

The Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) welcomes the Senate support for a motion put by Greens Senator Mehreen Faruqi to refer her private members' bill *Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill 2018* to a Senate Inquiry.

The Australian Association for Research in Education exists to support the health and excellence of research specific to Education in all its forms. The organisation has long-established connections with similar organisations in the USA and UK and holds workshops, seminars and a conference annually. In our first fully on-line conference last year, in the depths of pandemic, we attracted close to 900 attendees. We forge connections with all those concerned about Education research and its translation. For more than 50 years the AARE has been committed to advocating a culture supportive the highest quality research activity and training to ensure Australia sustains strong leadership in Education Research. In this we have connections with key government agencies and research organisations around the country including the Australian Research Council. Many of our members have accepted roles as grant reviewers and we can boast a strong showing of Association members in independent selection for the ARC College of Experts and Australian Academy of the Social Sciences. <https://www.aare.edu.au>

The Association is in accord with the concerns expressed by a wide cross-section of the research community, community leaders and politicians about the inappropriateness of political intervention that directly undermines the expert and ethical grant peer review processes of the Australian Research Council.

It is our position that political intervention at the end stage of the ARC competitive process is unacceptable and should cease. Political interference at that point is untenable and undermines the credibility of research quality and the ARC competitive system of grants in ensuring that quality. These types of decisions undermine the rigorous peer review process and assessment by the College of Experts which is essential for creditability and integrity of the ARC Grant process.

Recommendation: That the Ministerial right to exercise a veto in final decisions about the award of specific research grants recommended for funding by the ARC College of Experts should be removed.

The exercise of the Ministerial veto has predominantly been in respect of research in the humanities and social sciences (2006, 2018, 2021). Political interference runs the real risk of undermining the commitment of the best and brightest minds to engage in research and strive for excellence and this ultimately impacts the stewardship and renewal of disciplines and will impede interdisciplinary attention to finding innovative solutions to difficult social and economic problems. The recent experience of how we have adapted to the COVID 19 pandemic illustrates the urgent need for a broad spectrum of research-informed approaches – from vaccines and public health measures, to understanding the impact on communication, education, and cultural life, and addressing changes in working and family life.

Successive Federal governments have pursued a national agenda of building high quality research activity and dissemination. This is against a backdrop of shrinking public funding for research oriented to new discovery. Researchers have willingly co-operated to build the research status and reputation of Australian universities and to address important issues in the national interest. It is counterproductive and financially detrimental that quality processes are then undermined by exercise of a veto.

In addition, the Minister's action undermines the fundamentals of assessment, namely robustness and fairness, and similarly the values and principles of equity and inclusiveness.

Peer review ensures that decisions about the merit of research proposals are led by specialists and subject to rigorous scrutiny and consideration from multiple perspectives. Government plays a vital role in setting and implementing broader strategic goals and national programmatic priorities and experts make informed decisions about the quality, significance and benefits of specific research projects. This is the process reflected in the internationally respected Haldane Principle which respects the autonomy of research councils and is enshrined in the UK's Higher Education and Research Act 2017.

While peer review may not be a perfect system of evaluation it has been refined over the years and is honoured by generations of scholars worldwide. That the forensically careful and considered review of research undertaken by academic experts is demeaned by the snap judgements or biases of ministers makes a mockery of holding academic research to account on the grounds of quality.

One of the most worrying messages conveyed by veto is that excellence in some disciplines or fields is more worthy of support and through certain lenses more in the 'national interest' than others. This is basically heralding a situation where:

- aspirations are quashed and choices become narrower
- fields and disciplines that have a higher proportion of women are diminished in reputation.
- universities risk losing high quality staff to international positions and Australia risks losing valued international collaborators
- the best academics in affected disciplines cease to apply for nationally competitive grants with concomitant impact on world rankings.
- there is narrowing of disciplinary opportunity and equitable access to competitive grant funding.

The outcry across all disciplines is notable, extending to the ARC College of Experts and the national Academies.

The veto of grants and disciplinary narrowness in the setting of national priorities is unhealthy for the sector and for international reputation.

Based on all the above concerns The Australian Association for Research in Education strongly supports amendments that end ministerial veto of ARC grants.