Australian Government

Australian Research Council

ARC Linkage Projects Grant Guidelines & Agreement Changes – 2019

Consultation

Feedback from stakeholders was considered in the drafting of the grant guidelines and grant agreement.

Changes have been made in accordance with the Australian Government's Streamlining Government Grants Administration Program (announced in 2015–16) and in response to the Parliamentary inquiry into efficient, effective and coherency of Australian Government funding for research (2018).

In addition to the standard consideration of comments provided throughout the previous year's grant opportunity assessment processes, ahead of the 2019 drafting process a number of changes were proposed to streamline the guidelines, agreements and assessment process through the National Competitive Grants Program (NCGP) Streamlining Workshop held with members of the Australasian Research Management Society (ARMS) in November 2018. Some of the proposed changes were presented to ARMS members and the ARC College of Experts for further feedback prior to their submission to the Minister for approval.

The ARC also consulted with the ARMS group about the ARC's transition to the Commonwealth standard grant agreement template in July 2019. This consultation provided an opportunity to comment on a draft ARC grant agreement and to ask questions about the new agreement template. Feedback from this group was incorporated in the new grant agreements.

OVERALL CHANGES TO THE 2019 GRANT GUIDELINES AND GRANT AGREEMENT

1. **Multi-year guidelines**
    In the past the ARC has revised and issued grant guidelines for each scheme every year. From 2019, we intend to issue the scheme guidelines every second year.

    This is reflected in removing reference to specific dates in the grant guidelines so the document can apply for a number of grant opportunities (scheme rounds).

    Changing the guidelines period provides researchers and research office staff with assurance that the details of each scheme will stay the same for a longer period, meaning longer term planning can be put in place and less time is devoted to the interpretation of ARC grant documentation. It will also provide the ARC with more time to consider policy issues affecting its funding schemes, rather than spending significant time amending wording and formatting.

    Guidelines references: applicants are referred to the ARC website (www.arc.gov.au) for dates for each grant opportunity where relevant in the guidelines.

2. **Format and streamlining**
    Since the ARC's move to the whole-of-government grant guidelines template in 2018, the ARC has continued to review the format and content of its guidelines with a view to:
    -   standardising presentation across all ARC funding schemes;
    -   increasing alignment with the guidelines of the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) where appropriate; and
    -   ensuring the ARC's grant guidelines are consistent with the whole-of-government grant guidelines.

While no significant changes to the format and content of the guidelines have been made, minor revisions include the following:

- clarifying the eligibility requirements (especially project limits) to ensure that they are as simple as possible;
- changing the layout of the Eligible Organisation list to match NHMRC (guidelines ref: 4.6);
- removing lists of policies, and instead referring applicants to the ARC website for the most up to date information (this is also in line with the NHMRC) (guidelines ref: 10.6); and
- removing any other unnecessary duplication or repetition.

The ARC's transition to the whole-of-government grant agreement template has also required changes to the format and structure of grant agreements. The following formatting changes have been made to the grant agreements:

- information regarding the specific scheme is now at the beginning of the agreement, rather than in schedules at the end of the agreement and scattered throughout the body of the agreement;
- information is now ordered in a more logical way, flowing from the project start through to grant activities, variations and reporting; and
- Execution (standard) Clauses and definitions are now at the end of the agreement.

CHANGES TO ASSESSMENT

3. **Scheme objectives and assessment criteria streamlined and updated**
In 2019, the ARC reviewed the assessment criteria for all NCGP funding schemes as part of streamlining activities being undertaken by the agency. The review was undertaken on the basis that clarity and consistency in presentation of the assessment criteria and their sub-elements will help provide clarity for both applicants and assessors. In some instances, the changes made relate specifically to changes made in the application form to streamline the collection of information.

The full list of changes to the *Linkage Projects* Assessment Criteria is available at **Attachment A**.

4. **Scheme objectives structure**
The scheme objectives and outcomes have been separated to clarify the objectives and expected outcomes of each scheme where:

- objectives are 'the specific result the ARC/Australian Government is trying to achieve within the scheme timeframe and with the available resources'; and
- outcomes are 'the result the ARC/Australian Government hopes to achieve if the objectives are accomplished'.

This approach is consistent with the whole-of-government grant guidelines template and the NHMRC.

5. **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research - to improve consistency, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research sub-elements have been included in all relevant schemes.**

Only including specific elements relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research under the *Discovery Indigenous* scheme has contributed to confusion about the scheme, that is, that one of its primary purposes is to support Indigenous research. The sub-elements relating to the conduct of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research are included under all relevant ARC schemes to ensure that proposals to conduct Indigenous research are framed appropriately (for example, through consultation with relevant communities).

6. **Requests not to assess – removed option to request more than 3 assessors be excluded**
In order to streamline this process, a maximum of three assessors may be requested not to assess an application. Previously more than three assessors could be requested not to assess an application in extraordinary circumstances and only if additional justification was provided. The administrative burden of this process was high. The option was not taken up by many applicants, and many of the requests were already covered by standard conflict of interest processes. Further information about this process is available on the ARC website.

