



Asian Studies
Association
of Australia

30 April 2024

Dear Minister for Education,

RE: Submission on behalf of the ASAA regarding the Department of Education and Australian Research Council's Policy Review of the National Competitive Grants Program

The Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) supports the current review by the Department of Education and ARC of the National Competitive Grants Program. In relation to the Terms of Reference (TOR), the ASAA recommends the following:

TOR 4: Strong and diverse research sector

The ASAA supports increasing the PhD stipend under ARC grants to ensure that such a stipend is above the poverty line in Australia. PhD students deserve a minimum living wage and the rate of inflation has outpaced the existing stipend rate.

TOR 6: National priorities for research

The ASAA recommends that the study of Asia be elevated as a national priority, particularly in the social sciences and humanities grant rounds (the HCA and SBE fields).

In 2023 the Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) produced a report on [*Australia's Asia Education Imperative: Trends in the Study of Asia and Pathways to Reform*](#), authored by Professor Edward Aspinall and Professor Melissa Crouch, that highlighted the challenges researchers focussing on Asia face in the HCA and SBE fields in the current climate research.

The report noted that between 2002 and 2020: *“funding for Asia-related research provided by the ARC has gradually declined over the period covered, with falls in both the total number of projects being funded annually and the value of total funding in real terms. When viewed in the context of the rapid expansion of Australian universities, these declines are more dramatic, with public funding for research on Asia failing to keep pace with the growth of the Australian university sector.”* (p. 68)

This decline has continued since the report was published. In 2023, only one project with any Asian focus was funded in the HASS fields for the ARC Discovery Grant round.

This negative trend runs contrary to the national interest in promoting deeper engagement with the Asian region. As numerous government initiatives show, Australia's current and future security and economic prosperity are embedded in the Asian region. For example, the Moore report published by DFAT in 2024 *Invested: Australia's Southeast Asia Strategy to 2040* advocates for and charts a course for deeper engagement especially with ASEAN.

There is past precedent for the ARC elevating the study of Asia as a special priority for academic research. In the early stages of the ARC's institutional life, a special set of funding administered by an expert Asian panel coordinated grant allocations to Asian Studies. Two of the ASAA's past Presidents served on this panel, Professor John Ingelson and Professor Tessa Morris-Suzuki. The panel was instrumental in driving a strategic direction for Asian Studies research in the HCA and SBE areas. The success of this past program of targeted funding is evident in the global leadership Australia has in key fields of scholarship on Asia but also the transformation and expansion of Australian government and business ties towards Asia.

The decline in funding we have identified should be rectified in order that Australia prepare itself for the future in which Asian nations play a leading role in shaping world affairs and global culture.

We also note the specific recommendations made in our report to embed the study and research of Asia as a national priority, including:

- Establishing two dedicated ARC research schemes:
 - an Asian Studies Fellowship Special Research Initiative, and
 - an Asia Special Research Initiative. Criteria for both schemes would include competence in at least one Asian language, and both schemes would apply to the humanities and social sciences.
- Establishing a special program based on the Centres of Excellence framework to support deep research collaboration between Australian and Asian universities in addressing major global challenges. Over a period of five to 10 years, we recommend that five such Australia-Asia Collaborative Centres of Excellence could be supported, with potential for collaboration and support from partner Asian governments.
- Ensuring a permanent role for Asian Studies expertise on the ARC College of Experts. The ARC should be required to ensure there is a permanent role for an Asian Studies expert with language capabilities (FOR code 449901) to assess every ARC grant round in the HBA and SBE fields.

We trust that your review will address these issues that Asian studies, and related HASS fields, face within the ARC system.

Yours sincerely,



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