

To: Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment, Parliament of Australia

From: Academic for Public Universities (<https://publicuniversities.org>)

Date: 24 February 2022

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

Academics for Public Universities is a group of academics interested in undertaking independent research to understand, address, and improve the current state of Australian public universities. The group is comprised of academics from a wide range of Australian universities and diverse disciplines, as well as Emeriti Professors and retired researchers. We began our collective research in 2020 as a result of the current crisis facing by the Australian tertiary education sector, allegedly as a result of the COVID19 pandemic over the past two years, but ultimately originating in government and institutional decisions made over several decades.

Our recent work, which will constitute the focus of an upcoming special issue of the journal *Social Alternatives*, has been dedicated to highlighting the structural faults that have created the current predicament universities have been besieged by:

- Over 40,000 tertiary education jobs have disappeared over a year, between May 2020 and May 2021 (Littleton and Stanford, 2021).
- The consistent growth of both revenue and expenditures (as well as assets) over the past two decades, which paralleled the growth in student numbers (almost tripled over the same period), has not been matched by a similar growth of permanent academic positions, leading to a dramatic increase in staff-student ratio. No Australian university currently features among the top 100 universities for the best staff-student ratio (Times Higher Education, 2021). On the contrary, while the average students-to-staff ratio among the top 100 ranked universities is 5.22 students to 1 permanent academic, the average ratio among Australian public universities is six times higher, at 30.5 to 1.
- Over the past 20 years, the number of people employed in (Higher Education Worker defined) support roles has decreased by 70% and the number of people employed in regular professional roles has increased by 37%, notwithstanding the tripling of student enrolments, while over the same period, middle and senior management grew 144% and 110% respectively (Croucher and Woelert 2021).
- Democratic and inclusive committee-based decision-making processes have increasingly been replaced by more managerial structures and processes.

- Structural changes within individual institutions occur at an increasingly rapid pace (often as a result of a new executive member being appointed to a particular portfolio).
- Students are increasingly diverted to ‘self-directed’ online modules, a trend accompanied by a decrease of direct contact-time with lecturers and tutors, notwithstanding the very clear student dissatisfaction with such a trend (TEQSA 2020).
- Courses and subject offerings are increasingly cut while the costs of some degrees have increased.
- Concerns about the decline of academic freedom have led to the recommendation of a Model Code by former Chief Justice Robert French (2018).
- Bullying and wage theft consistently appear in recent news reports.
- The casualisation of the workforce has reached unprecedented proportions (for example, the University of Melbourne, Australia’s richest tertiary institutions, has been recently reported by the ABC as employing 72.9% of its staff on insecure terms).
- According to recent research (conducted in 2021), Australian university personnel are 2.5 times more likely than the national average to work in a high-risk corporate climate highly conducive to poor mental health conditions.
- While all the above is occurring, the average salary of Australia’s Vice-Chancellors has reached just above A\$1 million dollars in 2019. Even with the relative cuts that have occurred as a result of the pandemic current salaries of Vice -Chancellors still far exceed the pay of any other public servant (including that of the Prime Minister) and, on average, are 11.26 times the average salary of Australian academics (more than twice their UK counterparts, where the ratio is 5.7 to 1) (Rowlands and Boden 2020).

It is, thus, against the background of the concerning trends our research has identified, that we respectfully present our submission in regard to the issue of Ministerial oversight of, and interference with, research grant allocation decisions by the Australian Research Council (ARC).

Firstly, while it is necessary for a society to maintain oversight of its various institutions via the democratically elected individuals who represent the political pinnacle of a free democracy, we question whether the power of the Minister to intervene to alter the decisions of an already established independent body – specifically tasked with making merit-based decisions on research proposal and grant allocations – does indeed exceed that need for ultimate political oversight. After all, several recourses already exist (both within the criminal and administrative legal frameworks) to address any potential shortcomings of ARC decisions. The Minister’s role, it would appear to us, ought to be to ensure the proper operation of the ARC, but, if such proper operation is guaranteed, the Minister ought to abstain from addressing the *merit* of the ARC decisions.

The existing peer-review system in the form of the ARC College of Experts is designed to provide a rigorous and comprehensive review process. To perform its functions at its best, it is designed as an impartial and a-political entity, free from political interference. As it is the case for many other institutions that are crucial to the functioning of an independent, democratic and free society, the existence of such a politically independent body – politically instituted and routinely reviewed, but free of transient political interference – is essential to the free pursuit of intellectual excellence within a society.

We believe it is not hyperbole to assert that most human progress depends as much upon the unrestricted pursuit of knowledge ‘for its own sake’ as it does upon the targeted solutions of specific problems. Knowledge is frequently acquired by such unbridled research, the immediate relevance and application of which may not be apparent, and which depends upon other similar research outcomes before it can ever be commercially exploited (in those cases where commercialisation is a possible output of research). At times, it may take decades before such translation occurs, whereas at times it is the failure of a particular research project that leads to previously unthought of solutions. When asked by William Gladstone, the British Prime Minister of the day, whether his publicly funded research on electricity (then seen as an amusing but largely useless diversion) would ever be of any use, Faraday coolly replied, ‘One day, Sir, you may tax it’.

