

Federation Fellowship Review: Response from the Council of the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences

The Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS) was established in 2004 to represent the interests of people working in the humanities, arts and social sciences (HASS). Many of these people are involved in research and education at the tertiary level. Our principle interests are in policy advice and strengthening the networks of people working in our sector and cross-sectorally.

CHASS has produced a series of policy reports: Commercialisation of research activities in the humanities, arts and social sciences in Australia; Measures of quality and impact of publicly funded research in the humanities, arts and social sciences; and Collaborating across the sectors. The relationships between the humanities, arts and social sciences (HASS) and science, technology, engineering and medicine (STEM) sectors.

We also run events: for the directors of university-based research centres; for early-career researchers from all disciplines; and for Federal Parliamentarians to discuss policy issues with academics.

CHASS Members include the Academy of the Humanities and the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia. A full list of Members and a snapshot of our recent activities is on our web site: www.chass.org.au

CHASS welcomes the invitation to respond to the review of the Federation Fellowship Scheme being undertaken by the Australian Research Council (ARC). Our submission draws on the views and opinions of HASS Federation Fellows, as well as other people from our sector familiar with the operation of the scheme through participation in the activities of the ARC and other bodies involved in HASS research.

The ARC Federation Fellowship scheme has produced positive outcomes for researchers from the humanities, arts and social sciences, but we believe its value could be enhanced. Our suggestions for improving the scheme are outlined below.

Issue 1: The effectiveness of the *Federation Fellowships* scheme in meeting its core objectives

HASS researchers report in generally favourable terms on a scheme that they believe has increased the quality and quantity of research and provided a mechanism for world-class Australian researchers to return to Australia from overseas posts. It is considered an important component of Australia's research support portfolio.

One value of the ARC Federation Fellowship award is that it retains talented researchers IN RESEARCH as opposed to moving to a university management or administration career path.

*"Prospective Federation Fellows are often lured to deanships, provost or administrative management posts. At some point in their career, researchers will need to face the choice whether to go into administration or stay in research - the Federation Fellowship scheme allows this to be a real choice in financial terms."
(This and the following italicised paragraphs are extracts from a series of interviews with Federation Fellows.)*

This is most important, and underlines the value of renewal as an option within the scheme.

“If Australia is going to achieve world class status, then freedom from teaching for periods of time and the continuity that a scheme like this offers are essential.”

The scheme has not been as successful in attracting overseas researchers to work in Australian institutions. A difficulty in achieving this aim could be that, although as a grant scheme the salary is comparable with grant schemes overseas, international institutions can independently offer higher salaries and, more importantly, better support packages to researchers.

CHASS is concerned that a disproportionately low number of Fellowships have been awarded in the humanities, arts and social sciences, with only 20% (25 out of 124 Fellowships) going to this sector. By comparison, 30.2% of the ARC's Discovery grants and 36.4% of Linkage grants were made to the HASS sector in the round announced on October 11 last year. We would expect that a similar proportion - about one third of the Fellowships - should go to applicants from the HASS area.

The success rate for HASS applicants is slightly lower than for applicants from other disciplines, but a bigger cause of this disproportion is the relatively low number of applicants. It would be reasonable to expect about one third of all applications to come from HASS, but instead of one third, only 22% of all applications are from HASS researchers.

We are uncertain as to why good potential applicants from HASS are deterred from applying for Fellowships, and we would recommend a more comprehensive study to discover the reasons. For instance, do the conditions of grant attached to the Fellowships act as deterrents to researchers who would meet the standards of world-class researchers but choose not to apply?

The success rate for HASS-based Fellowship applicants is slightly lower than for the scheme as a whole (12.8% compared with 14.5%). This is a second matter of concern: if the success rates were the same across all disciplines, there would currently be three other Fellows from the HASS sector.

A third matter of concern is the remarkably low proportion of women being awarded Fellowships. Slightly under 9% of all Fellowships announced in the period 2001 to 2006 went to women and a gender bias of such magnitude is unacceptable. This matter should be referred to the more comprehensive study recommended above, with the aim of taking remedial action as a matter of urgency.

Issue 2: Preference stated under the scheme for Fellowships to be given to early- to mid-career researchers who will play a leadership role in building Australia's internationally competitive research capacity

The HASS researchers we surveyed overwhelmingly agree that achieving world class research capability is not an age issue, and therefore priorities or quotas intended to promote or restrict applications from researchers at any particular age, or early, middle or late career criteria should not be introduced.

“The award of Federation Fellowship should be based on productivity not on chronological age.”

