

From: The Australian Institute of Physics
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To: Committee Secretary
Senate Education and Employment Committees
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra, ACT 2600, Australia

24 February 2022

Submission in relation to inquiry on the Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill 2018

The National Executive of Australia's main professional association for physicists, the Australian Institute of Physics (AIP), wishes to make the following submission in response to your inquiry on the Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill 2018. The AIP is the principal body representing professional physicists in Australia and is the accrediting body for undergraduate physics degrees at Australian Universities.

This submission has the endorsement of the National Executive of the AIP. The current members of the National Executive are as listed here: <https://aip.org.au/committees/>

The Australian Research Council (ARC) is the main funding agency for physics research conducted in Australia. The ARC's peer-review process for grant applications is of the highest standard and meets international expectations. There are, however, a number of points which urgently need improvement:

- (1) The ARC should be set up as an autonomous science-led funding body with final-decision making powers in regards to research grant allocations, rather than merely providing funding recommendations to a government minister. Governments formulate the rules for research funding, and the ARC implements them through a well-defined and transparent peer-review process. The National Interest Test – which we note is not part of the peer-review process – and the Minister's right to veto the ARC's funding decisions violate international best practice in the allocation of research funding, and undermine the integrity of the entire review process. The autonomy of the ARC, in terms of funding decisions, should be set out legislation or statute and should be comparable to its international counterparts, such as the European Research Council.
- (2) Scientific endeavour is an inherently international activity and Australia's reputation in terms of how it enables scientific research matters greatly for Australia's ability to attract and retain the best and brightest researchers. Ministerial interventions in funding decisions, as well as other government interventions that threaten the autonomy and independence of scientific institutions or scientists, risk reflecting poorly on Australia's standing in the international community. There is some indication that, in response to last year's ministerial interventions, some international expert reviewers have already turned their backs on the ARC and refused to participate in the peer-review process.

- (3) Clearly communicated and reliable timelines for funding decisions are as important as the independence of the review process. Arbitrary delays in announcing grant outcomes are unprofessional and jeopardise research projects, continuation of employment of highly skilled researchers and Australia's international competitiveness. The effects are particularly negative for early-career researchers, who rely on their grant success for their own livelihood. It is likely that the uncertainty in particular affects the participation in the grant process of underrepresented and disadvantaged groups or those who, for personal reasons such as carer responsibilities, cannot accommodate the financial uncertainty or emotional stress that results from this uncertainty. Ministerial sign-off is not used in any other democratic country we are aware of. Removing ministerial sign-off would enable funding outcomes to be announced on well-defined dates and with greatest expedience. Aside from benefits for applicants, it would also counter-act the impression that Australia's competitive research funding is overly politicised.
- (4) The science portfolio has only recently been identified by the Australian government as crucial to the national interest, with a strong focus on commercialisation. We stress that commercialisation and fundamental research are just two sides of the same coin, and the former cannot be successful without the latter in the longer term. Funding for commercialisation and fundamental research needs to be well-balanced in order to guarantee Australia's future success and prosperity, and secure our role as a relevant player in the international knowledge economy.
- (5) The Australian Government should ensure that its policies, decisions and processes in relation to research funding are consistent with the recommendations of the UNESCO, including those in relation to Science and Scientific Researchers (as agreed at the UNESCO's 39th session in 2017) and those in relation to the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel (as per 1997). Perhaps most important is that the design of legislation and processes for research funding respects the letter and spirit of recommendation II.6 of the 2017 recommendations: "Member States should treat public funding of research and development as a form of public investment the returns on which are, for the most part, necessarily long-term, and take all appropriate measures to ensure that the justification for, and indeed the indispensability of such investment is held constantly before public opinion."
- (6) The AIP urges greatest caution in making any comparative judgments or evaluations as to the relative usefulness, merit, relevance or national interest of different disciplines or fields, whether by an individual, an office holder within the government or through systemic processes. The AIP considers that Australia's excellence in research, its future prosperity and sustainability and its foundation as an ethical and mature society requires a strong and balanced academic and research environment where all disciplines, including in particular also the humanities, are valued, independent and supported.

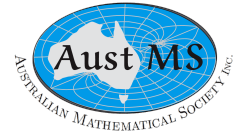
In addition to the above, the AIP wishes to submit its joint open letter to The Honourable Stuart Robert, MP, dated 27 January 2022 and attached to this document, for consideration by the committee.

The Australian Institute of Physics supports the Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill 2018.

Kind regards,



Prof Sven Rogge, President
– on behalf of the National Executive of the AIP –



27 January 2022

The Honourable Stuart Robert, MP
Acting Minister for Education and Youth
stuart.robert.mp@aph.gov.au

CC: Professor Sue Thomas
Chief Executive Officer
Australian Research Council
ceo@arc.gov.au

Re: Ministerial interference in 2021 Australian Research Council Discovery Grants

Dear Minister Robert,

As Presidents of a number of learned societies we write to express our concerns about the continued use of the National Interest Test to veto the funding of Australian Research Council Discovery Grants recommended for funding by the Australian Research Council (ARC) College of Experts. While national interest should be a factor in the allocation of research funding, our strongly-held view is that this should be (and already is) achieved through the assessment process carried out by the ARC. An ex post facto ministerial intervention in the form of a veto cannot possibly be in Australia's national interest. Such a veto severely erodes the trust the scientific community has in the process of research funding allocation. It also damages our international reputation as a country with a healthy and thriving ecosystem for conducting scientific research, and will ultimately diminish our scientific competitiveness as a nation. Already this process of veto has reduced our international colleagues' willingness to contribute their expertise to the ARC process.

We can think of very few examples of selection processes for government funding in Australia that are as selective and rigorous as that carried out by the ARC. We strongly endorse the recent call by the members of the Australian Research Council College of Experts to legislate amendments to the Australian Research Council Act 2001 to ensure the independence of the

ARC and to maintain the rigour and integrity of the ARC's grant assessment process by ending the Minister's use of the National Interest Test.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Steven Bottle, President, Royal Australian Chemical Institute (RACI)
Associate Professor Jessica Kasza, President, Statistical Society of Australia (SSA)
Professor John Lattanzio, President, Astronomical Society of Australia (ASA)
Professor Sven Rogge, President, Australian Institute of Physics (AIP)
Professor Ole Warnaar, President, Australian Mathematical Society (AustMS)