimately determine the ranking of proposals. Currently, applicants have **just 3 days** to alert the ARC to “inappropriate” reviewer comments, i.e. those that are manifestly “defamatory, discriminatory, biased or conflicted”. Further, the **ARC has no process at all for researchers to flag grossly unprofessional reviews** – those not strictly “inappropriate” but which any reasonable researcher would disqualify from informing the ARC College’s ranking of proposals.

**To strengthen the rejoinder process and increase both its fairness and efficiency, we recommend that applicants be able to simply flag potentially “inappropriate” and/or “unprofessional” reviewer comments and respond to them separately in a supplementary rejoinder.** The ARC staff and ARC College members would then judge these comments and include the supplementary rejoinder if required. This would completely avoid the need for the “3 day system” currently employed, easing the problems this creates for affected researchers, diminishing the administrative burden on the ARC, and producing a better, fairer, more collegiate rejoinder system. More details of the proposed system are provided in [“Further details”](#) below.

**4. Put inappropriate and unprofessional reviewers on notice (no cost)**

Currently, there are no real repercussions for reviewers who submit inappropriate or unprofessional reviews. Given the importance to career opportunities of gaining ARC grants, such irresponsible behaviour can completely ruin promising careers. Consequences need to be introduced to curb this behaviour and improve the peer review system for all. **We recommend three simple, no-cost means of addressing this:**

- Reviewers whose comments have been judged as inappropriate or unprofessional should be informed of this by the ARC after the grant scheme outcomes are announced.
- The ARC should publish the number of inappropriate and unprofessional reviewers at each university (broken down by grant scheme) each year. The ARC already publishes a table showing the number of reviewers at each university each year, so adding this new information would be simple: <https://www.arc.gov.au/policies-strategies/policy/statement-support-assessors-within-national-competitive-grants-program/2020-assessor-data-report>.

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curriculum vitae of the applicants and straight-forward descriptions of their expertise and roles in the proposed project. However, much more room is given over to describing the project itself, which we do not think is necessary.

- We suggest that repeat offenders be reported to their university's Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research, barred from reviewing applications for 2 years, and, if the behaviour continues, perhaps barred from applying for ARC funding for a period of time (e.g. 1 year), or other similar sanction.

This proposed approach would ensure that reviewers know their behaviour is inappropriate and/or unprofessional, incentivise universities to train their research staff in providing appropriate reviews, and remove repeat offenders if required.

#### 5. Update Research Management System security (no or low cost)

The ARC's Research Management System (RMS) is the interface for applicants to prepare and submit grant applications. It needs to be secure, as it holds personal details, intellectual property and potentially commercial-in-confidence information. However, the user security of the RMS is questionable and out of date: it relies on mandated, frequent password changes. Modern databases holding such sensitive information use 2-factor authentication instead. We recommend a small, one-off investment in a security upgrade for RMS to move to 2-factor authentication, though it is possible that such an upgrade can be undertaken within the ARC's existing administration budget.

#### 6. Notify applicants directly of outcomes via email (no or low cost)

Currently, applicants are not directly informed of the outcomes of their grant proposals. Instead, a list of approved grants appears on a public-facing section of the Research Management System, and the ARC issues a tweet sometime later (usually an hour or more). There is not even a user alert system within RMS to email or otherwise notify an applicant that an outcome for their grant proposal is available to view within RMS. We recommend that the RMS system be used to directly notify applicants of their outcome immediately once it is available. This should involve no cost (it should be trivial for a large database system like RMS) or may require a small upgrade.

## Further details

### 1. Fixed dates for ARC Outcomes (no cost)

**A fixed outcome release date could be enacted by a simple commitment from the Minister to approve the ARC's recommendations for a grant scheme within 2 weeks<sup>2</sup>.** The ARC plans a fixed time-line for each grant scheme well ahead of its opening for proposals; that is, the ARC knows when it will send its recommendations for funding to the Minister. With a 2-week approval period agreed with the Minister,

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<sup>2</sup> In practice, previous Ministers have often approved these recommendations within days, as shown in the records released under the ARC Senate Order, <https://www.arc.gov.au/about-arc/reporting/senate-requirements/agency-grants-senate-order-arc-grant-recommendations>.

the ARC could **fix and advertise the outcome date for each scheme when it first opens** (or even well beforehand, to further increase certainty).

