

April 9, 2025

ACGR Response to the Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program Discussion Paper

The Australian Council of Graduate Research (ACGR) acknowledges the work of the Australian Research Council and welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program discussion paper.

ACGR was established in 1997 and is Australia's peak body for higher degree by research (HDR) education, often referred to as graduate research. Through our programs and advocacy, we support the development of the Australian research ecosystem and research workforce. We engage and consult with stakeholders to advocate for excellence in research training and scholarship, and high standards for all HDR programs. As a group we aim to contribute to the development of effective HDR policy as well as promote the benefits of HDR within academia and beyond into industries and communities.

All HDR-awarding Higher Education (HE) institutions in Australia are members of ACGR, each represented by a senior academic leader. In most cases this is the most senior relevant executive at the institution, usually a Graduate School Dean or Pro Vice-Chancellor with responsibility for graduate research. Additionally, professional leaders in researcher development and management from the member institutions participate in working groups, annual conferences, and webinars, where they contribute insights into operational and regulatory challenges in the recruitment and management of HDR candidates. ACGR is thus uniquely qualified to provide credible advice on the Australian research training environment and is pleased to provide the following responses for consideration by the ARC.

The ACGR are very pleased to see the main aim of the review "A renewed focus and structure for the NCGP will enable Australia to: build the next generation of world-class researchers, including Indigenous researchers". As the peak body for Higher Degree by

Research education in Australia, the ACGR are strongly committed to this aim of building the next generation of world-class researchers, and particularly Indigenous researchers. However, we are concerned that, in doing so, the proposed scheme would inadvertently introduce measures that would see support for PhD students severely reduced and have a devastating impact on domestic PhD enrolments.

Currently, Australia is experiencing a decline in domestic enrolments in the PhD nationally. Between 2018 and 2024, there was an 8% decline in PhD enrolments, which can be attributed to the strong job market coupled with the low stipend rates available to PhD students in Australia.¹ PhD students are crucial to the pipeline of future researchers and therefore any changes to the national funding landscape must consider the impact that those changes would have on PhD students. The proposed model dedicates a large proportion of grants for the “Initiate” scheme (900+), which are geared towards two-year projects that favour high-risk/high-reward research. While the ACGR appreciates the rationale of increasing funding to high-risk/high-reward research, **the likely unintended impact of this change is to ensure that these grants could not support a PhD student who requires funding across 3.5 years.**

The current ratio of “Initiate” to “Breakthrough” grants (900:300) means that the majority of grants, and particularly those awarded to Early- and Mid-Career Researchers (EMCRs), will no longer be able to support PhD students. This will likely result in a further reduction in the number of domestic PhD students who are able to access PhD scholarships, which will in turn contribute to the current decline in domestic enrolments into the PhD that is being observed nationally.¹ Further, this will also mean that EMCRs will be less likely to attract PhD students as lead supervisors, which will further disadvantage people early in their careers and deny ECRs of the opportunity to learn valuable skills in mentoring and supervision.

The concern of the ACGR is that, if introduced, these changes have the potential to undermine the aim of building the next generation of researchers and do the opposite. ACGR recommends **lengthening the initiate grants to three years and/or changing the proportion of funding dedicated to initiate versus breakthrough grants.** These changes would go some way towards mitigating the devastating impact that this new structure would otherwise have on domestic PhD enrolments.

¹Universities Australia and Australian Council of Graduate Research (2024). Investing in PhD Candidates in Australia.