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The Australian Council of University Art & Design Schools (ACUADS)

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SUBMISSION BY
THE AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF UNIVERSITY ART & DESIGN SCHOOLS (ACUADS)
TO THE AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH COUNCIL (ARC) ON THE *DISCUSSION PAPER:*
A NEW PLAN FOR ARC-FUNDED RESEARCH

The **Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools (ACUADS)** is the nation's peak organisation representing the interests of art and design schools within Australian universities. ACUADS currently represents 20 Australian tertiary art and design faculties, schools and departments and other academic units offering university degrees at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in art, craft and design.

This submission in response to the *Discussion Paper: A New Plan for ARC-Funded Research* is prepared on behalf of the ACUADS Executive Board: Associate Professor Veronika Kelly (University of South Australia), Associate Professor Charles Robb (Queensland University of Technology), Associate Professor Katherine Moline (University of New South Wales), Professor Mitchell Whitelaw (Australian National University), Dr Janelle Evans (University of Melbourne), Associate Professor Spiros Panigirakis (Monash University), Monte Masi (Adelaide Central School of Art), Associate Professor Simone Slee (University of Melbourne) and Associate Professor Ionat Zurr (University of Western Australia). The submission drew on expertise from ACUADS member institutions, including contribution from Associate Professor Michelle Catanzaro (Western Sydney University).

ACUADS welcomes the proposal for reforms to the ARC's National Competitive Grants Program (NCGP), including the revised structure, support for early career researchers, Lead and Mentor program, and embedded fellowships. In response to the six questions in the *Discussion Paper (Paper)*, we offer the following perspectives on the re-designed NCGP's potential to meet the ambition in the overarching purpose statement (p. 16) in relation to our sector.

Indigenous researchers and research

The proposal is to be commended for the inclusion of dedicated support for Indigenous researchers and Indigenous-led research. Yet, there appears to be limited recognition of Indigenous Knowledges as valid methodologies in their own right. More explicit reference to Indigenous research approaches is necessary to reflect the claimed move away from traditional frameworks and metrics. Creative Australia has provided valuable resources for working with Indigenous knowledges that would be worthy of review by the ARC, such as *Protocols for using First Nations Cultural and Intellectual Property in the Arts (2019)*, available at <https://creative.gov.au/advocacy-and-research/first-nations-arts-and-culture>.

The Paper acknowledges the need for "Indigenous-informed assessment processes" (p. 18) but provides no detail on how Indigenous perspectives will be integrated into evaluation criteria or what Indigenous expertise and representation will exist on assessment panels. This raises questions about whether Indigenous research will be assessed through culturally appropriate lenses that recognise Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing.

Further, the report lacks clarity on how Indigenous knowledge will be embedded and valued across all disciplines rather than siloed into specifically Indigenous-focused projects (with significantly lower grants per round than the Initiate and Breakthrough schemes). Additional detail about this would ensure Indigenous concerns are holistically considered and embedded across all research areas. For this approach to genuinely support Indigenous research, more comprehensive work is needed to ensure cultural appropriateness is clearly articulated at every stage—from application design to assessment to impact measurement—with clear mechanisms for Indigenous-led processes (Catanzaro, 2025).

Design and Creative Arts Research

The Paper seems to suggest a positive move towards the kind of research that practice-based design and creative arts researchers engage in. While there may not be space for a discipline to be reflected within a document such as this, several of the transdisciplinary and innovative methods that are suggested are drawn from, or are deeply embedded within, the design and creative arts disciplines.

Despite the Paper emphasising novel, disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives and high-risk research it would be advantageous for researchers if the policy explicitly recognised and evaluated the qualitative, iterative processes that are central to practice-based research. For example, in the design and creative arts disciplines, the act of making through prototyping, performance, and artistic experimentation can generate new knowledge and methods with significant cultural, social, and intellectual value, even if the quantifiable economic impact is not immediately apparent. The notion of an increased appetite for risky or innovative research projects approved on potential rather than track record is positive. This will allow experimental and creative arts researchers a greater capacity to secure competitive funding that they may not have been provided access to previously.

Due to the perceived move toward more iterative and experimental research, which is the foundation of design and creative arts research, we would value a clear delineation and reference to design and creative arts research within future documentation. Making the field of design and creative arts visible beyond subsumption under the umbrella of humanities would demonstrate a genuine commitment to an inclusive research framework that values all forms of knowledge creation and towards a sustained, vibrant research-innovation ecosystem (Catanzaro, 2025).

Additionally, a challenge faced by researchers has been in regard to cross-disciplinary research as the ARC has been designed to assess proposals which are within one discipline, or those deemed “closely related”. An improved system for assessing cross-disciplinary research would enable evaluating the importance and rigor of the cross-disciplinary approach.

Alignment with Government priorities

The Paper does not address whether the requirement of the National Interest Test will continue under the proposed Prioritise scheme or other new funding schemes, and makes two concerning statements. These pertain to the Collaborate and Prioritise schemes, and designated research programs, where “the Minister has final decision-making authority” (p. 25, 26), and for designated research programs the Minister “retains decision-making authority [...] and can direct the Board not to approve a grant for reasons relevant to the security, defence or international relations of Australia” (p. 16).

The Paper emphasises that projects under the Prioritise scheme must "demonstrate national or international significance" (p. 26) yet it provides no safeguards against ministerial vetoes similar to the recent example of the cancellation by Creative Australia of the artist Khaled Sabsabi and curator Michael Dagostino selected to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale in 2026. For the ARC's reformulation to genuinely support research excellence across all disciplines including design and the creative arts, it must explicitly address how academic freedom will be protected from arbitrary political decisions driven by short-term political imperatives. For the revised NCGP to stand up for "bold thinking" (p. 8) and deliver "cultural, economic, environmental and societal benefits for Australia [...] that produces new knowledge, understandings, ideas and solutions that sustain a vibrant research-innovation ecosystem" (p. 16), it should outline robust decision-making process that are driven by evidence-based national research priorities.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this consultation and we look forward to the outcomes. Should there be any questions or follow up regarding this submission please contact the ACUADS Executive Officer at admin@acuads.com.au.



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Chair, Australian Council of University Art & Design Schools (ACUADS)

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