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Prepared by AAUP Council on behalf of the Association

Submitted by Professor Manuel B. Graeber in response to the invitation dated 14.02.2022

To

Senate Standing Committees on Education and Employment, Parliament of Australia

Attn.

Alan Raine

Committee Secretary

Thursday, 24 February 2022

Dear Sir,

Re: Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill 2018

Thank you for inviting the Australian Association of University Professors (AAUP) to comment on the Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill 2018.

The Australian academic community strongly supports the principle that specific judgements concerning academic content should be made by experts who have the necessary deeper understanding and experience of the issues, their practical implications and some of the foreseeable societal impact.

Australia, in contrast to other democratic countries, lags behind in the formal legal protection of the independence of research from government and external interference [1]. We, therefore, urge Parliament to pass the Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill 2018. It is a necessary step to protect the integrity of research by reducing political and other external interference.

The task of research is to create trustworthy knowledge, enable well informed teaching and add to the skill base of our country by establishing facts and explanations through evidence and careful deep thought. This endeavour of truth finding, rather than mere truth claiming, cannot occur without respect for the independence of research. Research itself is not above the law or the demands of society and there are several well prescribed routes for a minister or anyone else to intervene should the need arise. There is no need to retain the current discretionary ministerial power to veto an award recommended by the experts..

We understand that research funding decisions intend to advance the national interest, but the decisions need to be made transparently with expertise about the issues that are investigated and the wider societal impact, that could arise from possible outcomes of the research. Historical precedent has time and again shown that the interference by politicians or administrators, often only on the basis of cursory knowledge of a specific project and disconnected from the current state of knowledge of the topic, distorts or devalues the benefit of research that crucially depends on impartiality and critical distance.

The AAUP is particularly concerned about failures to understand research as a dynamic process that for its success must value and integrate different intentions and methods that are, often inadequately, labelled as basic, translational, applied, commercial and others. Particularly prominent is the disregard for the humanities and social sciences, fields about which uninformed opinion is often strongly held. Research in these fields is vital for the methods-critical self-understanding of what research needs to achieve and how to benefit society through deeper understanding of our social and regional situation, and its change through time.

As well as resolving the specific issue of politically motivated grant rejection, we hope that the amendment paves the way to greater consistency, notably in regard to the timeline of grants made available or awarded. Specifically, junior researchers need much greater planning certainty as they are often supported by grants, whether fellowships they win directly, or through positions on grants that are won by more senior academics. Excellent researchers and future potential are lost when grant announcements are delayed for ministerial review or for politically-timed announcement; this can leave researchers unsure about their livelihood and location, and they may decide to seek other roles, often overseas.

In conclusion, we are grateful for this opportunity to comment and urge Parliament to pass this Amendment.

[1] **References**

Putting Science and Engineering at the Heart of Government Policy - Innovation, Universities, Science and Skills Committee

<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmdius/168/16807.htm>

Higher Education and Research Act 2017, c29, Part 3 Funding and Directions, Section 103

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/29/section/103/enacted>

UK Research and innovation

<https://www.ukri.org/about-us/our-structure/our-relationship-with-the-government/>

42 U.S. U.S.de § 282a - Authorization of appropriations

<https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=granuleid:USC-prelim-title42-section282a&num=0&edition=prelim>

US National Science Foundation (National Science Foundation Act 1950)

<https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title42/chapter16&edition=prelim>