

Senate Inquiry

Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill 2018



Submission from the Australian Society of Plant Scientists

The Australian Society of Plant Scientists (ASPS) is an incorporated not-for-profit society with approximately 300 financial members. The ASPS represents researchers and tertiary educators within the broad scope of plant science ranging from basic biology to applied agricultural science. Our principal function is to support our membership and Australian plant science in general by encouraging communication and interactions between our members, rewarding excellence in research and teaching and advocating for plant science to governments and policy makers.

In this submission, the ASPS expresses strong support for the amendment proposed by Senator Faruqi to prevent the responsible Minister from vetoing funding decisions recommended by the Australian Research Council (ARC). It is imperative that the selection and allocation of research grants through the ARC remain a trusted process. There cannot be any suspicion that a Minister rejects recommendations from the ARC for political reasons. The ASPS believes that any hint of political interference in deciding these highly-contested grants, real or perceived, completely undermines the principle of independence which is so important to a modern democracy.

Key points

- The ARC, in partnership with the research community, performs a laborious and highly competitive peer-review process to determine its funding recommendations. This process takes many months with careful consideration of thousands of pages of grant applications. Currently, the Act permits the Minister to veto those recommendations based on the Project Title and a 150-word National Interest Test Statement, or less.
- The government can and should be able to determine Australian research priorities and establish funding rules to meet those objectives. However, any grant that meets those funding rules and is recommended for funding by the ARC following peer-review and eligibility checks, should be funded.
- The opportunity for deliberation by the Minister over ARC grant recommendation adds unnecessary delays to a funding cycle which is already a very thorough process. Removal of the Minister's veto power could shorten this process by weeks. This is important because, apart from needlessly increasing frustration among the applicants, the delays and uncertainty have caused many talented scientists to leave Australia for overseas positions, which weakens Australian research.

On behalf of the Australian Society of Plant Scientists

Dr Peter Ryan (CSIRO, President)

Dr Kim Johnson (La Trobe University, Hon. Secretary)

Dr Mike Haydon (University of Melbourne, Hon. Treasurer)