

Comments to the ARC on the Review of the NCGP

On behalf of 60 China Studies scholars from 22 universities in Australia; the National President and Chair, Australia China Business Council; as well as the past and current Chair, Foundation for Australian Studies in China.

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Professor Christina Twomey
ARC Chief Research Officer
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Dear Prof Twomey

Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the review of the NCGP. These comments address three particular questions posed in the *Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Discussion Paper*:

2. How can the NCGP further support and encourage: (p.9)
 - a. high-calibre research that drives the advancement of knowledge?
 - b. the utilisation, translation or commercialisation of research to deliver benefits to Australia's society, economy, and community?

5. How can the NCGP best support collaboration between disciplines? (p.13)

'There may be opportunities within the NCGP to remove possible disincentives for interdisciplinary proposals and to promote their equitable consideration during the review process.'

9. How should the NCGP be structured to best support and deliver on national research priorities, as they evolve over time? (p.21)

In March 2023 the Australian Academy of the Humanities (AAH) produced a report on [Australia's China Knowledge Capability: University teaching, research, and future needs](#) that highlighted key challenges for Australia's China knowledge into the future—both short term and long term. Several of the findings have direct relevance to the current NCGP review and point to a crisis in the production of core China research in the HCA and SBE fields (p. 50).

The report highlighted 'a funding decline (number of projects and funding awarded) through Australia's premier funding research agency which has been an important source of funding for humanities, arts and social sciences research on China' (p.51) It shows that this decline has been steady for the past 12 years (p. 59). The report also noted that there has been no support of China-related research at scale, such as through the funding of Centres of Excellence (p. 60) that can support a multidisciplinary program of strategic, sovereign research capacity on China.

This trend runs counter to our national sovereign interests at a time when China is becoming increasingly more important to the Australian economy and also to our stability and security in the Asia-Pacific. In 2023 no ARC Discovery Grant was awarded to research on China. Moreover, collaboration with China-based researchers slumped to the 'other' category in 2023 after many years at fourth place. Our nation's need for expert knowledge about China grows apace, and we hope that this review can go some way to supporting that demand. Attention to ensuring that research is conducted in Australian institutions about China is central to advancing our present and future national interests.

While there may be many reasons for the dramatic absence of Discovery Grants related to China, it is possible that there are structural issues that your committee could consider in its reforms of the grant programs. Researchers on core China topics are covered by two panels (HCA and SBE) and must combine disciplinary knowledge and expertise with knowledge and expertise of China, its history, society and cultures. Top quality research on China is inherently interdisciplinary. The absence of China knowledge in the ARC College of Experts means that applications to those two panels risk being assessed only in disciplinary frames and debates. The innovative aspects of their contents related to China are potentially overlooked in a largely Euro-American centred research culture. The benefits that accrue to the Australian nation from in-depth knowledge about China are lost in the process.

All Area Studies fields experience this problem but in the case of Asian Studies and China Studies there are additional difficulties that arise from the historical weight of the UK, Europe and USA in our university systems. In some parts of the world (notably USA, UK) research funding for Area Studies is now provided separately from and alongside the major disciplinary areas. The advancement of knowledge usually progresses regardless of national boundaries, even while the application of that knowledge sometimes may be subject under certain circumstances to national security considerations. Australia's capacity to produce cutting edge research on

China is currently at crisis point, precisely at a time when that knowledge is most sorely needed.

In Australia, during the 1990s the ARC convened a discrete Asian Studies panel to promote research on the region to good effect. Australia produced outstanding China scholarship that gained global recognition. Later the ARC supported research on the Asia-Pacific region by ensuring that both the HCA and SBE panels had at least one Asia-Pacific expert each among their membership and moreover that those two Asia-Pacific experts were in any one year not engaged in research on the same country.

China and its social, economic, technological, and political development are too important for Australia's future to be allowed to inadvertently disappear from the ARC's research agenda. We urge the current review to address this problem.

Yours sincerely

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