

WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY



Response to the Senate inquiry into the Australian Research Council Amendment (Review Response) Bill 2023

Western Sydney University welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Senate inquiry into the Australian Research Council Amendment (Review Response) Bill 2023. Western is a young multi-campus university which, according to THE 2022 and 2023 rankings, ranks 1st in the world for impact. Western is a university that defines itself as research-led and delivering regional, national and global impact.

Central to Western's research is the ambition to construct a better global future. The University's research is aligned with four broad themes: Education and Work; Environment and Sustainability; Health and Wellbeing, and Urban Living Futures and Society. These themes encompass research across all disciplines and produce outcomes ranging from new technologies to practice and policy change.

Western has structures, policies and supports in place for collaborative, cross-disciplinary research that is built around grand challenges. Our research cohorts include industry partners and research end-users within their governance structures and as part of the research teams. These strategies ensure not only translation but also that the challenges central to industry, in the broadest definition of the term, are addressed.

Western commends the Department of Education for circulating this draft of the ARC Act for consultation prior to the implementation of changes, noting it as one of recommendations in the initial consultation.

Western regards as positive many of the changes presented in the Bill and welcomes it as an attempt at building on, and securing, Australia's research capability. The Bill's implementations of recommendations 1 and 2 of the Review, amending Schedule 1, the Object of Act, and amplifying its focus on impact and purpose is supported by Western. The University fully endorses the intent expressed in the Bill that reflects the essentialness of all disciplines through the Bill's assertion of the ARC's role in supporting research for 'Australia's economic, social, environmental and cultural benefit.'

In Schedules 1 and 2 the Bill also acknowledges the ARC's commitment to supporting academic career pathways and recommendation 2's focus on promoting excellence, equity, and diversity in Australian universities. The Explanatory Memorandum notes that considerations of equity and diversity in the research workforce will include First Nations peoples, women and early and mid-career researchers. Western Sydney University welcomes this intent but cautions against making these groups the only focus of equity initiatives. Research careers, particularly in recent years, are easily disrupted by a multitude of factors. Similarly, the individual uniqueness of researchers is

broad. The ARC's responsibility for supporting and promoting equity must reflect all aspects of diversity and be responsive to the changing factors and experiences in individual research careers. This includes gender, career stage, First Nations and external impacts to opportunity.

Recommendation 6, the establishment of an ARC Board, is viewed as potentially beneficial, Board selection being crucial to its success. The scope of the Board is broad with its decisions having significant impact on the national research funding landscape. The role of the Minister in the appointment of the Board is noted in the Explanatory Memorandum. It is also noted that the Board will be an 'appropriate mix of skill-based appointees with sector experience, industry and governance experience, and broader social and economic experience.' The depth of skill and knowledge required by the Board is substantial if it is to be equipped to inform funding and strategic decision making. An even distribution of the disciplinary expertise is strongly recommended. Given the Board's responsibility for the appointment of members of the College of Experts this depth of understanding is essential.

The Board will also help determine 'priorities, strategies and policies for the ARC' and advise the Minister accordingly. It is anticipated that significant change will be informed by consultation and advice from across the sector and with relevant stakeholders, including industry, as necessary. Western sees the assurance in Schedule 2 Division 3 of at least one Indigenous person to the Board along with membership that is representative of regional, rural and remote Australia as essential. Assurances should also be made to ensure gender balance, including within the roles of Chair and Deputy Chair.

The multi-levelled approvals enabled through the structure of a Board, Advisory Panel, CEO and Minister will help ensure greater transparency and, if requirements of Board selection are appropriately met, equity. We anticipate this will prevent unwarranted and unexplained vetoing of approved funding by the Minister in future funding rounds. It is noted that the new subsection 48 in Schedule 3, which covers Ministerial approval, allows for the Minister to refuse approval if the Minister considers that approvals should be refused for reasons relevant to security, defence or international relations. Western accepts that this is reasonable and indeed unavoidable. We would however remind the Inquiry that universities have significant safeguards in place for all research engagement with foreign entities. These include the University Foreign Interference Taskforce and the Defence Industry Security Program. In light of the rigorous measures already in place, it is hoped that any decisions to reject funding based on perceived security threats would be made in consultation with the impacted university. It is understood that this may not always be feasible but, in situations where discussion is permissible, it is requested this occur.

Finally, Western notes that the Explanatory Memorandum indicates additional costs required for the changes proposed in the Bill will total \$1.5mil per annum, this being combination of direct and indirect costs. The Explanatory Memorandum further notes that these costs will be met through existing resourcing and reprioritisation from the ARC's current budget. Research funding and funding success rates continue to decline across programs. Any further reduction in program funding would impact Australia's research and undercut the intention of the enhancements to the ARC proposed in the Bill. Western urges the government to ensure no further cuts are made to funding or resources that directly support research in Australia.

Well-funded national research agencies are crucial for Australia to take its place as a nation that drives research delivering translation and sovereign capabilities and attracts world leaders in research and industry.