Research, in other words, must be unfettered, and the creative power of the individual minds of the brightest researchers must be allowed to wonder (relatively) freely if its potential is to be truly and fully harnessed. Where such unfettered research is not fully supported, a society does not benefit from it. Such unfettered research supported by sufficient long-term and stable funding across all discipline areas has ensured that highly developed economies such as Germany, France, Japan, and the US (among others), as well as demographically comparable ones such as Switzerland, Sweden, Denmark and Finland, have achieved, and continue to maintain, global competitiveness and a strong economic future that is not dependent on a particular production chain based on finite resource availability. In other words, such economies have successfully invested in a knowledge-economy as the basis for their continuous economic, political and social success and wellbeing. In all these instances, the freedom to undertake research free from political interference is highly protected, on the understanding that the creative power of the human mind should not be restrained if creative, innovative, competitive and ultimately unpredictable solutions are to be engendered. According to Alfred Nobel’s will, Nobel prizes are awarded to ‘those who, during the preceding year, have conferred the greatest benefit to Mankind [sic]’. Scientists at Germany’s Max-Planck-Society (and its predecessor organisation, the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Society), which is Government-funded and devoted purely to blue sky fundamental research, have won, by themselves, 37 Nobel prizes for Physics, Chemistry and Physiology or Medicine. By comparison, Australian scientists as a whole (even including those working overseas) have won 13 Nobel prizes in the same fields. Without a properly established system of government funding for *free* ‘blue-sky’ research, our lack of competitiveness with other countries over time becomes immediately apparent.

Since 2018, according to data available on the Australian Bureau of Statistics, there has been a 28.8% drop in Government expenditure on all forms of research and development. In 2015-16 Government expenditure was 0.239% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), whereas in 2019-2020 Government expenditure relative to GDP was only 0.170%. Yet, the recent sudden need for mRNA vaccines has starkly highlighted the essential value of theoretical knowledge at critical (and often unpredictable) junctures. A stronger ongoing investment in ‘blue-sky’ research without immediate apparent commercial value would have allowed Australia to be even better placed in dealing with the onset of COVID. A sustained and continued investment in ‘blue-sky’ research with unpredictable results is likely to yield sudden and previously unexpected results when they are most needed. Therefore, any transient political constraint on such research process is likely to cause economic harm to Australia in the long term.

Furthermore, no society is only an economy. Societies depend upon numerous areas and types of research for their well-being and prosperity, for the resolution of diverse problems and for their preparation for new challenges. Therefore, we also note that much research does not have direct commercial implications and rather contributes to Australia's capacity to be self-reflective about its own institutions, its own history, and its place in the world, as well as crucial social values such as freedom of speech, social justice, and equity. Most of such research cannot be commercialised in the manner currently envisaged by the Federal Government.

The value of much arts and humanities research (directly targeted by the latest use of Minister Roberts's exercise of his Ministerial veto powers) does not lie in innovation, intended or otherwise, but in the deepening of our collective understanding of ourselves and of society. Such inherently blue-sky research is equally instrumental to the establishment of an economically thriving society, just less predictably so. Much social science research may not be industry-oriented, with value that is instead often quite incremental, empirical, and builds on recognised bodies of knowledge and purpose. Moreover, the current emphasis on scientific pursuits and research aimed at the manufacturing sector hides the continued need for the social scientific knowledge required by all those sectors of the economy employed in public administration, social services, infrastructure, health and education, which overall constitute the majority of Australia's workforce.

Society also depends upon such diverse research to support higher education and professional training. Where such research is not available, the quality of teaching provided by universities inevitably declines. Simple instrumental, market-oriented economic imperatives governing the assessment of grant applications is thus inevitably bound to decrease the overall quality of Australia's tertiary education sector. Students may be immediately ready for jobs upon graduation, but they may not any longer know why they are undertaking such jobs, leading to a much more unstable job-market in the long term. In other words, the societal value of allegedly less market-ready academic pursuits *is* instrumental, but it is not measurable in the short term and cannot be contained within the short political timeframe of a single Ministerial tenure.

Moreover, in addition to the pursuit of new knowledge, the maintenance of a sufficiently nuanced knowledge-base is necessary for the maintenance of an intellectually healthy and robust society. Japan, for example, has established a system of 'Living National Treasures' (*Jūyō Mukuei Bunkazai Hojisha* - 'Preservers of Important Intangible Cultural Properties'), individuals tasked with the preservation of key knowledge areas, whereas many European countries establish lifetime chairs in a number of key academic disciplines. At present, Australian universities do not possess a system capable of preserving such essential knowledge against the threat of an increasingly casualised and precarious academic workforce.

The precarious nature of current academic work carries the additional risk of decreasing the pool of available talents, since the prospect of, at best, precarious employment, makes it increasingly hard to invest in a research career, for which a commitment of more than a decade of dedication is required. The current Ministerial veto powers, therefore, carry the additional consequence of acting as a deterrent for potential scholars to embark upon a research career marked not only by a precarious future but also by the uncertainty of their research being subject to political (rather than expert) oversight.

In conclusion, we believe that there should be a strong degree of political oversight in establishing the ARC and in periodically reviewing its operation, but *merit* decisions ought to be free from political interference if Australia is to remain a competitive knowledge-economy on the world stage.

As a result, we fully support the proposed amendments contained in subsections 51(1), 51(2) and 52(4) of the *Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill 2018*.

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