



Group of Eight

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
Legislation Committee

Inquiry into the provisions of the Australian Research Council Amendment Bill 2006

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Mr John Carter
Secretary
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee
Department of the Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Dear Mr Carter

The Australian Research Council Amendment Bill 2006 proposes significant changes to the operation of the ARC and has implications for the integrity of the processes used to distribute a large sum of public money.

The Group of Eight strongly supports the peer assessment process employed by the ARC and believes that, in the interests of public accountability, academic respectability and international credibility, this model should continue. In this respect we welcome public comments made by the Minister which have been supportive of peer assessment. It is important, however, that policy settings and administrative arrangements are clearly established by Government and that the ARC is given a clear mandate to exercise these responsibilities. Such clarity will help resolve recent tensions between recommendations of expert assessors and political funding decisions.

The ARC board plays a important oversight role to ensure that the operation of the ARC is, and is seen to be, efficient, transparent, and authoritative. While the Minister has, and will continue to have under this Bill, the power to accept or reject recommendations for funding from the ARC, the grant applicants as well as the Australian public have a right to be assured that the process is fair and rigorous. In the interests of good governance the board should be retained with the responsibility to make funding recommendations to the Minister. Should the Minister fail to accept the advice of the board then clear reasons should be given for this.

While abandoning the checks and balances provided by a board model of governance, this Bill increases the power of the Minister to establish and dissolve committees and initiate inquiries. This approach could lead to considerable administrative difficulty and uncertainty between the Minister and the CEO and greater clarity of the intentions of the Bill is required.



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Some of the changes to the operation of the ARC proposed in this Bill will affect the independence of the organisation, create uncertainty for grant applicants and threaten public confidence in its operation. The ARC should operate as an independent statutory authority on terms and conditions established by the Government but fulfilling its remit at arm's length from political intervention.

Yours sincerely

Virginia Walsh
Executive Director