

## **IRU response: ARC Discovery Program consultation paper, 2010**

The IRU supports the intent of the paper to provide a more coherent set of awards and fellowships that provide opportunities for researchers across their careers, particularly for early career researchers (ECRs). In the following comments we focus on particular points of concern or lack of certainty about the detail of the proposed changes.

The IRU suggests that once the shape of the future awards is settled that the ARC consult again on the detail of how they will operate and be supported.

### **The new ECR award**

The intent of the proposed ECR award is to improve the likelihood that good researchers can access suitable support and positions in the early stages of their research career post completion of a doctorate. The IRU supports the creation of the new award but raises the following issues.

#### **Covering the period from ECR to Future Fellowship**

The discussion paper indicates that the ECR would be for three years full-time. This creates a potential gap, for highly capable researchers who win an ECR within two years of completing a PhD and undertake it full-time, of up to two years before they could access a Future Fellowship which is limited to those with five or more years' research experience.

Against one of the aims to ensure a viable career path for leading researchers this is a weakness in the proposal which should be addressed by allowing ECR award holders to receive a second Award based on the outcomes of the first award.

#### **ECR assessment criteria**

The IRU does not support the proposed weighting in the assessment for ECRs of 50% for the project, 20% for research record and 30% for institutional commitment. The relative standing of the project and research record is inverted. In the context of a competition among ECRs, the IRU considers that research record should be the key factor. It provides the best basis for understanding the likely value of future work, including the capacity to carry through a project and do with outstandingly.

Hence IRU considers that the selection criteria should be similar to those used to now for APD awards.

#### **Access to discover project grants**

The IRU is concerned that the requirement to either hold an ECR award (with up to \$25,000 for project costs) or win a discovery project grant. Depending on the area of research the \$25,000 may not be sufficient for all likely ECR award holders. The either/or requirement also retains the potential for applicants to apply in two pools at the same time, increasing workloads in all organisations, one issue the proposed changes seek to remove.

The ARC should look to develop a process that allows consideration of the need for a discovery grant in addition to receipt of the ECR award or for scope for a larger project cost element where the applicant makes a suitable case.

## **Changes to the Discovery Projects scheme**

### **Eligibility for awards**

The paper raises the question of whether the requirement that Chief Investigators should hold appointments of at least 50% with eligible institutes should be loosened or removed.

The IRU does not see any rationale to widen the eligibility without an substantial increase to the funds available for distribution. The programs are intended to support research from university staff and should continue to do so.

### **Loss of the QEII title**

Receipt of a QEII fellowship has been a particularly distinguished attribute for a researcher. The loss of the name is an unfortunate consequence of the integration into the Future Fellowship arrangements.

The IRU proposes that some of the Future Fellowships, potentially those at the second step, be named QEII fellowships to retain the historical link.

### **Combining the Australian Professorial Fellowships with the Australian Laureate Fellowships**

It is unclear whether the total number of fellowships under the new arrangements will be the same or fewer than from the current two programs combined.

## **General Issues**

### **Reduction in award period from 5 to 3 years**

On balance the IRU supports the reduction in the award period to three years, although the change may be hard on some disciplines with significant reliance on field work. With the limited funds and awards available it is important to ensure some breadth, with the provision that awardees are eligible to re-apply and be assessed on their performance.

We have raised the question of re-applying specifically for ECRs above but consider it is relevant across the suite of awards.

### **Reduction in feedback**

The IRU is concerned about the reduced amount of feedback to applicants in the most recent rounds. This hampers the capacity of researchers and institutions to understand the strengths and weaknesses of applications from which they can improve future applications.

### Timing: overlap of discovery and NHRMC rounds

The proposed timing for the discovery rounds will bring it closely into line with the NHMRC process putting considerable pressure on research offices and potentially on applicants whose research is of relevance to both funding councils.

IRU requests that the ARC work with NHMRC to ensure a more even spread of application rounds to allow universities to co-ordinate applications effectively.

IRU  
1 December 2010