ARC Linkage Infrastructure, Equipment and Facilities (LIEF) Grant Guidelines & Agreement Changes – 2019

Consultation

Feedback from stakeholders was considered in the drafting of the grant guidelines and grant agreement. In April 2019, the ARC distributed a consultation paper and accompanying online questionnaire to key research sector stakeholders regarding a suite of changes to the LIEF scheme, including allowing leasing to be an eligible budget item. Respondents broadly agreed with all of the proposed changes outlined in the consultation paper and several changes have been introduced into these grant guidelines.

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, members of the Australasian Research Management Society (ARMS) and the ARC College of Experts were consulted regarding some key changes.

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

OVERALL CHANGES TO THE 2019 GRANT GUIDELINES

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:

- changing the layout of the Eligible Organisation list to match NHMRC (guidelines ref: 4.8);
- 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.

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.   New Assessment Criteria
To improve clarity, an additional high-level assessment criterion has been included under the LIEF scheme for 'Suitability and Need'. The sub-elements included under the new criterion were previously located under the 'Benefit' criterion.

All of the assessment criteria changes are included at **Attachment A** of this document.

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 BUDGET REQUESTS

7. Leasing costs allowed as an eligible budget item
Due to changes in research equipment acquisition models, particularly in areas of fast moving technology, leasing has been added as an eligible budget item for the LIEF scheme. Further detail includes:
- leasing is available for one to five years;
- the cash contributions received from participating organisations for leasing requests should be the same as those required for other grants (that is, a minimum of 25 per cent of the total direct cost);
- the items for which leasing funding can be sought are the same as those that can be purchased; and
- justification as to why leasing is a more cost-effective option than purchase will be required in the application.

Guidelines reference: 3.2 (page 10), 4.1 (page 10) and 5.7c (page 16)

CHANGES TO POLICY IN THE AGREEMENT

8. Start date for projects
The LIEF grant agreement will now show a specific date by which the project must start. This date is 12 months after the scheme-specific Grant Commencement Date. This will avoid confusion for Administering Organisations and researchers, and will also introduce a common date for all projects in a grant opportunity.

All scheme dates are listed in the Grant Calendar available on the ARC website.

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 the LIEF assessment criteria

Project quality and innovation: 25%

- Describe the:
  - Aims and significance of the research that will be supported by LIEF funding sought
  - Relevance of the proposed research infrastructure to the needs of ARC and other competitively funded research projects/programs
  - Enhancement of support for areas of existing and/or emerging research strength
  - Demonstrated national or international focus for large scale cooperative initiatives.

Suitability/Need: 20%

- Describe the:
  - Demonstrated needs from the researchers and/or research projects that they will utilise the proposed research infrastructure, including level of demand and likely measurable impact on the research program, including beyond the project activity period
  - availability of and access to similar research infrastructure at organisational, regional, national and/or international level
  - planned rate of use of the proposed research infrastructure, including proposed arrangements for broader access to individuals not named on the application
  - alignment of this planned use with other similar existing infrastructure within Australia and/or internationally
  - Special needs for regional or otherwise remote institutions
  - ~~value for money and budget justification for cash and in-kind contributions, and the expected rate of use of the proposed research infrastructure~~ [removed]
  - ~~Importance of equipment for the training of research students~~ [removed]
  - ~~Feasibility of plan to use infrastructure~~ [removed]
  - ~~capacity for freedom to operate in the Intellectual Property and patent landscape to enable future benefits to industry (where relevant)~~ [removed]

Feasibility and strategic alignment: 25%

- Describe the:
  - Extent to which the project represents value for money
  - Feasibility of the plan to use the research infrastructure
  - Relevance of the research to the strategic priorities of the organisations
  - Evidence that each of the organisations is genuinely committed to, and prepared to collaborate in, the project
  - Existing or planned strategic research alliances between the higher education organisation(s) and other organisation(s)
  - Effectiveness of cooperative arrangements for the management and sharing of the proposed research infrastructure, including arrangements for ongoing operational expenditure where applicable

Investigator(s)/ Capability: 20%

- Describe the:
  - Demonstrated record in these activities (for CIs and PIs who will manage the purchase, design, manufacture, installation, maintenance and coordination of access to the proposed research infrastructure)
  - relevance of the research infrastructure to the research capacity and planned activities of each CI and PI on the application and, where relevant, to the research groups represented on the application
  - ~~evidence of research training, mentoring and supervision~~ [removed]
  - ~~track record of investigators relevant to the use of the proposed research infrastructure, with consideration given to Research Opportunity and Performance Evidence (ROPE)~~ [removed]

Benefit: 10%

- Describe the:
  - Benefit of the proposed research infrastructure to the national research community
  - 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 Capacity for freedom to operate in the Intellectual Property and patent landscape to enable future benefits to industry (where relevant)
  - ~~availability of and access to similar research infrastructure at organisational, regional, national and/or international level~~ [moved to feasibility and strategic alignment]
  - ~~demonstrated needs from the researchers and/or research projects that they will utilise the proposed research infrastructure, including level of demand and likely measurable impact on the research program, including beyond the project activity period~~ [moved to feasibility and strategic alignment]
  - ~~value for money and budget justification for cash and in-kind contributions, and the expected rate of use of the proposed research infrastructure~~ [moved to feasibility and strategic alignment]
  - ~~planned use of the proposed research infrastructure, including proposed arrangements for broader access to individuals not named on the application and the alignment of this planned use with other similar existing infrastructure within Australia and/or internationally~~ [moved to feasibility and strategic alignment]
  - ~~plans to ensure that publicly funded research data generated from LIEF infrastructure is made open~~ [moved to feasibility and strategic alignment]