

## Australian Historical Association Submission Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program

8 May 2024

### Terms of Reference

The Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program (NCGP) discussion paper sought to provide an opportunity for all interested parties to contribute to the design of a reinvigorated program. The review's terms of reference identified six key thematic areas of interest:

- Purpose and impact of ARC grants
- Program structure and design
- Alignment with other government research funding programs
- Strong and diverse research sector
- Advancing support for Indigenous Australian research and researchers
- National priorities for research

In this submission, the Australian Historical Association addresses those six themes in response to the nine questions posed by the discussion paper, and offers specific, practicable recommendations for consideration by the review.

### *Question 1*

**What are the best guiding objectives for the NCGP to support excellent pure basic, strategic basic and applied research that will enable it to deliver economic, social, environmental and cultural benefits for Australia?**

The NCGP is set within a university sector that is under-funded, under-staffed and under extreme pressure. Yet universities are among our most important civic institutions. They represent fundamental democratic values of open intellectual inquiry and evidence-based knowledge, values that are increasingly challenged, both within democratic countries and by hostile external actors.

In this context, humanities and social sciences (HASS) disciplines funded by the NCGP are expected to carry a heavy burden. They are, as with all government-funded research, expected to help meet national economic, environmental and social needs. At the same time as they share this mission with the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines, HASS also bears an unusually large share of the weight of meeting cultural and civic needs, and supporting an open, democratic, inclusive and cohesive society.

History has a particular role to play in this context, often in partnership with a range of public institutions and, increasingly, with a private sector that specialises in the digitisation and commercialisation of historical documentation. An evidence-based understanding of the past – one that can be both shared and contested – is an essential foundation of a social cohesion in a democratic society such as Australia. It depends on the archival investigation, truth-telling and deep listening that are the key elements of historical research.

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The NCGP should value and support a comprehensive culture of research excellence that includes the scientific, medical, technological and environmental expertise that can enable Australia's energy transition, protect its environment, promote good health and provide economic opportunity, as well as the historical and cultural knowledge that safeguards our democratic and civic institutions and encourages social solidarity.

### *Question 2*

#### **How can the NCGP further support and encourage:**

##### **a. High-calibre research that drives the advancement of knowledge?**

The NCGP can further support and encourage high-calibre humanities, arts and social sciences research with greater recognition that the needs of many HASS researchers differ in fundamental ways from those in the scientific disciplines and suffer from being repeatedly required to conform to scientific conventions. While rigour and accountability are unquestionably necessary in grant application processes regardless of field or discipline, the basis of historical enquiry in archival research and (often) oral testimony, and the near certainty that the focus question(s) of any worthwhile project will shift significantly during the research process, means that flexibility is needed in matters such as budgeting and duration.

Moreover, many HASS projects – including some in history – do not require the large grants familiar from the natural sciences, but the needs of such research are poorly served by the NCGP. The NCGP can better recognise the particular requirements of HASS researchers, whose basic funding needs often pertain to archival and other field research, and teaching relief in order to write, which is itself a fundamental aspect of the intellectual process involved in much HASS research. As our colleague Professor Tom Griffiths pointed out many years ago, scientists might talk of ‘writing up’ their research, but for historians, writing is itself a research act. Historians need better support and time to be able to do this more effectively. Historians also now often present their work in forms less familiar in academic contexts, such as films, podcasts and online multimedia. This, too, needs to be adequately supported by the ARC for its potential cultural impact, and not simply seen as an adjunct to more traditional genres.

***Recommendation 1: That the ARC reinstate smaller grants as well as fellowships of limited duration (such as 1-2 years) to facilitate the presentation of HASS research in written and other forms to maximise cultural and social impact.***

##### **b. The utilisation, translation or commercialisation of research to deliver benefits to Australia's society, economy, and community?**

The NCGP can identify areas of particular importance that pertain to HASS research and conduct special grants rounds, as with the 2020 Special Research Initiative on Australian History and Culture, which was targeted to the research needs of HASS researchers. Future funding rounds could encourage HASS research in areas of national priority, such as democratic and civic institutions, truth-telling, and the health system, including mental health and Indigenous health.

