

Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill 2018

The [Australian Academy of the Humanities](#) (AAH) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee Inquiry on the Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill 2018.

The Academy **supports the unique role of the Australian Research Council (ARC) as the principal source of merit-based funding for non-medical research**. Alongside its medical counterpart – the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) – the ARC is the lynchpin in Australia’s pursuit of competitive advantage and world-class outcomes from research.

We have joined forces with Australia’s Learned Academies in a Joint Statement to urge bipartisan commitment to a research system that is consistent with world’s best practice, where **expertise in both conducting research, and evaluating which research to support, is essential**.¹

Expertise in both conducting research, and evaluating which research to support, provides confidence to the community that pays for it, the politicians who prioritise it, and the researchers who conduct it, that the outcomes of our research support a culturally rich, economically prosperous and secure Australia.

Under the Australian Research Council Act 2001, the Minister for Education is responsible for funding and approving research proposals. However, we are **deeply concerned that the Minister has the power to reject proposals recommended for funding by the ARC**, which have otherwise met lengthy and strenuous tests of excellence, national benefit, and value for money.

The system currently has **no checks and balances to ensure that the veto power cannot be used arbitrarily** on personal preference or political grounds. The National Interest Test (NIT) has, in practice, put a political frame around the creation of new knowledge. This is at odds with the rigour afforded to the other key parts of the process.

Research systems in the US, UK and Canada uphold basic principles of independence and integrity, defend primary research, consult widely on research priorities, and deliver superior commercial outcomes. There are legislative safeguards, which hold to a standard of integrity, such as the UK’s Haldane Principle:

- researchers are best placed to determine detailed priorities;
- the government’s role is to set the over-arching strategy; and

¹ Joint Statement from the Learned Academies <https://humanities.org.au/news/joint-statement-from-the-learned-academies-regarding-arc-funding-veto/>

- the research councils are guardians of the independence of science.²

The ARC's College of Experts conducts a comprehensive assessment process to identify high-quality research proposals which evidence social, cultural, economic and environmental benefits to Australia. This process involves up to ten experts and assessors reviewing each application, with the ability to involve further review by the full selection panel (up to 20 members) where required.

A Minister who rejects this expert advice risks **eroding trust in the ARC's processes**, and jeopardises the range of ideas, possibilities and capacities that Australia needs its research system to develop to support our ability to grasp new opportunities or deal with the unforeseen.³

It is time to strengthen our system through legislative and procedural change.

The exercise of the Minister's veto power has exposed differences between the ARC and NHMRC with regard to governance and advisory processes, legislation, and decision-making and assessment. **We recommend a review is undertaken to achieve better alignment between these two councils**, including the checks and balances needed to maintain rigour and integrity of the entire process.

The Academy supports the development of inclusive and forward-looking national research priorities that are in the long term national interest. We agree that the nation's research effort should support work in areas prioritised for social, environmental or economic development. **While short to medium term priorities should set the agenda for strategic programs, this must be balanced by resourcing for longer-term fundamental research.** Proposals to allocate high fixed proportions of program expenditure against specific sets of priorities (such as the Manufacturing Priorities) are likely to have unintended consequences, which may prejudice the capacity of the ARC to meet overall public policy objectives. It is crucial that the research sector be actively involved in the process used to determine what these priorities should be.

We urge the following actions:

Legislative

1. Amend the Australian Research Council Act 2001 such that funding for research will be allocated according to expert advice in line with ministerial guidelines, and that ministers may only intervene to correct malpractice or on the advice of national security agencies.
2. Equip the CEO of the ARC through legislation to make decisions and recommendations in accordance with agreed guidelines. This would bring the ARC into line with the NHMRC, which vests decision-making responsibility with the CEO as advised by the NHMRC Council and Principal Committees.

² [Parliament of the United Kingdom](#), "The Haldane Principle", paragraph 148, accessed 9 February 2022.

³ Recall the [US Government's commission](#) enquiring into the events of September 11, 2001, p. 9, accessed 9 February 2022: "The most important failure was one of imagination."

Procedural

1. Prioritise consultation with the sector to repair relations, and seek sector input on reforms to the ARC.
2. Undertake a full review of the national research priorities and implement a broad consultative process which draws upon the expertise of the research sector.
3. Provide researchers with clarity and consistency around national priority requirements at the outset of the grants process.
4. Recognise and support the College of Experts to perform its role in assessing research excellence, including value for money and value to the nation.

We offer our expertise, and willingness to engage, and welcome genuine and wide consultation on a reform process to ensure our system reflects best practice and continues to produce high-quality research that benefits the Australian community.

About the Academy

The Academy is an independent, not-for-profit organisation with a Fellowship of 690 humanities leaders. Our Academy is one of Australia's five Learned Academies – independent organisations established to encourage excellence in their respective fields and to provide expertise and advice at public, institutional and government levels.

We are the national voice for cultural, creative and ethical thinking. We promote the study and application of the humanities because recording, explaining and predicting the human story brings distinctive and diverse ideas to decision-making and contributes to a better future for all.