



22 February 2022

Alan Raine
Committee Secretary
Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee

**Re: Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill
2018**

Dear Mr Raine,

The Australian Mathematical Society (AustMS) is the national society of the mathematics profession, representing the interests of the profession in Australia and promoting mathematics in the community.

The AustMS is strongly supportive of the proposed amendments to the Australian Research Council Act 2001. The ministerial use of the National Interest Test to block the funding of Australian Research Council Grants or Fellowships which have been recommended for funding by the Australian Research Council is problematic on a number of fronts, and it is the view of our society that the test itself is not in the national interest.

We acknowledge that national interest should be a factor in the allocation of research funding in Australia. However, national interest already plays a significant role in the assessment and selection process undertaken by the ARC. This assessment is based on a clear set of criteria against which proposals are to be judged by discipline experts and by the ARC's College of Experts, made up of leaders in research across the nation. This ensures the process for the allocation of research funding is rigorous, fair and transparent, and serves the best interests of the nation in terms of outcomes. In contrast, a ministerial veto is wide open to the perception (or worse) of political or ideological motivation on the part of the minister in question; it is not subject to due process, lacks clear criteria and requires little to no justification.

The current use of the ministerial veto undermines the confidence in our assessment processes, putting the willingness of domestic and international researchers to participate in the process at risk. The use of the National Interest Test in 2022 has been openly condemned by the ARC College of Experts, and has been noted in international scientific circles and the international scientific press. The input of scientists of international repute is vital to ensure the most deserving, innovative and cutting-edge applications are selected for funding, safeguarding our international scientific competitiveness. Current practices undermine our international scientific reputation and decrease the preparedness of the international scientific community to engage in the selection process itself and to participate in new Australian-led research projects.

Another undesirable consequence of ministerial intervention, and the lack of transparent criteria applied in interventions, is that it leads to the practice of self-censorship in certain politically sensitive areas of research, with scientists second-guessing the opinion of the minister of the day. This potentially affects a much larger portion of research proposals than the handful of applications that may actually be subjected to a veto. Scientific self-censorship is a practice that is typically associated with societies that are not open and free such as ours, and should have no place in a well-functioning liberal democracy. It ultimately leads to a loss of competitiveness well beyond the immediate scientific realm.

Per dollar spent, the allocation of research funding by the ARC is subject to a greater degree of scrutiny than almost any other government funding decision made across the country, and we ask all sides of politics to carefully reflect on the merits of removing the current ministerial veto powers.

The AustMS welcomes the proposed amendments to the Australian Research Council Act 2001 to ensure the independence of the ARC and to protect our international standing as a nation with an open contest of scientific ideas, free from political interference.

Yours sincerely,



Professor S. Ole Warnaar,
President of AustMS