***Recommendation 2: The NCGP should have a category of grants geared towards addressing major societal problems and issues that require research teams draw from both STEM and***

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*HASS disciplines. Such a scheme should be additional to, and not replace, schemes directed towards pure basic HASS research.*

### *Question 3*

**How can the outcomes, impact and contribution of NCGP funded research be best identified and communicated?**

Information technology has now developed to a point where there are considerable data available for assessing the outcomes, impacts and contributions of HASS research in relation to civic life, public culture and policy formulation. Yet measures of such impact are haphazard and, despite the best efforts of learned academies and other academic and professional organisations to draw wider attention to them, still poorly appreciated compared with advances in medical and scientific research. Historians, for instance, have contributed to fundamental transformations over the last half century in how the Australian people experience their society's past, present and prospects, yet appreciation of the contribution of such work rarely extends beyond the research communities concerned.

The question of whether Australians should have a chief social scientist alongside the chief scientist has been a long-running one; certainly, it is possible to imagine a position being created where the appointee would communicate to the public the diverse contributions made by HASS disciplines (such as history) and advocate for the support necessary to secure their critical societal role.

There is also a National Science Week (since 1997) and, from more recently, a Social Sciences Week, but History Week is a New South Wales initiative and the History Festival a South Australian one. The extension of these efforts to the national level – either for history or for the humanities generally – would be an excellent opportunity to engage the general public with the benefits of NCGP funded research in history.

***Recommendation 3: That the Federal Government provides an infrastructure for HASS advocacy and promotion, such as through a Chief Social Scientist and/or a Humanities Week, comparable with the more generous support it provides for the STEM disciplines.***

### *Question 4*

**What structure and design of the NCGP would:**

- a) **Best support the NCGP's objectives?**
- b) **Reduce complexity and deliver grants more efficiently?**
- c) **Rebalance risk settings to encourage frontier basic research with potentially transformative outcomes?**
- d) **Set the right balance between different scheme types and duration?**
- e) **Use peer review in the most effective way?**
- f) **Leverage the opportunities and manage the risks of using artificial intelligence?**

The current structure of NCGP schemes is not fit for purpose. Below, we outline the problems and the possibilities for reform as they pertain to each major existing scheme.

DECRA

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In the first place, there is no genuinely postdoctoral scheme. The DECRA awards are, in theory, available to recent PhD graduates, but in practice, the scheme tends to favour those who will have been able to build a research profile, benefiting from full-time or secure academic employment, mentoring, and institutional supports available within universities. In history, it has become impossible to gain a DECRA in the first few years after PhD graduation, and difficult to do so without existing academic employment, sometimes at a middle level such as Senior Lecturer (Level C). As a result, the system tends to lose a great deal of talent in the years following PhD graduation. This is precisely the type of brain drain that is raised as a core issue in the Australian Universities Accord *Final Report*.

A genuinely postdoctoral research opportunity would help to rebuild career pathways for emerging researchers that have been allowed to fall away. We advocate that staff in continuing roles should have their own version of an Early Career Researcher grant or fellowship that might provide, say, two years away from teaching to develop a project. Those yet to be appointed to such a role should be served by a separate scheme that would provide a genuine pathway between the PhD and a career in a university or industry via postdoctoral research. It might be funded at three years rather than the two available to those who already have university positions.

***Recommendation 4: That the ARC redesign the DECRA scheme to ensure that there are genuine postdoctoral opportunities for leading PhD graduates in the 2-3 years following graduation who do not yet have continuing academic employment.***

### Future Fellowships

The Future Fellowship Scheme is also, in our discipline, failing to fulfill its complete potential. Among its original purposes was to draw academic talent back to Australia. We see little evidence that it has served such a role, not least as universities are not required to guarantee a continuing position once the fellowship is complete. More generally, there are too few such fellowships at present for them to work effectively to strengthen career pathways in our discipline. Because they cover salaries, Future Fellowships are expensive. That is not an argument against them, but the opportunity cost of tying up substantial amounts of research money in such scheme does need to be considered in the broader landscape of the NCGP. In sum, we support a mid-career ARC fellowship scheme, but we would like to see consideration given to more flexible offerings that might include shorter fellowships (of, say, two years) offered to a larger number of excellent researchers.

