The Australian Research Council (ARC) is a statutory authority within the Australian Government's Education portfolio. Its mission is to deliver policy and programmes that advance Australian research and innovation globally and benefit the community.

In seeking to achieve its mission, the ARC provides advice to the Government on research matters and manages the National Competitive Grants Program (NCGP), a significant component of Australia's investment in research and development. The ARC is also responsible for administering Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), which aims to identify and promote excellence across the full spectrum of research activity in Australia’s higher education institutions.

Through the NCGP, the ARC supports the highest-quality fundamental and applied research and research training through merit-based, competitive selection processes.

**Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill 2014 (the Bill)**

One purpose of the Bill is to amend the *Australian Research Council Act 2001* (ARC Act). The ARC Act provides for the funding of research programmes. Each year the ARC Act is amended to update the special appropriation funding cap to include policy approvals, indexation adjustments and an additional forward estimate for schemes within the NCGP. The amendments in the Bill result in altering three existing financial year funding figures and extend the forward estimates, resulting in additional spending of $760 million for the period 1 July 2014 to 30 June 2018.

The Bill allows additional investment in research through the Future Fellowships scheme. As part of the 2014-15 Budget, the Government announced that it would provide $139.5 million over four years to support research under the Future Fellowship scheme. The scheme would be funded on an ongoing basis.

The Bill also amends the ARC Act to apply a one-off efficiency dividend, applies indexation to existing appropriation amounts and adds an additional forward estimate amount of $736,972 million for 2017-18.

**The Future Fellowships scheme**

Established in 2009, the Future Fellowships scheme provides funding to enable highly qualified mid-career researchers to pursue a research career in Australia.

The objectives of the Future Fellowships scheme are to:

- attract and retain outstanding mid-career researchers
- build collaboration across industry and/or research organisations and/or disciplines
- support research in national priorities that will result in economic, environmental, social, health and/or cultural benefits for Australia, and
- strengthen Australia’s research capacity by supporting innovative, internationally competitive research.

The Future Fellowships scheme provides four-year fellowships to outstanding Australian mid-career researchers. Future Fellowships are awarded to only the best mid-careers researchers through the ARC’s merit-based, peer review selection processes.

Preference is given to researchers who can demonstrate a capacity to build collaborations across industry and/or research institutions and/or with other disciplines.
Future Fellowships are an important vehicle for Australian researchers seeking the opportunity to return home from overseas to continue their work.

Since 2009, 1,163 Future Fellowships have been awarded to mid-career researchers across all research disciplines.

The ARC considers the Future Fellowship scheme to be an effective and beneficial component of the NCGP that enables the ARC to achieve its outcomes.

Mid-career researchers often face uncertain employment circumstances. Many face employment in short term, casual positions increasing the risk that they will either leave the research profession or pursue opportunities overseas. The Future Fellowships scheme was introduced to reduce these risks, build research capacity and support excellent research.


The scheme’s success in attracting and retaining outstanding mid-career researchers was demonstrated through interviews conducted with Future Fellows and their Administering (employing) Organisations:

- 97 per cent of Administering Organisations believe the scheme had fully met, or mostly met, the objective to attract and retain outstanding mid-career researchers
- Administering Organisations expected to retain almost all, 93 per cent, of their Future Fellows in their employ following completion of Fellowships and
- 86 per cent of Fellows interviewed expect to be employed by their Administering Organisation beyond the term of their Fellowship.

A common sentiment expressed in interviews was that a Future Fellowship provides the scope and scale to accelerate a recipient’s research effort. It provides the opportunity to focus almost exclusively, over an extended period of time, on a research question. It also provides fellows with the profile to expand collaborative networks, particularly internationally, and attract high-quality students.

Future Fellows have been responsible for many important research breakthroughs. For example, Professor Mark Kendall was an inaugural (2009) Australian Research Council Future Fellow when he received funding to develop a Nanopatch that delivers biomolecules to the skin. Nanopatch is a needle-free vaccine delivery device which is under rapid research and development to product through spin-out company Vaxxas. Professor Kendall co-founded Vaxxas with $15 million in capital investment, one of the largest investments in an Australian start-up biotechnology company. The Nanopatch technology has been licensed to US-based pharmaceutical company Merck & Co. Professor Kendall’s research group received the Eureka Prize for Research by an Interdisciplinary Team in 2011 and also won the 2011 Australian Innovation Challenge. On 16 September 2014 Vaxxas signed an agreement with the World Health Organisation to trial the Nanopatch delivery system for polio vaccines.

The Government’s decision to continue the Future Fellowship scheme as an ongoing programme has the widespread support of the research community.