Dear Margaret,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the consultation paper outlining changes to the ARC Discovery Projects scheme. In addition to the specific feedback requested in the template which we attach, we make the following more general comments.

We firmly support the changes proposed for early career researchers (ECRs), though we are mindful now of the challenges these could pose for researchers in the future in the subsequent career stage, and that a continuation of the Future Fellowships scheme will be vital. It is important that we keep some mechanisms for attracting and retaining the most talented researchers in Australia.

The University recognises the challenge the ARC is facing with regard to funding and that it is, in part, seeking to distribute funds more strategically. We will certainly support the ARC in pressing for an increase to the public funding for the important nationally competitive grant programs it administers on behalf of the Australian Government.

We would also suggest that the ARC maintain reasonable levels of funding for projects rather than cut funds to individual projects in order to prop up the success rate. Funding at 55-60% of the estimated direct costs of the research, means that much research proposed is no longer fully viable. It also means that at a time when the Government is seeking to improve the overall sustainability of the sector through measures like the Sustainable Research Excellence initiative, institutions are being forced to cut corners, or to divert funds from other activities to meet the direct costs of awarded research. In an environment of ever increasing applications, we do not believe that the current approach of seeking to keep success rates for core programs above certain levels is sustainable in the long term. We therefore think it may be time for the ARC to initiative a discussion across the sector about the pros and cons of sustaining the success rate, as opposed to funding the highest quality projects appropriately. We do, however, welcome increased flexibility in the expenditure of funds, particularly around teaching relief.

It is also worth noting one particular aspect of the changes here, and that is the shift to allow research-based creative practice to be eligible, a move we strongly support.
We look forward to seeing the final form of the rules for both the DECRAs and Discovery projects in early January.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Jill Trewhella
Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research)
ARC Discovery Program Consultation Paper
Response Pro-forma

The ARC Discovery Program Consultation Paper is available at www.arc.gov.au

Responses to the Consultation Paper should be submitted electronically, using this pro-forma, to the ARC by COB Wednesday 1 December 2010.

Email: DiscoveryConsultation@arc.gov.au

If you have any questions about the Consultation Paper, please contact:

Mr Jonathan Rogers, Acting Assistant Director
Ph: (02) 6287 6667 or email: DiscoveryConsultation@arc.gov.au

Respondent Survey

Information gathered using this survey will enable the ARC to analyse feedback received by type of respondent. Any reporting of respondent information will be aggregated and will not be used to identify individual respondents. Completion of the Respondent Survey (pages 1 & 2) is optional.

Contact Details of Respondent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title:</th>
<th>Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Research</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name:</td>
<td>Professor Jill Trewhella</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organisation:</td>
<td>The University of Sydney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact email address:</td>
<td><a href="mailto:jill.trewhella@sydney.edu.au">jill.trewhella@sydney.edu.au</a></td>
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**Is this an individual response or a response on behalf of an institution?**

(Please mark with an X in the box to the right of the appropriate option)

| Individual response       |                      |
| Institution response X    |                      |

If this is an institutional response please proceed to the feedback section.

If this is an individual response please complete the individual respondent information before continuing to the feedback section.
### Individual respondent information

(Please mark with an X in the box to the right of the appropriate option)

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Feedback

A new ECR award in the Discovery Program

Issues for specific feedback

1. Is the definition of ‘early-career’ as researchers who have between 0 and 5 years research experience since the award of their PhD (or equivalent research qualification or experience) appropriate?

Response:

Yes, this definition is appropriate.

We note, however, that in some science disciplines where it is common for people to do two postdocs, researchers are often only starting independent academic careers after 5 years (in chemistry at Sydney and in the Go8 as far as we can ascertain, the proportion of such people is roughly 50%). We urge the ARC to remain alert to funding levels for researchers 5-8 years from PhD. We also encourage the ARC to foster continued growth in the observance of ROPE to mitigate this problem.

2. Will the proposed new ECR award meet the needs of ECRs?

Response:

Yes. In particular, the flexibility of the scheme will assist researchers in developing their careers in appropriately structured ways, including integration in to teaching and research positions. Again we make the point about the importance of the observance of ROPE.