***Recommendation 5: That the ARC adopt a more flexible approach to mid-career fellowships that includes a range of opportunities geared to the diverse circumstances and needs of both universities and researchers.***

### Laureate Fellowships

In many ways, the Laureate Fellowships have been the most effective of the major schemes in building career pathways in history. They have provided opportunities for scholars to be mentored towards an academic career by a leading scholar, and in history there have been programs associated with Laureate Fellowships that have also provided mentoring for scholars beyond those actually connected directly with a project. The main challenge here is the ‘road

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to nowhere' problem: the contraction of continuing positions in history means that the often exceptionally talented emerging researchers on Laureate projects do not gain academic employment once the project is finished.

***Recommendation 6: That the NCGP examines how emerging researchers involved in Laureate projects can be supported in building careers following their participation.***

### Discovery Projects

The Discovery Project (DP) scheme has yielded major research projects in history and is greatly valued by historians. It has provided incentives for collaborative work, with positive effects on the discipline's research culture which has traditionally tended to favour either single-authored work or co-authorship. Even while many grants only provide partial funding for proposals, it remains broadly true that the DP scheme is for large multi-year and multi-researcher projects. Again, we would urge the ARC to consider a scheme to run alongside the main DP scheme – perhaps something like the old Small Grants program – that would fund projects on a smaller scale. Such grants might be capped at, say, \$50,000. Ground-breaking and field-defining books in history can sometimes result from relatively small amounts of research funding and we can see the prospect of 'value for money' in a scheme designed to meet the needs of arts, humanities and social sciences researchers in this way. We are not arguing that such a scheme should replace the larger-scale project funding of the DP scheme, but we do see a space that is at present largely vacant. In the Britain, Europe and the United States, there are many funding opportunities provided by learned academies, trusts and other bodies that provide such funding, with positive effects on historical research.

***Recommendation 7: That the ARC reinstate a program of smaller grants to facilitate research projects undertaken by sole researchers in HASS fields.***

### *Question 5*

**How can the NCGP best support collaboration between disciplines (between and across HASS and STEM) among researchers (both national and international), across sectors and funding programs?**

Complex societal problems now usually demand multidisciplinary research that will draw on both STEM and HASS. The latter can only play its proper role if the NCGP is drastically improved to better meet the particular needs of arts, humanities and social sciences researchers. There is still a tendency for research proposals to be formulated and submitted in a siloed manner, which the division between HASS and STEM maintained. There is presently no scheme devoted to promoting such collaborations. We argue that there should be such a scheme, and that it must include meaningful participation from diverse disciplines across the HASS and STEM divide.

***Recommendation 8: That a scheme be designed to promote HASS-STEM collaborations in addressing major basic and applied research problems. It could be called a 'Grand Challenges' scheme, but it must not be confined to applied or policy issues. Such a scheme should be additional to, and not replace, schemes directed towards pure basic HASS research.***

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### *Question 6*

**How can the NCGP promote a strong and diverse research sector, including through supporting research training and opportunities for early career researchers, women researchers and other under-represented groups?**

The need for under-funded Australian universities to compete for international students has distorted the nature of academic research. The dependence of university research – as well as other operations – on cross-subsidies from international fees has driven investment towards the effort to attract such students. Since international students are not by any means distributed evenly across the disciplines, staffing in HASS disciplines has contracted with predictable effects on career opportunities, including in research. The Universities Accord addressed the challenges of building and sustaining the academic workforce of the future. The NCGP needs to be designed in a way that supports this objective. The NCGP cannot ‘fix’ all the problems in the university system, but one major difficulty at present is that while there are many opportunities for funded doctoral study, there are very few for postdoctoral work. Yet when budgets are being trimmed in the award of grants, it is sometimes postdoctoral positions that are eliminated. Greater priority should be given to supporting such positions.

***Recommendation 9: That the NCGP develops a comprehensive and integrated plan for the building of an academic workforce including through a coordinated plan for the support of postdoctoral positions.***

### *Question 7*

**Are there aspects of the NCGP that could be strengthened or redeveloped to advance support for:**

- a. Indigenous Australian research, incorporating Indigenous knowledge and knowledge systems (where appropriate)?**

Indigenous history has been one of the most innovative and impactful fields of Australian historical research for many decades. In recent years, Indigenous researchers have led the push for higher ethical standards in the production of Indigenous history: ‘no research about us without us’. However, in practice, this has resulted in a decline in research on Indigenous history, mainly because there are still only a small number of Indigenous researchers (including historians), who have many demands on their time and resources, including building their own research careers. It is essential that the design of research funding schemes prioritises the building of an academic workforce among Indigenous researchers.