There is a view that it takes longer for HASS researchers to reach the peak of their career than it does people working in science, technology and engineering. Targeting 'early- to mid-career' researchers could bias the program against people from the HASS area or discourage them from applying. We believe it would be appropriate to add an analysis of

the age issue to the study suggested in point 1 above, including a comparison of the age of Federation Fellows on the date of their appointments, by discipline.

While ECRs may demonstrate the standards and capacity to be awarded a Federation Fellowship, targeting ECRs for Federation Fellowships seems fundamentally inappropriate.

“ECRs are the focus of other ARC schemes that foster their careers so that they can become Federation Fellows later [in their career].”

There is a different age-related issue: that the granting of Federation Fellowships to researchers nearing the end of their tenured post in universities may result in those fellows choosing to retire at the end of their Fellowship to take advantage of superannuation benefits. This could impact on one of the implied aims of the scheme, to provide research leadership.

This observation is not a recommendation to bar otherwise suitable older applicants. Significant research leadership benefits will be achieved during as well as after the fellowship period. But we do suggest that the ARC should be cognisant of this factor. Further research on this issue would be required before any changes were made to the provisions of the Fellowship scheme.

Issue 3: The continued relevance of the *Federation Fellowships* scheme

CHASS considers that the Federation Fellowship scheme is still relevant, in its main aim of retaining the best people in Australia and attracting talented people from positions overseas in a global market for talent.

Issue 4: The appropriateness of the ARC’s expenditure on the scheme (relative to that on other ARC research schemes).

In comparison to other ARC research schemes, CHASS believes that the level of expenditure is about right. We would caution against diverting funds from other ARC programs to supplement the Fellowship scheme.

CHASS members involved in assessing applications from HASS researchers for Federation Fellowships reported that they believed the success rate of awards to applications was about right. They felt that these prestigious Awards should only go to researchers of the highest calibre.

This should be qualified by our concern (expressed above) about the success rate for HASS applicants lagging behind the rate for the scheme as a whole.

Issue 5: How the Federation Fellowships scheme fits in the overall context of research career opportunities such as the other fellowships offered by the ARC

CHASS believes that there is a gap in the support available for mid-career researchers (defined in terms of productivity rather than age) that could be supported by the ARC. While Federation Fellowships may not be appropriate for this group of researchers, alternative ARC fellowship schemes are too small and too competitive to support the talent and capacity that exists. There is a strong view there could be more mechanisms to allow these mid-career researchers to “buy out from teaching” to focus on their research.

In the various fellowship schemes, we would recommend that any additional funds available to the ARC be used to increase support for Australian Research Fellowships, Queen Elizabeth II Fellowships and Australian Professorial Fellowships, rather than the Federation Fellows scheme. There was a view put during our research that the APFs are already as competitive as the Federation Fellowships.

In addition, we feel there is a significant gap in infrastructure funding available to the humanities, arts and social science sector. One resolution to this would be the creation of a collaborative scheme focused around a Federation Fellow and directed at HASS research, a sort of mini-centre offering a significant opportunity for Fellows to extend their leadership impact if their program is progressing in an outstanding fashion. This would serve to focus and concentrate the impact of Federation Fellowships and be drawn from the existing Discovery pool of funding. This is not inconsistent with the following response (to Issue 6), as Federation Fellows can already apply for a full range of DPs but must make them separate projects rather than seek to explicitly grow their 'impact domain'.

Issue 6: Number of Federation Fellowships awarded

CHASS does not recommend increasing the number of Federation Fellowships at the expense of other ARC project or fellowship funding mechanisms. It could, however, seek to partner with other funding sources to grow the funding available for such prestigious appointments (as the ARC has done with its centres program from time to time).

Issue 7: Level of financial support provided

The level of funding provided to the scheme is appropriate, provided that the host research institutions fulfil their side of the contract to provide cash and in-kind support for Fellows.

This is a significant proviso. When CHASS sought the views and opinions of HASS Federation Fellows and others familiar with the operation of the scheme, the response was that an attractive feature of the more established US and UK institutions is the certainty of the continued standing and investment in the discipline and department within the institution. This feature is not as apparent for humanities, arts and social science researchers in Australian universities. This impacts on the Fellow in that while the fellowship salary is guaranteed, the salaries of those researchers around the Fellow, and the institutional investment in infrastructure may change during the course of the fellowship (notwithstanding the institution being able to continue to meet the letter of their contract with the ARC).

