

# Australian minister 'reserves decision' on research projects

Pre-approved grants referred to security agencies as another front opens up in debate over research risks

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Eighteen research projects endorsed by Australia's key funding council have been put on ice while they are scrutinised by the country's security agencies in yet another hurdle for university research seen as conflicting with national interests.

Education minister Dan Tehan has reserved his decisions on 18 grants "pending further advice" from security agencies to the Australian Research Council (ARC).

The grants were among 669 that had been signed off by the ARC for funding under its Discovery Projects and Linkage Projects schemes. Mr Tehan offered no information about the projects or the concerns that had led him to seek security agencies' advice, saying only that he had promised to be "transparent" about decisions at odds with ARC funding recommendations.

The referral is not thought to be linked to the development that triggered that promise – the "national interest test" applied to ARC funding applications in the wake of revelations that former education minister Simon Birmingham had vetoed ARC-endorsed grants for 11 humanities research projects in 2017.

Rather, the sidelining of the 18 grants suggest that the government has embraced a new mechanism to ensure that it does not fund research that could jeopardise national security.

University research projects – particularly those funded under the Linkage scheme, which supports collaboration between research agencies and business – have long been subject to the Defence Trade Controls Act, designed to prevent technology and knowledge with potential military applications from falling into the wrong hands.

But the referral of funding applications to security agencies appears to be a new step, particularly for Discovery grants that largely support fundamental research.

A Twitter-based monitoring service, which details funding developments using the handle "ARC Tracker", reported feedback from university contacts that at least some of the 18 projects had involved collaborations with institutions listed on the [China Defence Universities Tracker](#).

This online database, compiled by Canberra thinktank the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), lists 159 Chinese institutions that ASPI says are collaboration risks because of their military links. They include the country's five top-ranked civilian universities.

The sector is divided over such warnings. Some academics and politicians have criticised research ties with China, saying universities are naive about the risks and are putting profits ahead of the national interest. Others say such claims are exaggerated and, in some cases, demonstrably false.

Either way, the referral of the 18 grants suggests that researchers – who already face long odds against securing funding – now must overcome yet another potential obstacle. “The people proposing these grants were not told about this in advance,” the researcher behind ARC Tracker told *Times Higher Education*.

“Their grants are in jeopardy because of a condition they didn’t know they had to meet.”

The researcher said academics, particularly those of Chinese heritage, should be “pretty worried” about the repercussions for continued funding if they attracted security agencies’ attention simply because they had contacts in the top Chinese universities. “But there might be other reasons for being referred to security agencies. There might be other lists. We don’t know.”

The referral of the grants comes as parliament considers a bill to give Canberra veto powers over universities’ foreign ties, and a joint committee pursues an inquiry into national security risks affecting higher education and research.

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