

Submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee inquiry into the Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill 2018

I write in strong support of the proposed amendments to sections 51 and 52 of the *Australian Research Council Act 2001* in order to remove Ministerial veto power over the awarding of Australian Research Council (ARC) grants for research funding.

For context, I am Associate Professor of Philosophy at Deakin University (where I have been since 2012) and have previously received competitive public research grants in Denmark and the United Kingdom. I have experienced the DECRA, Discovery, and Future Fellowship application processes multiple times but have not had an application vetoed. The views expressed in this submission are entirely my own and do not reflect those of my employer.

In what follows I will outline concerns with the current practice (which the Bill would obviate) under three headings: *Procedural Fairness*, *Denial of Expertise*, and *Disproportionate Impact*.

1. Procedural Fairness

Researchers engage in the ARC application process in good faith. We take note of the ARC's extensive application requirements and address how our projects relate to the government's declared research priorities and to the national interest.

An emphasis on the government of the day's stated research priorities is therefore already 'baked in' to the recommendations that are sent by the ARC to the Minister. If a grant is recommended for funding despite being assessed low relative to those priorities, this means the grant is of such outstanding quality otherwise that it has overcome this relative deficit.

Ministerial veto at the conclusion of this process therefore amounts to changing the criteria on which applications are assessed at the very last moment. This denies researchers basic procedural fairness. Researchers who have had projects vetoed undertook months of work preparing their applications on the understanding they would be judged on one set of criteria, only to learn that the actual criteria they would be judged against was the minister's subjective view of their project. It is like winning a game of football, only to be told that the match will be decided not on the score but on which team the umpire 'felt' deserved to win.

That analogy may sound flippant, but research careers can be, and are, ended by funding decisions. That is obviously a grave loss to the individual researcher. But it is also a loss to their fields (and thus to the advancement of knowledge), and it is a loss to the Australian public who, rightly, invested in training these researchers. Ministerial veto makes the risk of such negative outcomes even higher.

2. Denial of Expertise

Whilst it is sometimes said that Ministerial veto powers are justified on the basis that ‘public servants advise, ministers decide,’ the awarding of research grants is an issue where the legitimate primacy of expertise is paramount. The question of which research projects are of the highest quality is not one that can be decided by anyone other than the relevant community of experts. A “pub test” is not, and should not be, part of that assessment (any more than we use pub tests to determine who won a football game).

3. Disproportionate Impact

In practice, Ministerial veto has disproportionately impacted projects in the Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS). Despite the low cost of HASS research relative to other fields, and the contribution HASS makes to both Australian public life and the international prestige of our universities, the ARC remains the only realistic source for significant research funding in Australia for many HASS fields. Success rates for ARC funding are already very low. Vetoes make it even harder for researchers in these fields to produce their world-leading research and to secure and advance their research careers.

Lip-service is repeatedly paid to the importance of ‘blue sky’ or ‘curiosity-led’ research, yet both policy and the exercise of Ministerial fiat suggest this is not, in fact, valued at all. Those of us who have dedicated our professional lives to the fundamental human goal of advancing knowledge would very much like to know that our work will in fact be supported, and not subject to political interference or Ministerial caprice.

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