While Federation Fellowship salaries are competitive with overseas schemes, they do not compete with levels and conditions available to researchers in the US. The Federation Fellowship award should be seen as a suite of resources, of which the Fellow's salary is only one component. More support should be provided for infrastructure, and incorporation of post-doctoral appointments and PhD stipends to ensure that a team is built around the expertise of the fellowship holder as part of a package of support.

This echoes the view that Federation Fellowship packages, rather than just the salary, must be competitive with overseas packages in order to attract returning Australian and overseas applicants.

For HASS researchers, support for additional research personnel is a critical part of the package. While PhD scholarships are useful as part of a support package, funding for post doctoral positions are more beneficial as they are more able to contribute to growing the research "theme" of the Fellow. The package of support has to focus upon the environment

and needs of the research program and it has to be complete, whether it is provided by the ARC or the host institution, and whether the provision is in cash or in-kind.

Issue 8: The requirement for the host organisation to provide matching funding and the appropriateness of the level of matching funding required

CHASS is concerned that the requirement for host organisations to provide matching funding may become increasingly problematic. It has been reported that some senior university management, while recognising the promotional benefits of hosting Federation Fellows, view the winning of a Fellowship as a backward step in financial terms. Because of this, some universities are unwilling to support applications.

The financial implications upon the host institution has been well recognised through the support provided by seed funding and through allowing accessibility to other ARC schemes to the Federation Fellow, but it has been suggested that institutions will become more wary of supporting Fellowship applications because they require matching funding for the position and support for the discipline area. This sifting at institutional level may prevent the most deserving researchers being eligible for consideration by the ARC.

A possible solution would be to reduce the number of Federation Fellowships awarded, and use the savings generated to reduce the burden on host institutions to provide matching funding.

The requirement upon the institution to provide a matching contribution is a particular disadvantage to HASS applicants. Fellows from the natural sciences often require sophisticated laboratory equipment, the cost of which may easily meet the scheme's requirement for matching funding and then the facilities may be shared with other users. It can also be easier to attract external support from industry for this equipment.

CHASS believes that it is far more important that the institutional environment is conducive and appropriate to the researcher's project and suggests that the matching component should be a mix of cash and in-kind. While there is a common perception that infrastructure costs to support humanities, arts and social sciences research are modest in comparison with the natural sciences, there may be significant costs attached to data and material gathering. Thus the requirement for matching funding could be more flexible, based on the needs of the applicant.

We further recommend a more flexible approach to the ARC audit process, so that it focuses on the nature of the in-kind contributions to determine that it is appropriate to the particular researcher's needs rather than only testing compliance with a financial leverage criteria.

Some of the respondents to our inquiries reported difficulties in dealing with institutions over the practical details of institutional support through funding or in-kind support. They suggest that institutions be required to document the relationship between the institution and the Fellow, and the support that will be provided to enable the Fellow to commence research as soon as possible (for example, accommodation, computing, research assistance etc).

"The ARC should have a check list that the dean, head of school and DVC Research have to sign off to guarantee the support, environment, and conditions negotiated, before the Fed Fellow starts."

Issue 9: Employment options

The requirement that award holders resign their substantive posts to take up the award can be a challenge for Federation Fellows. Our respondents regarded this requirement as assurance that the Fellow is able to concentrate upon their research, but suggest that this is perhaps not based on a realistic view of how research is conducted in the HASS sector. Prospective Federation Fellows are frequently engaged within their institutions in research leadership posts; and the requirement to resign may be viewed with dismay by institutions and may even prompt the institution not to support the application.

While senior institutional management positions of DVC or PVC could certainly restrict the ability of the Fellow to focus on research, holding a Research Centre director post can be highly compatible with a Federation Fellowship award. It is suggested that more flexibility is needed in assessing capacity and interpreting this requirement.

“The ARC is too focused on inputs when the real issue should be ‘is this (situation) going to produce the outcomes that have been agreed?’”

Issue 10: The range of disciplines supported under the *Federation Fellowships* scheme, including support for medical research

Our views on the proportion of Fellowships being awarded to applicants from the humanities, arts and social sciences are set out in point 1 above.

CHASS is opposed to any extension of the Federation Fellows scheme to include researchers from medical research. This would increase competition in an already highly-competitive scheme, and may impact upon the success rates for HASS researchers and reduce seed-funding support. The ARC is a crucial source of public funding for HASS research and unlike their counterparts in science, technology, engineering, medicine and health, whose disciplines are eligible for a range of Commonwealth and State Government schemes and priorities, HASS researchers do not as a rule have access to alternative, well funded public schemes.

