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'Absurd' rule change has researchers up in arms

Julie Hare *Education editor*



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Some of Australia's brightest minds have been rendered ineligible for research grants, putting jobs on the line, after an obscure rule change that made their applications void.

The Australian Research Council has been policing thousands of grant applications for references to 'preprints' and automatically disqualifying any application that mentions one.





Research applications can take months to write, with only one in five being successful. **Wayne Taylor**

The move has been described by the research community as nonsensical, out of step with modern research practices and potentially catastrophic to some careers.

Preprints are research papers that have been submitted to academic journals but not yet published. Along with other data and materials, they are stored on huge servers so the work is accessible to other researchers around the world.

Research applications can take months to write, with only one in five being successful. The rule change was communicated to university research officers last September via a webinar but not to the researchers themselves.

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The situation, which is attracting international attention, was revealed on social media by an Australian researcher who runs a Twitter account called [ARC Tracker](#).

The researcher, who asked to remain anonymous, told *The Australian Financial Review* that the disciplines most impacted by the rule change were astrophysics, physics, maths and computer science, all of which had decades-long experience of uploading new research onto preprint servers, such as ArXiv, which is administered by Cornell University.

There was no clear explanation why the ARC had introduced the rule, he said.

“It’s baffling. You wouldn’t even suspect it to be a real rule because it runs so counter to what we do,” the researcher said.

Matthew Bailes, a world-renowned astrophysicist from Swinburne University of Technology and director of OzGrav, the ARC Centre of Excellence for Gravitational Wave Discovery, described the rule change as absurd.

Disciplines such as astrophysics couldn’t operate without preprints, he said.

“The preprint server has changed over the years to something that has a whole lot of material of scientific value that was never even meant to be going to a journal.”

An example was information about Laser Interferometer Space Antenna (LISA) on the [arXiv server](#). LISA is a \$2 billion space telescope that will rewrite human understanding of the cosmos to “unveil the gravitational universe”.

Ethical questions

The rule change raises ethical questions, with researchers effectively being told by the ARC not to cite the most recent research if it is on a preprint server.

On Twitter, Martin Dominik, a reader in physics and astronomy at the University of St Andrews in Scotland, said that not citing sources correctly “is a severe violation of research integrity”.

“Not just encouraging but requiring researchers to do so does not reflect well on ARC and questions its credibility,” he wrote.

“Please also note, ARC, that if you considered to send (sic) me something for review, please think again. I will not lend any direct or indirect support to procedures that conflict with scientific integrity.”





Mehreen Faruqi is demanding answers from the Australian Research Council about a recent rule change. **James Brickwood**

ARC Tracker said he had been contacted by more than 20 people who had been made ineligible due to the rule change.

Mehreen Faruqi, Greens education spokesperson and former academic, said the ARC had to “come clean” about who it consulted before making the rule change, how many applications were impacted, and what it intends to do now to fix it.

“This is about research integrity, to be sure, but it’s also about reputational risk for Australian universities. It has to be resolved swiftly and fairly,” Senator Faruqi said.



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Labor senator for Victoria, Kim Carr, agreed, saying a number of international research agencies recognised preprints as a vital part of cutting-edge research.

“The ARC has been unresponsive and overly defensive. It is simply not keeping

pace with the legitimate inquiries and is maintaining outdated guidelines,” Senator Carr said.

In response to questions, an ARC spokeswoman said that the application form and instructions to applicants said preprints should not be included in applications.

She noted that researchers could appeal decisions made by the ARC.

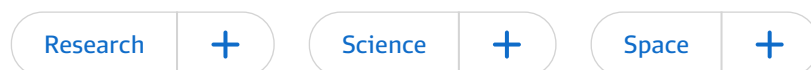
A spokesman for Education Minister Alan Tudge, who has oversight of the ARC, said it was a matter for the ARC.

Julie Hare is the Education editor. She has more than 20 years' experience as a writer, journalist and editor. *Connect with Julie on [Twitter](#). Email Julie at julie.hare@afrc.com*



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