3. How do we maximise international and national mobility in designing this scheme?

Response:

It is important to make the scheme open to overseas applicants, so that we effectively support excellence in research in Australia – the best possible people doing high quality research. National mobility should be viewed favourably, with DECRAs wishing to stay at the same institution required to strongly justify how staying is appropriate and supportive of their careers and research. Consideration should be given to supporting ECRs who wish to spend 3-12 months overseas as part of their DECRA, perhaps formalized as an international collaborative award (ICA) of sorts, as is part of the Discovery program.

4. Is $25,000 per annum an appropriate amount for additional project support (noting if more was offered fewer awards could be funded)?

Response:

Yes, it is a reasonable level of support given the overall funding pressure and if DECRA holders are able to be part of other DPs in addition to the award. We urge that the DECRA rules permit flexible use of project
funds e.g. for research assistance to free up time of the CI.

Given such a limit, however, it is evident that applicants would be well advised to scope their projects accordingly, or to identify additional resources in the application. Impact of such a restriction is likely to be greater for some disciplines (e.g. archaeology where fieldwork costs can be significant) but there is no easy way to accommodate that in the rules. University of Sydney data show that on average, current and previous APDs have an annual project budget less than $25,000 per year.

We note that the consultation paper is silent on DECRAs or Senior Award holders based in ARC Centres of Excellence – analogous to the current concept of Centre Fellows. We urge the ARC to retain such an option whereby an Award holder could receive the salary component of the award, but have the project costs funded by the Centre if they propose a research project falling within the remit of the Centre. Our experience is that this mechanism currently works very well to help grow critical mass in Centres, at all levels of Fellowship.

5. Are the selection criteria appropriate?

Response:

The University maintains that the proposed criteria are the best way to achieve the ARC’s desired outcomes, particularly with regard to quality. We propose that the weighting for the project remain at 50%, with the weighting for track record increased to 30% at least and that for institutional commitment correspondingly decreased to 20%, if not less.

We recommend that a term such as ‘suitability of research environment’ would be more appropriate than ‘institutional commitment’. We agree there needs to be some evidence that the applicant has the ability to carry out an independent project, within a suitable and supportive research environment. We take it that what is intended is the availability of relevant infrastructure and mentoring at an appropriate level, rather than commitment of additional funding.

6. Should there be limitations on the number of times an applicant may apply?

Response:

No.

7. Given that some of the current cohort of potential applicants for ARF/QEII Fellowships may apply to the new ECR award but those seeking a second ARF/QEII Fellowship will need to apply to the Future Fellowships scheme, should the current restriction on ARF/QEIIs applying for Future Fellowships be relaxed?

Response:

Yes. Such a relaxation would make sense in the circumstances.

Clearly various details of the Future Fellowships scheme will need adjustment given these proposed change to the Discovery scheme. Three points in particular that we suggest are that:

- the ARC consider removing the restriction of only two Future
Fellowship applications being made by any researcher during the 2009–2013 rounds, or at least avoid such limiting measures in the future version of the scheme.

- Future Fellows be allowed to apply for a second fellowship.
- Consideration be given to awarding project costs with Future Fellowships to remove some overlap with the Discovery scheme and so that the Future Fellowship becomes an attractive enough package to recruit outstanding overseas researchers.

8. Are the proposed flexible arrangements adequate?
Response:
Flexibility, for example to accommodate teaching responsibilities or carers’ needs is welcome. Good governance will be needed at institutions to ensure appropriate post-award management.

Issues for general feedback
The ARC also welcomes feedback on any other aspect of proposed new arrangements to support early-career researchers.
Response:
It is indicated that the assessment process for DECRAs will be separate from that for Discovery projects, but no information is provided about the new process apart from the proposed broad assessment criteria. This lack of detail makes it impossible to assess the likely reliability and validity of the process, or of how the change might contribute to ‘assessor fatigue’. For example, will the turnaround time be shortened? Will the process of assessment follow the DP pattern? Will there be provision for a rejoinder?

A targeted and simplified Discovery Projects scheme

Issues for specific feedback
1. Are the weightings of the selection criteria appropriate?
Response:
The weightings are appropriate. We suggest, however, that the ARC revisit the value of the National Benefit section; it overlaps with Significance (National Research Priorities especially) and it is clear from assessor reports that overseas assessors are unsure how to evaluate this section.
Removal of the National Benefit section would require revised weightings of criteria. We would suggest track record, 40%; S&I 35%; and methodology 25% (or perhaps 30/30).

