

Public Universities Australia

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

From: Public Universities Australia (<https://pua.org/>)

Date: 25 February 2022

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

Public Universities Australia is a nation-wide alliance of organisations and individuals that connects academic professors and students (<https://puau.org/>). All are concerned with the current state of Australian universities and committed to ensure that the value and function of Australian universities for the broader public is fully realised. Public Universities Australia aims to give expression to the voices of all academics, all students and alumni, and all professional staff of Australian public universities. Public Universities Australia is independent of government and other directions.

The prosperity of any society depends on its ability to innovate, adapt and quickly respond to unexpected problems with previously unimagined solutions. Innovative research is thus at the core of any society's ability to thrive into an inherently uncertain future. However, history has shown time and again that innovation cannot be predetermined. Ultimately, it is a grass roots enterprise driven by individuals allowed to follow their ideas, even if unpopular or paradoxical at the time. Indeed, research is not research if its outcomes are dictated. A society can determine the needs *for* research but not the specific pursuits *of* the research itself. However, the unbridled and unfettered power of the human mind can benefit from a thorough and rigorous peer-review process. It is for this reason that panels of experts are established to peer-review new research projects and also critically discuss the review process itself.

While it is necessary for a society to maintain oversight of its various institutions via democratically elected individuals, the Ministerial intervention on the decisions made by a panel of experts specifically tasked with making merit-based decisions on research proposal and grant allocations institutes a degree of oversight that is not only unnecessary but detrimental.

The existing peer-review system in the form of the ARC College of Experts is already designed to provide a rigorous and comprehensive review process. To perform this function at its best, it is designed as an impartial and a-political entity, free from political interference. Ministerial interference, therefore, is bound to alter academic expert decisions based on political considerations. If the underlying issue was to ensure that research proposals comply with the overall Australian legal framework, several recourses already exist, both at the criminal and the administrative level. Therefore, the Minister's role must be to ensure the proper operation of the ARC, but, if the *form* of such operation is guaranteed, the Minister ought to abstain from addressing the *merit* of any ARC decision.

Furthermore, passing the amendment will have a profound impact on current and future students. The amendment will send a strong positive message to our youth, suggesting that their passion is deemed more important than transient political considerations. It will encourage self-expression and support future generations in reaching their true potential and help to protect the democratic values that we see increasingly under threat world-wide.

Funding cuts and grant vetoes do not only affect academics and staff; they change the atmosphere on campus. Students feel and share the disappointment of lecturers, supervisors, friends and mentors. They share the same passion for pursuing knowledge for the betterment of society. Therefore, political vetoes hurt students just as deeply. More importantly, they take away the students' sense of hope for a brighter future when they see their role models lose the jobs they love.

To deny academics pursuing what they love, especially when their intellectual peers have validated the quality of their proposal, is counterproductive for individuals, for our communities, and for society as a whole.

Finally, political interference has a disproportionate impact on Indigenous research and academics, thus constituting a blatant example of a culturally disrespectful approach.

In summary, while we believe that there should be a necessary degree of political oversight in establishing the ARC and in periodically reviewing its operation, *merit* decisions ought to be free from political interference and be solely based on academic criteria if Australia is to improve its standing as a 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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