

Submission to the senate enquiry into the Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill 2018

Please consider my submission as an individual researcher who has been closely associated with the work of the Australian Research Council over the span on some 50 years.

Currently I hold the position of Emeritus Professor at James Cook University.

I have held (mostly with collaborators) a succession of Large/Discovery and Linkage research grants allocated by the Australian Research Council from 1970 to 2021.

In the 1990's I served on the Earth Sciences discipline panel of the Australian Research Council, acting as panel chair for two years.

Over my research career I have assessed very many grant applications submitted to the ARC and followed the outcomes. I have always been mindful of the fundamental role the ARC plays in driving research outcomes across the full discipline range of enquiry within the remit of the Council.

The allocation of publically funded support to the Australian research community must be evidence-based. That this condition should apply to the allocation of all public funds by Government is very widely accepted by the community and by its governmental representatives.

To ensure the evidence basis for ARC funding allocations, a detailed system of application and assessment has been in place for over 50 years.

The application process is daunting and involves many person/weeks of effort to achieve submission - documenting in detail the project for which funding is sought (project team and their roles, project context, approach - including innovation, techniques, budget, intended outcomes and their significance in relation to national research objectives). In parallel, the research track record and capacities of the grant applicants is provided in considerable detail.

Assessment involves a process similar to that adopted by all journals of quality in selecting research outcomes worthy of publication. Independent reviewers are enlisted to assess submissions, with assessment and oversight by discipline experts contracted by the ARC to ordinate submissions for budget-constrained funding decisions. All applicants are well aware of the process and it's detail is available through the ARC as a public record.

It is very important for research funding decisions to be communicated in a timely manner so funding applicants can plan effectively for the initial year of project support. This is especially the case for Fellowship applications and for grants involving industry partners for which budget decisions are pending.

Funding decisions announced by the ARC in their annual timetable are already very challenging to forward planning by researchers. Additional delay due to the application of over-riding decisions is counterproductive to achieving ‘value for money’ in the discharge of research projects.

Similar to democracy, the ARC process in its detail is less than perfect but it provides the best available evidence-based mechanism for the allocation of public funding to support Australian research enterprise.

Any over-riding process that sets out to modify funding decisions by the ARC must be at least its equal in evidence-based assessment. The detail of any over-riding assessment process employed should be of public record, as well as the decisions made and their timetable for announcement. Given the exacting process adopted by the ARC, it is very hard to envisage how this could be achieved.

Democracy depends absolutely on evidence-based decisions to guide its application to governance. Depending the ARC independent of, and isolated from, other considerations in the assignment public funds to Australian research is clearly in line with that aspiration.

**Robert Henderson
Emeritus Professor
James Cook University**