Currently, the date on which the outcomes of a grant scheme will be communicated to researchers is not specified. This prevents essential planning around staffing, equipment purchases and national and international collaborations. Without knowing when fellowship grant outcomes will be known, many applicants are forced to accept other positions, often outside Australia. This simple problem leads to numerous channels of waste, missed opportunities and uncertainty that cripple the research sector's ability and productivity, diminishing our leadership of new ideas, ventures and collaborations around the world. Some of the problems stemming from the lack of fixed ARC outcome dates were described by an Australian researcher here:

<https://researchwhisperer.org/2019/11/05/announcement-delays>

**The simple, no-cost solution of fixing dates for ARC outcomes would provide a wealth of benefits to researchers, universities, collaborating industries and even the ARC itself.** For example, fellowship applicants would know which alternative hiring opportunities to apply for, and be able to inform those employers about the time-frame. Those seeking funding for teams, or laboratories, could inform staff about the outcome dates, allowing all those staff, and their families, to plan contingencies. Universities could plan staffing loads more effectively for the flurry of activity required after outcomes are released. Industry partners could plan for contributing staff, equipment and capital. **The benefits are wide-ranging and so numerous that it quickly becomes apparent how wasteful and uncertain the current system is, and how easily it can be improved.**

## 2. Streamline ARC proposals (no cost)

**Reducing ARC proposal lengths at least 30%, by streamlining or removing the least important parts, would recover more than 100 working years of researchers' time, each year.** We therefore recommend that the ARC conducts an urgent community consultation to establish and implement the best ways to reduce the work required for ARC proposals. The highest priorities would be the largest schemes (by number of applications): Discovery Projects, Future Fellowships and Discovery Early Career Researcher Awards.

The amount of time researchers spend writing ARC proposals, and how long reviewers spend assessing them, is extraordinary. To see this, consider the approx. 3500 Discovery Project proposals submitted each year. Each one requires at least 1 month of researcher and support staff time to prepare. **That is 300 working years for this one grant scheme alone.** The three schemes listed above also have extremely low success rates: typically just one in 5 proposals are approved for funding. The scale of wasted effort in preparing and reviewing such long (80-page) proposals, most of which will not be funded, is therefore staggering. Streamlining ARC proposals is clearly paramount to increasing Australian researchers' competitiveness internationally.

## 3. A fairer, more efficient system for responding to peer reviews (no or low cost)



ARC grants are critically important in determining a researcher's career prospects. The peer review system the ARC administers is generally robust, but it is still common to receive inappropriate and unprofessional reviews. **Receiving such an “inappropriate” review can be devastating for a researcher – it likely scuppers their proposal completely**, unless it can be identified and removed efficiently and fairly. For junior researchers, this may end their career.

**The current 3-day deadline for reporting “inappropriate” reviews to the ARC is far too short.** After receiving such a career-threatening review, many researchers would require significantly more than 3 days even to face the complicated administrative processes required to have it reviewed by the ARC. **And such a short period discriminates precisely against the demographic groups of researchers most likely to receive such comments** and those least likely, or able, to seek assistance from their universities (e.g. part-time researchers, carers, minority or marginalised groups etc.). It is also apparent that the ARC staff who judge any appeals set a very high bar for removing a review. Indeed, many researchers have shown examples of blatantly biased and discriminatory comments that clearly demonstrate that the reviewers' opinions about the grant proposal should have been entirely disqualified, but weren't.

A reviewer's biases against certain people – especially their competition – or undeclared conflicts of interest, are also often apparent in their comments. Obviously, reviews by such people should also be disqualified. But the ARC has no convincing system for this. The ARC insists that the ARC College members with carriage of a proposal will identify such “unprofessional” reviews. But with often more than 100 proposals to grade, each more than 70 pages long, it is at-least questionable that all instances of such unprofessional behaviour will be caught. This is extremely important because gaining, or failing to gain, an ARC grant often makes or breaks a researcher's career. A better system is needed.

**The solution is quite simple, and will actually be more efficient, fairer and much less stressful for applicants affected by inappropriate or unprofessional reviewers.**

We recommend a new rejoinder process in which applicants are able to flag reviewers as having made “inappropriate” or “unprofessional” comments. The rejoinder would be completed on the assumption those reviewers comments will be removed from the process. At the same time, applicants would also be able to submit a supplementary rejoinder, addressing the potentially “inappropriate” or “unprofessional” reviewer's comments. Reviewers flagged as having made “inappropriate” comments would be first judged by the ARC staff, as in the current system. If judged as not “inappropriate”, they would be relabelled as potentially “unprofessional”. Potentially “unprofessional” reviewer comments would be explicitly flagged to the ARC College members with carriage of the proposal, to assess whether a reviewer should be excluded. Any reviews by that reviewer, of any grants for that scheme, would be set aside in this case. If an ARC College carriage judges



the comments as not “unprofessional” then the review would be included and the supplementary rejoinder taken into account.

