



Professor Melinda Fitzgerald
Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Research (Interim)

Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Research

GPO Box U1987
Perth Western Australia 6845

Telephone +61 8 9266
Email lindy.fitzgerald@curtin.edu.au
Web curtin.edu.au

18 January 2024

Curtin University submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Australian Research Council Amendment (Review Response) Bill 2023

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Senate Inquiry into the Australian Research Council Amendment (Review Response) Bill 2023.

Curtin University broadly supports the recommendations of the Bill, particularly the establishment of the ARC Board, which we see as a promising step towards transparency, fairness, accountability and integrity. Having the Board approve grant applications under the National Competitive Grants Program is especially welcome, as is the move to limit funding decisions to 15 sitting days of the House.

We would like to make the following recommendations, which we believe will further enhance the ARC's effectiveness under the amendments:

The Board

The ARC Board will be an extremely powerful body and it is imperative that the membership of the Board holds sufficient experience and diversity. The current membership of Chair, Deputy Chair and 3-5 members, could see a group of 5 people wield great power in the direction of the ARC and funding for research in Australia. Curtin suggests the Board membership is increased, and provision made to ensure gender balance, national representation and a diversity of experience including age. It is important to ensure that that membership includes both people with research management experience, and people with research experience. A Board that includes members who are active or past researchers will be more attuned to the nuances of scientific enquiry and possess a deeper understanding of the challenges and priorities of the scientific community.

We also recommend the Board includes representatives of key stakeholders of the ARC, such as a representative from the College of Experts and a university representative, such as a Vice-Chancellor or Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Research.

Fundamental research is fundamental

The Board will approve grants of financial assistance for research projects in relation to research programs specified by the Minister. While ministers may understandably favour research that has immediate practical application for the benefit of the Australian public, we urge the ARC to have a mechanism in place to ensure that support for fundamental research is not diminished. Fundamental, or investigator-initiated, research helps elevate human understanding of the world around us, and is critical in laying the foundation for all subsequent research. The ARC has long been the champion of investigator-initiated research and we encourage the Senate to maintain that strength of the ARC.

In Australia, this type of research is only undertaken at universities, and is the reason why many researchers choose the university environment over government or industry.

Clarifying “association”

Clause 55, *Reasons relevant to the security, defence or international relations of Australia*, states that the Minister must regard whether the person involved in the research project has, or has had, an “association” with a tertiary education institution outside Australia, and if so, the nature of that “association”.

It is unclear if research collaborations would constitute an “association”, but if they do, this clause may significantly increase reporting requirements for researchers who undertake these collaborations. It would be useful if “association” could be clarified within the context of this clause.

Ensuring transparency and continual improvement

As with any legislation, robust, transparent processes will be crucial in preserving the intent of the amendments. A mechanism must be in place to ensure the independence of the Board and Advisory Committee not only from political influence, but from grant applicants.

As such, there is a need to incorporate an ongoing feedback loop for continuous improvement in the funding process, and to help the Board refine criteria and procedures.