***Recommendation 10: That any comprehensive and integrated plan for the building of an academic workforce needs to give particular attention to the challenges and opportunities of supporting Indigenous Australian participation in the national research effort.***

- b. Indigenous researchers, irrespective of their areas of research?**

In the discipline of history, Indigenous researchers have been successful in both dedicated Indigenous grant schemes and general schemes. Attempts by successive governments to boost Indigenous participation in higher education have clearly borne fruit, but the pipeline from

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undergraduate participation to postgraduate attainment, and on to academic careers, is clearly an issue which requires concerted efforts by universities and governments, not just the research funding sector. The revised NCGP will need to work in harmony with other initiatives across the higher education sector to strengthen that pipeline, including initiatives to boost Indigenous participation in higher education.

***Recommendation 11: That the NCGP supports more dedicated scholarships for Indigenous HDR students interested in working on any historical project.***

### *Question 8*

#### **In the context of other government funding for research and development:**

- a. How should the NCGP promote an appropriate balance of basic and applied research?**

The NCGP should fund basic research at a high level because that is the kind of research that will not be funded by industry, and because the funding of basic research is an essential foundation for application to a wide range of social issues and problems. Telling examples from the study of Australian history include research on Indigenous ownership and native title, the Stolen Generations of Indigenous children, and the Forgotten Australians subjected to institutional abuses. Universities have an important social and cultural role beyond conducting applied research for commercial enterprises, and the NCGP should recognise and celebrate these critical forms of impact which often take decades to be fully realised but play a transformative role.

***Recommendation 12: That the ARC develops a comprehensive and widely publicised account of the ways basic research in both the HASS and STEM disciplines has improved the lives of Australians, with an emphasis on long-term impacts that are poorly understood.***

- b. How can the NCGP improve its connectedness to the research ecosystem to help progress the research it funds further along the pipeline towards translation and impact?**

Linkage schemes could be promoted to industries as a way to connect with field-leading research in their areas: in other words, the NCGP could encourage industry to seek linkages with university researchers, as well as encouraging researchers to work with industry. In its current form, the NCGP places the burden of seeking partnerships on universities, with huge investments of time and resources even before grants are awarded. Promoting the NCGP to industry, including the GLAM sector, would help foster partnerships, which are essential to research translation and impact.

For historical research (and indeed for HASS research more broadly), many of our industry partners are not-for profit or government agencies, and the contributions these organisations make to applied research are largely in-kind. It is crucial that the ARC retains the exemption clause (which allows in-kind support in lieu of cash) to foster applied research in the HASS fields.

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***Recommendation 13: The NCGP should, through a mixture of incentives and publicity, encourage industry to seek linkages with university-based researchers.***

*Question 9*

**How should the NCGP be structured to best support and deliver on national research priorities, as they evolve over time?**

For most NCGP grant schemes it is not an eligibility requirement for applicants to align with a government policy or priority area, and this must be maintained in any restructuring of these schemes. It is vital that researchers can continue to be supported to conduct curiosity-driven basic research to advance their disciplines, not least as agenda-setting research will very often take this form.

The vast majority of the identified national research priorities (such as the National Science and Research Priorities [NSRPs] and the National Reconstruction Fund priorities) are in the fields of science and technology. This set of priorities is far too narrow considering the breadth of challenges facing Australia today. As the Policy Review document states, ‘investment in publicly funded research is expected to generate knowledge that can help address societal needs, and that leads to a range of social, economic, environmental and cultural benefits to the community.’ Such knowledge is not the sole preserve of the STEM disciplines.

We therefore recommend that at least two NSRPs address social and cultural issues, to encourage HASS research in these areas. For example, the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters is currently inquiring into ‘civics education, engagement and participation in Australia’: such an urgent and important topic could become a national research priority, and arguably should be elevated considering the current global pressures on democracy.

Similarly, focused NCGP schemes such as the 2020 Special Research Initiative on Australian History and Culture, with funding guidelines that were targeted towards HASS research (for example, the provision of larger amounts of teaching relief, which allowed for in-depth fieldwork and extended writing time), and smaller amounts of overall funding, remain important to support research in particular fields, particularly HASS, and could also be focused in order to foster HASS research in areas of national priority.

***Recommendation 14: That the present National Sciences and Research Priorities be revised to include areas that are currently ignored in their technologically- and science-driven orientation.***