**This proposed approach provides the full two-week rejoinder period for applicants to access assistance in identifying inappropriate or unprofessional reviews.** It also avoids the ARC’s usual objection that only 3 days can be allowed for identifying inappropriate reviews because the ARC must make a determination about the reviews in time for the applicant to complete a rejoinder in the two week period. The proposed approach would avoid the need for the ARC to consider “exceptional circumstances” where applicants were unable to meet this (for some, impossible) 3-day deadline. It would require no cost or perhaps a small cost in formulating additional guidelines and/or training for ARC College members to properly assess whether a reviewer has been “unprofessional”.

## Signatories

The following **1007** researchers co-signed this Pre-Budget Submission prior to 13:50 (AEDT) 29 January 2021. Further signatories are being added to the live version of this submission: [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1757OBU64iPFwwAB6EVTWkGpzzqiziPRAkPVE\\_3UMM6yM/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1757OBU64iPFwwAB6EVTWkGpzzqiziPRAkPVE_3UMM6yM/edit?usp=sharing). Researchers have signed as individuals, not representing their universities or institutions.

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Prof. David Alais, New South Wales  
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Prof. Leanne Armand, Australian Capital Territory  
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Prof. Damien Arrigan, Western Australia  
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Dr. Robert Chapman, New South Wales  
A/Prof. David Chapple, Victoria  
Dr. Alienor Chauvenet, Queensland  
Dr. Yung En Chee, Victoria  
Dr. Seth Cheetham, Queensland  
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Prof. Chris Clark, Western Australia  
Prof. Jack Clegg, Queensland  
Dr. Kelly Clemens, New South Wales  
Dr. Alice Clement, South Australia  
Dr. Jennifer Clutterbuck, Queensland  
Dr. Onoride Coast, Australian Capital Territory  
Dr. Julia Coffey, New South Wales  
Prof. Lachlan Coin, Victoria  
Prof. Jared Cole, Victoria  
Prof. Matthew Colless, Australian Capital Territory  
Prof. Alex Collie, ARC Future Fellow (2020), Victoria  
Prof. Brett Collins, Queensland  
Dr. Rebecca Colvin, Australian Capital Territory  
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Dr. Jacqueline Coombe, Victoria  
Prof. Michelle Coote, Australian Capital Territory  
Prof. Susan Coppersmith, New South Wales  
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Dr. Daniel V. Cotton, New South Wales  
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Prof. Vincent Craig, Australian Capital Territory  
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Dr. Daniel Creedon, Victoria  
Dr. Laura Crommelin, New South Wales  
Dr. Simon J. Cropper, Victoria  
Prof. Emily S. Cross, New South Wales  
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Prof. Chris Davies, Victoria  
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Prof. Jeffrey Davis, Victoria  
Prof. Matthew Davis, Queensland  
Prof. Tamara Davis, Queensland  
Dr. Kate Davison, Victoria  
Prof. Judith Dawes, New South Wales  
Prof. Phillip Dawson, Victoria  
Prof. Janine Deakin, Australian Capital Territory  
Dr. Rebecca Defina, Victoria  
Dr. Sara Dehm, New South Wales  
Dr. Raffaella Demichelis, Western Australia  
Dr. Evelyne Deplazes, New South Wales  
Dr. Nicholas Deutscher, New South Wales  
Dr. Simon Devitt, New South Wales  
A/Prof. Haryana Dhillon, New South Wales  
Prof. Serena Dipierro, Professor of Mathematics, Western Australia  
A/Prof. Mahdi Disfani, Victoria  
Dr. Sally Dixon, New South Wales  
Dr. Tim Doherty, New South Wales  
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Dr. Yaegan Doran, New South Wales

Prof. Assa Doron, Australian Capital Territory  
Dr. Annette Dowd, New South Wales  
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Prof. Catherine Driscoll, New South Wales  
Dr. Sebastian Duchene, Victoria  
Dr. Brendan Duffy, Victoria  
Dr. David Duncan, Victoria  
Dr. James Dunk, New South Wales  
Dr. Patrick Dunlop, Western Australia  
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Prof. Robert Edwards, South Australia  
Prof. Ulrik Egede, Victoria  
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Dr. Katie Ekberg, Queensland  
Dr. Stuart Ekberg, Queensland  
Prof. Erik Eklund, Victoria  
Dr. David Ellison, Queensland  
Prof. Michael Ellwood, Australian Capital Territory  
Prof. Nick Enfield, New South Wales  
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Dr. Megan Evans, Australian Capital Territory  
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