

24 August 2021

Professor Sue Thomas
Chief Executive Officer
Australian Research Council
Via email: ceo@arc.gov.au

Re: Concerns about new ARC “no preprint rule”

Dear Professor Thomas,

The Australian Physics, Astronomy, Chemistry, Mathematics and Statistics communities express grave concern about a recent change to Australian Research Council (ARC) rules to forbid reference to preprints anywhere in a grant application. We are particularly concerned about the impact on early career researchers whose ARC fellowship applications have recently been ruled ineligible because of a violation of this new rule.

We are not aware of any consultation with our scientific communities about this change. We urge the ARC to rescind this rule, as it is unworkable and inconsistent with standard practice in our disciplines.

Preprints are vital for the rapid dissemination of knowledge in physics, astronomy, chemistry, mathematics and statistics. This is particularly important in fields where there is a long lead-time between journal submission and publication. Citing preprints in publications, reports, or grant applications is an entrenched disciplinary norm in these fields. Experts and referees who encounter such citations know that preprints are not peer reviewed and are experienced in assigning them appropriate weight.

Preprint servers are also used to store other important scientific documents including white papers, PhD theses, software and instruction manuals, experimental design reports, and other technical documents. Although never intended for publication in a regular journal, it is common for such documents to be definitive references on certain topics and cited many hundreds of times.

Forbidding references to preprints prevents applicants from giving appropriate credit to the authors of ideas that informed their proposal. This constitutes academic misconduct. Doing so is contrary to the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research 2018, which requires researchers to both “Present information truthfully and accurately in proposing ... research” (Principle 1) and “Appropriately reference and cite the work of others” (Principle 4).

Preprint servers, such as the physical sciences arXiv server, pioneered the development of open access publishing. They are an established part of the publishing landscape. Their use is fully consistent with the ARC Open Access Policy.

Major science funding agencies around the world permit or encourage preprints to be cited in grant proposals and funding reports. This includes the US funding agencies such as the Department of Energy (DOE), the National Science Foundation (NSF), NASA and the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the European Research Council (ERC), the French National Research Agency (ANR) and the UK funding agencies for Engineering and Physical Sciences (EPSRC), Biological Sciences (BBSRC) and Medical Sciences (MRC).

We are dismayed that promising research careers have been impacted and perhaps even ended because fellowship applicants cited preprints and other documents housed on preprint servers. We encourage the ARC to explore avenues to support the researchers affected.

We strongly recommend the ARC reverse its rule change as a matter of urgency, and permit authors to cite any relevant material in accordance with disciplinary conventions. We further recommend that any future proposed changes that represent a significant departure from disciplinary norms be subject to wider consultation with researchers and peak scientific bodies.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Sven Rogge, President, Australian Institute of Physics (AIP)
Professor Steven Bottle, President, Royal Australian Chemical Institute (RACI)
Professor John Lattanzio, President, Astronomical Society of Australia (ASA)
Professor Ole Warnaar, President, Australian Mathematical Society (AustMS)
A/Professor Jessica Kasza, President, Statistical Society of Australia (SSA)
A/Professor John Holdsworth, President, Australian and New Zealand Optical Society (ANZOS)
Professor Anthony Dooley, Chair, Australian Council of Heads of Mathematical Sciences (ACHMS)
Professor Tim Marchant, Director, Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute (AMSI)

Professor Brian P Schmidt AC FAA FRS, ANU Distinguished Professor, 2011 Nobel Laureate

Professor Harry Quiney, Head, School of Physics, The University of Melbourne
Professor Celine Boehm, Head, School of Physics, The University of Sydney
Professor Tim Senden, Director, Research School of Physics, The Australian National University
Professor Michael Morgan, Head, School of Physics and Astronomy, Monash University
Professor Susan Coppersmith, Head, School of Physics, University of New South Wales Sydney
Professor Peter Veitch, Head, School of Physical Sciences, The University of Adelaide
Professor Jingbo Wang, Head, Department of Physics, The University of Western Australia
Professor Igor Bray, Head, Physics and Astronomy, Curtin University
Professor Geoff Pryde, Head, Applied Maths and Physics, Griffith University
Professor David Spence, Interim Head, Department of Physics and Astronomy, Macquarie University
Professor Jamie Quinton, Head of Physics and Dean of Science, Flinders University
Professor Gary Bryant, Associate Dean (Physics), RMIT University
Professor John-David Dewsbury, Head, School of Science, UNSW Canberra
Dr Brenton Hall, Chair of Department of Physics and Astronomy, Swinburne University

Professor Scott Kable, Head, School of Chemistry, University of New South Wales Sydney
Professor Philip Gale, Head, School of Chemistry, The University of Sydney
Professor Richard O'Hair, Head, School of Chemistry, The University of Melbourne
Professor Phil Andrews, Head, School of Chemistry, Monash University
Professor Chris Sumbly, Head of Chemistry, The University of Adelaide
Professor Alison Rodger, Head, School of Chemistry, Macquarie University
A/Professor David Wilson, Head, Department of Chemistry and Physics, La Trobe University
A/Professor Jennifer MacLeod, Head, School of Chemistry and Physics, Queensland U. of Technology
Professor Catherine Yule, Head, School of Science, Technology & Engineering, U. of the Sunshine Coast
A/Professor Andrew Seen, Head of Chemistry, University of Tasmania
Professor Richard John, Head of Chemistry, Griffith University

Professor Howard Bondell, Head, School of Mathematics and Statistics, The University of Melbourne
Professor Joseph Grotowski, Head, School of Mathematics and Physics, The University of Queensland
Professor Adelle Coster, Head, School of Mathematics and Statistics, University of New South Wales
Professor Warwick Tucker, Head, School of Mathematics, Monash University
Professor Andrew Hassell, Interim Director, Mathematical Sciences Institute, ANU
Professor Andrew Bassom, Head of Discipline, Mathematics, University of Tasmania
Dr Maureen Edwards, Head, School of Mathematics and Applied Statistics, University of Wollongong
Dr Christopher Lenard, Head of Department of Mathematics and Statistics, La Trobe University
Professor Alan Welsh, Chair, National Committee for Mathematical Sciences

Professor Dragomir Neshev, ANU, Director, ARC Centre of Excellence for Transformative Meta-Optical Systems (TMOS)

Professor Matthew Bailes, Swinburne University of Technology, Director, ARC Centre of Excellence for Gravitational Wave Discovery (OzGrav)

Professor Elisabetta Barberio, The University of Melbourne, Director, ARC Centre of Excellence for Dark Matter Particle Physics

Professor Lisa Kewley, Australian National University, Director, ARC Centre for Excellence in All-Sky Astrophysics in 3D (ASTRO 3D)

Professor Paul Mulvaney, The University of Melbourne, Director, ARC Centre of Excellence in Exciton Science

Professor Peter Taylor, University of Melbourne, Director, ARC Centre of Excellence for Mathematical and Statistical Frontiers (ACEMS)

Professor Michael Fuhrer, Monash University, Director, ARC Centre of Excellence in Future Low-Energy Electronics Technology (FLEET)

Professor Andrew White, The University of Queensland, Director, ARC Centre of Excellence for Engineered Quantum Systems (EQUS)