CHANGES TO ELIGIBILITY

7. **Project limits simplified**
Chief Investigators with projects funded under *Special Research Initiatives*, *Learned Academies Special Projects* or *Supporting Responses to Commonwealth Science Council Priorities* schemes will no longer count towards *Linkage Projects* scheme project limits requirements.

The wording in this section of the grant guidelines (*What are the limits on the number of applications and projects per named participant?*) has also been revised for clarity.

Further information about NCGP project limits is available on the ARC website.

Guidelines reference: 4.30-4.35 (page 16)

CHANGES TO BUDGET REQUESTS

8. **Changed budget item limit - Teaching Relief**
The limit for teaching relief will now be considered per Chief Investigator (CI) rather than at a project level. The new limit allows teaching relief to be requested for up to $50,000 per CI per year. As the limit was previously set by Project rather than CI, CIs participating in a project involving multiple CIs were disadvantaged when requesting teaching relief. This change seeks to rectify this issue.

Guidelines references: 5.8 (page 17)

CHANGES TO POLICY IN THE AGREEMENT

9. **Data Management Plan**
All successful applicants for ARC grants will now be required to prepare a data management plan before the project starts. Details on data management were previously required in the application form, this requirement has been removed. The Administering Organisation will be required to retain the data management plan and provide it to the ARC upon request.

10. **Participating Organisation Agreement requirements**
The information in the grant agreement about Participating Organisation Agreements has been reduced, which means that there is now more flexibility for Administering Organisations to determine what level of detail is commensurate with the contribution of each Participating Organisation when preparing Participating Organisation agreements.

11. **Ethics clearances**
Practices relating to ethical clearances have been brought into line with NHMRC practices, to provide clarity to researchers and Administering Organisations about when they need to have all appropriate ethical clearances in place. A plan for ethical clearances must be in place before the project starts to ensure that clearance is approved before the particular component of the project which requires ethical clearance begins.

12. **Further guidance information on the ARC website**
    Detailed information regarding how to submit variations, how to complete reports and other guidance information will now be provided on the ARC website, separate to the agreement.

    Refer to https://www.arc.gov.au/grants/grant-administration for further information.

Attachment A – Changes to Linkage Projects assessment criteria

Investigator(s)/Capability: 25%
- Describe the quality of the candidates' ROPE including evidence of:
  - potential to engage in collaborative research with end-users
  - experience in research training, mentoring and supervision
  - time and capacity to undertake and manage the proposed research in collaboration with the Partner Organisation(s).

Project quality and innovation: 25%
- Describe the extent to which the project is significant and innovative including:
  - any new methods or technologies to be developed that address a specific market opportunity
  - how the anticipated outcomes will advance the knowledge base to address an important problem and/or provide an end-user and/or industry advantage
  - how the project's aims and concepts are novel and innovative
  - how the project will significantly enhance links with industry and/or other organisations outside the Australian publicly-funded research and higher education sectors
- Describe the research approach and training including:
  - the conceptual framework, design, methods and analyses, demonstrating these are adequately developed, well integrated and appropriate to the aims of the project
  - the intellectual content and scale of the work proposed is appropriate to a higher degree by research student where relevant
  - ~~the project plan's business model for implementation~~ [removed]
  - ~~how the project will address the Australian Government Science and Research Priorities~~ [relocated to Benefit]

Feasibility and commitment: 20%
- Describe
  - the extent to which the project represents value for money
  - the supportive and high quality environment for this research in the Administering Organisation and the Partner Organisation(s)
  - the availability of the necessary facilities to conduct the research
  - the commitment of each Partner Organisation(s) to collaboration in the research project and capacity to implement the outcomes of the research
  - the adequacy of the budget, including cash and in-kind contributions pledged by the participating organisations

If the project involves Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research
  - the strategies for enabling collaboration with Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities where appropriate (for example, dialogue/collaboration with an Indigenous cultural mentor)
  - any existing or developing, supportive and high quality research communities

Benefit: 30%
- Describe:
  - New or advanced knowledge resulting from outcomes of the research
  - Economic, commercial, environmental, social and/or cultural benefits for relevant Australian research end-users (including relevant industry sectors)
  - Potential contribution to capacity in the Australian Government's Science and Research Priorities
  - Benefits of the research for Partner Organisation(s) and other relevant end-users

- Contribution of the research to developing strategic research alliances between the higher education organisation(s) and industry and/or other organisation(s)
- Strategies to encourage dissemination, commercialisation, and if appropriate, the promotion of research outcomes;
- Where relevant the extent to which the applicants have identified the freedom to operate in the Intellectual Property and patent landscape to enable future benefits to industry and/or end-users
- ~~The anticipated economic, commercial, environmental, or social benefits to the relevant Australian research end-users (including relevant industry sectors);~~ [reworded]
- ~~Extent to which the project represents value for money~~. [moved to Feasibility]