Issue 11: Possible changes that could be made to enhance the *Federation Fellowships* scheme

This section summarises recommendations made above.

1. The low application rate from the HASS sector is an issue discussed in point 1 above. We recommend a further study to discover the reasons for an under-utilisation of the scheme by HASS researchers. The study should also examine the gender bias of the scheme.
2. We recommend a study of the age issues identified in point 2 above.
3. A number of concerns were expressed about the level and appropriateness of support provided to the Fellow by the host institution. We recommend a more flexible approach tailored to the needs of the individual Fellow, and a monitoring of the agreement between the ARC and the host institution to ensure that both the spirit and the letter of the agreement are being observed.
4. The requirement that award holders resign their substantive posts to take up the award is a key challenge faced by Federation Fellows. As Federation Fellows are expected to play an active role in leading research direction in their disciplines and in their institutions, we believe that ARC rules need to be more flexible to allow them to play an active leadership role, without having to compromise or “resign” their awards.

We recommend that the ARC reviews this requirement.

5. We recommend that the Federation Fellows scheme should not be extended to include researchers from medical research.

6. Some Fellows have encountered difficulties arising from changed circumstances at their host institution, perhaps because the priorities of the institution or the research environment have changed. Currently Fellows in this position have the choice of either 'putting up' with an inappropriate environment or resigning their fellowship, making them ineligible for re-application elsewhere. As an institutional employee, the university can even direct the fellow not to discuss the issue with the ARC.

We recommend that that Fellows be allowed to negotiate to transfer their award to another institution, with the consent of all parties. The ARC may need to establish a process to enable this negotiation. It appeals to us as a more attractive solution than another proposed by one of our correspondents, that of establishing a Dispute Resolution mechanism, similar to that adopted by the National Foundation for Science in the USA..

7. For researchers contributing to other ARC funded initiatives, the current process of measuring outputs from individual schemes and projects (rather than combined as overall progress in the research theme) fails to capture the full benefit of the ARC's investment. Similarly, the current focus of ARC schemes on "new stand alone projects" as the subject of applications may inhibit the ability of the Federation Fellow to pursue 'exploratory' aspects of his or her research. This concern may be dealt with in terms suggested in our response in point 5 above.

"The ARC does not allow researchers to claim research outputs across the different "boxes" - Federation Fellow outputs cannot be counted as an output of a Centre of Excellence. The artificial distinction between different schemes means that if [a federation fellow] develops new concepts or questions that come out of the organic interface and interrelationship between different ARC schemes, it is hard to find funding to take these lines of enquiry forward."

8. Concerns were expressed that HASS applicants were disadvantaged by a system where the natural sciences held a majority on the selection panel. This position can be exacerbated if the chair of the panel takes a partisan view:

"ARC should take great care when selecting the chair (of the panel) that they do not appoint a "discipline warrior" who will prioritise certain disciplines to the detriment of others."

CHASS recommends that the ARC take into account discipline equity when appointing the panel, and selects a neutral figure as chair of the panel.

9. If a core aim is to attract overseas researchers then the citizenship and residency restrictions are restricting factors. The requirement for Australian citizenship and or permanent residency should be made less stringent. This issue affects not only overseas researchers wishing to take up posts in Australia, but also returning Australian expatriates as in some countries, Australian academics taking up posts overseas may be required to renounce their Australia citizenship to take up citizenship of their host countries.¹ We

¹ This applied in the US prior to 2002, and Australian academics wishing to take up Federation fellowship appointments would face difficulties under the current rules.

recommend a slight modification, to allow “Australian citizenship, permanent residency or Australian birth”.

We further recommend that the ARC consider joint appointments between overseas institutions and Australian universities. This would allow potential and current fellows to retain their Fellowship in the face of attractive overseas offers, and would strengthen international networks for both the Fellow and their research teams. We suggest that conditions relating to percentage of time to be spent in each country over the period of the fellowship may be advisable.

Issue 12: Any other comments?

In point 5 above, we pointed out what we feel is a significant gap in infrastructure funding available to the humanities, arts and social science sector.

In broad terms, the suggestion is for a scheme would be a more nimble version of the cooperative research centre program. It would establish within existing structures new research groups collaborative in nature and multi-disciplinary in approach. The expectation is that they would extend beyond a single institution to draw on expertise in other research institutions, industry and government. Prominent in the organisation would be a Federation Fellow.

The aim would be to provide a mechanism to support research career development and training as well as deliver benefits for Australia. CHASS would welcome the opportunity to further develop this concept in collaboration with the ARC.