2. How might we simplify the application process further?
Response:
Simplifications to both the free-text sections of the proposal as well as the RMS process would be welcome. We make the following specific recommendations for simplifying and improving the application process:

- auto-populate as many fields as possible in the form through RMS.
- streamline some aspects of the proposal. Communication of results for example, which could be removed as a separate section and instead be shifted in to the Approach section.
- reduce the level of detail required for the budget, given that funds are arbitrarily cut in any case.
- remove the table in Part F of previous grants held matched with the publications arising from those grants. This cross referencing of publications to grants is of little value to assessors, but can be time consuming for the applicants and replicates information already submitted to the ARC in annual and final reports. The productivity of a researcher could be addressed by an expert in the field by looking at previous project grant income and a separate list of publications.
- introduce a two-stage assessment process to reduce the amount of time devoted by researchers to writing and assessing what will be unsuccessful applications. A form of this process might be a rapid-turnaround pre-screening of short applications (e.g. two-page proposal, one-page CV, one-page summary budget) by ARC panels. The ARC would provide brief feedback to unsuccessful applicants and invite the top, say, 35% to submit full applications that would go out to expert peer review. This approach would reduce overall work for the ARC, assessors, and applicants alike, but would require significant rethinking of the application cycle. A similar system operates well in New Zealand’s Marsden Fund.

3. Are there any issues about eligibility we should address?

Response:

While there are suggestions that the current limitations on the number of grants that can be held should be removed, we believe, on balance that they are appropriate. With only two grants, however, it is important that these be funded at levels such that the projects can be completed satisfactorily. We would encourage formalising the implication in the paper that in exceptional circumstances, researchers would be able to argue for larger/longer grants. Again, in the Sciences, there are many projects that genuinely require a timeframe longer than three years to achieve meaningful results.

We also comment on the ARC requirement that one Discovery Project must be collaborative. The idea to promote collaboration is good in principle, but it does not always make sense, particularly for those that are attempting new lines of innovative research. The application process can become an exercise in trying to find someone to work with on a project, rather than being driven by the scientific questions.

4. Is the rejoinder process useful?

ARC Discovery Program Consultation Paper Response Pro-forma
Response:

Definitely. It provides applicants with the opportunity to counter criticism (and often factual error) in the assessments and to provide an update on track record which can be important in so protracted a process. In the current form of the scheme these assessor reports are the only feedback available too, which makes the process particularly important.

5. Do you have comments on the current eligibility criteria for Discovery Projects CIs, in particular, and the provisions for researchers holding 50% appointments at Eligible Organisations?

Response:

No comments.

6. How might we improve feedback to unsuccessful applicants?

Response:

Researchers would value more detailed feedback if a method of providing it can be devised that is meaningful (and not onerous for the panels). The other important point is that researchers want feedback on how the application was assessed in the final stage of the process when decisions are being made. Overall percentile rankings are not helpful and can be misleading. Brief comments of the order of ‘Limitation of the scope of the project would make this proposal more viable’ or ‘Applicant’s research experience to date does not indicate potential capacity to execute the proposal’ would at least indicate areas requiring attention.

Issues for general feedback

The ARC also welcomes feedback on any other aspect of proposed new arrangements for the Discovery Projects scheme.

Response:

Clarification concerning the new ‘senior awards’ is needed, as the Consultation Paper does not address some questions that arise from the proposed elimination of ARF/QEII and APF. Particular anomalies occur because FTs are to be the principal mid-career fellowship, where originally they were intended to complement ARF/QEII: e.g. (i) FTs are four years in duration (cf DECRA and DP ‘senior awards’, now three year maximum; and five year Laureates – the extended period for the premier fellowship is intelligible); (ii) FTs do not have the flexibility provisions envisaged for DECRA and DP ‘senior awards’: a matter of particular concern in mid-career where an applicant might well want to maintain some teaching presence; and (iii) in addition, FTs emphasise both National Research Priorities and the National Innovation Priorities, with consequent privileging of some ‘topical’ research over more traditional curiosity-driven projects.