

Submission to the Australian Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee inquiry into Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill 2018

Executive summary

The Australian and New Zealand Association for Medieval and Early Modern Studies (ANZAMEMS), is a scholarly organisation that exists to promote and foster all aspects of Medieval, Renaissance, and Early Modern Studies in Australia and New Zealand.

ANZAMEMS supports the proposed amendment on four grounds:

1. Academic freedom is fundamental in a liberal democratic society, and to the moral, material and intellectual advancement of the human condition. Academic freedom, therefore, ought to be treated as a ‘defining value’ by governments as well as universities.¹
2. Ministerial veto damages Australia’s standing globally by contradicting agreed international principles.
3. The Australian system of peer-review of applications for public research funding is rigorous, and conducted by experts who have an unparalleled understanding of the potential value of each proposal.
4. Humanities research offers insights that are crucial to understanding people, society and the world, and our past, present and future.

ANZAMEMS’ submission to the Committee

Australia has a long history of supporting Medieval and Early Modern studies research

ANZAMEMS supports the proposed amendment to the Australian Research Council Act 2001 to remove ministerial discretion in relation to the approval of research grants administered by the Australian Research Council (ARC). We are profoundly concerned at ongoing Ministerial interference in the provision of research funding schemes overseen by the ARC.

ANZAMEMS exists to promote and foster all aspects of Medieval, Renaissance, and Early Modern Studies in Australia and New Zealand. It is the peak body for scholars working in these fields in Australia and New Zealand, representing their collective and specific national interests.

¹ French, Robert S. 2019. ‘Model Code for the Protection of Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom in Australian Higher Education Providers’ in *Report of the Independent Review of Freedom of Speech in Australian Higher Education Providers*, p. 114.

22 scholarly projects recommended for funding by the CEO of the ARC have been vetoed by the Minister responsible for education since 2017: 11 by Minister Birmingham in 2017 and 2018, 5 by Minister Tehan in 2020, and 6 by Acting Minister Robert in 2021. In 2021, two of the six vetoed Humanities proposals were in the fields of research supported by our organisation, and a number of chief investigators named on those vetoed grants are members of ANZAMEMS.

The acting Minister's determination not to fund these projects flies in the face of decades of funding decisions by previous governments. The ARC has funded research in Medieval and Early Modern studies for as long as records are publicly available (since 2001), including the Network for Early European Research (2005-2010). ANZAMEMS members include those who received ARC funding before that time. The ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions, which was awarded \$24.2 million in 2011, had a significant focus on Medieval and Early Modern studies.

Academic freedom is a 'defining value' of Australian research

Academic freedom is a 'defining value' of the Australian university sector.² The 2019 *Report of the Independent Review of Freedom of Speech in Australian Higher Education Providers* (French Review) was accepted by the (then) Minister for Education Dan Tehan. The 'Model Code for the Protection of Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom in Australian Higher Education Providers' (Model Code) offered by the French Review has been widely adapted and adopted by Australian universities with the active support of the Coalition government.

The Model Code set out, as a key objective, "[t]o ensure that academic freedom is treated as a defining value by the university and therefore not restricted nor its exercise unnecessarily burdened by restrictions or burdens other than those imposed by law and set out in the Principles of the Code."³ Universities and academic staff cannot exercise their academic freedom without public funding processes that are free from Ministerial veto once rigorous, independent assessment by experts has been undertaken.

The Model Code asserts the right of scholar to pursue research topics without undue burden or impediment in its definition of academic freedom: "the freedom of academic staff and students to engage in intellectual inquiry, to express their opinions and beliefs, and to contribute to public debate, in relation to their subjects of study and research".⁴

ANZAMEMS believes that Ministerial veto of research projects that have been recommended for funding by the ARC impinges directly on this right to academic freedom.

Legislation that allows ministerial veto of funding that has been recommended by the ARC after rigour peer-review by experts is at odds with the 'defining value' of academic freedom.

Academic freedom is an agreed international principle

Academic freedom is fundamental to the conduct of a liberal democratic society, and to the moral, material and intellectual advancement of the human condition. In global contexts, the importance of academic freedom in research is widely recognised.

² *Report of the Independent Review of Freedom of Speech in Australian Higher Education Providers*, p. 114.

³ *Report of the Independent Review of Freedom of Speech in Australian Higher Education Providers*, p. 230.

⁴ *Report of the Independent Review of Freedom of Speech in Australian Higher Education Providers*, p. 231.

The *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (1966) is a multilateral treaty to which Australia is party.⁵ Article 15. 3 states that signatory nations “to the present Covenant undertake to respect the freedom indispensable for scientific research and creative activity.” This broad statement pertains to academic freedom as well as to other domains in the principle it expresses.

Academic freedom is enshrined into law in other international contexts, as the French Review notes, for example in the *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union*.⁶ It is also guaranteed in the national constitutions of liberal democracies Brazil, Japan, South Africa, Spain and Germany.⁷

Research funding in the United Kingdom has been structured by the Haldane Principle since the early twentieth century. This principle is described in the UK *Higher Education and Research Act 2017*: “decisions on individual research proposals are best taken following an evaluation of the quality and likely impact of the proposals (such as a peer review process).” The principle was fundamental to the 2017 restructuring of UK research funding under one body, United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI) by a Conservative government. This transformation of the UK research-funding landscape articulates processes for grant award based on peer review, and without ministerial right of veto.⁸

ARC expert peer-review processes are rigorous and robust

The Commonwealth government is profoundly involved in shaping research funding, including by setting national Science and Research Priorities and by determining the nature of funding schemes and their criteria. The ARC has robust and rigorous assessment processes that ensure priorities are adhered to and rules followed before funding is recommended.

Every research proposal recommended for funding by the ARC has undergone a rigorous peer-review process, involving two stages, by national and international research experts in its respective academic fields. The scholars who undertake this work have unparalleled understanding of the potential value and benefits of the proposed research precisely because of their expertise. The process includes consideration of ‘value for money’ and national benefit – the grounds on which the most recent ministerial vetoes were made. These justifications of value are necessarily thorough, and account for diverse forms of scholarly, community and national value that have been accepted by the process of peer review. Ministerial veto of the successful applications, justified most recently on the basis that these proposals failed to offer ‘value for money’, threatens the careers of individual researchers. It also constitutes a rejection of the high standards of the assessment processes themselves.

The ARC administers assessment with stringency, and at great expense. These processes depend upon the uncompensated labour of scholars across Australia. Ministerial veto jeopardises the good faith that scholars bring to assessment and applications, and profoundly undermines the ARC’s legitimacy, both nationally and internationally.

⁵ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>

⁶ *Report of the Independent Review of Freedom of Speech in Australian Higher Education Providers*, p. 119.

⁷ *Report of the Independent Review of Freedom of Speech in Australian Higher Education Providers*, p. 123.

⁸ *Higher Education and Research Bill: UKRI Vision, Principles & Governance*, 2016.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/559210/Higher_Education_and_Research_Bill-UKRI_Vision_Factsheet.pdf p. 5

ANZAMEMS offers strong support for the proposed amendment and suggests that its adoption is an essential step towards the amelioration of the reputational damage to the ARC that has been caused by ministerial veto.

Humanities research has social, cultural, economic and environmental impact

Research in the Humanities is valuable to Australian social, cultural and economic life. ANZAMEMS agrees with (then) Chief Scientist of Australia Ian Chubb who wrote in 2014: ‘The humanities, arts and social science (HASS) disciplines provide vital knowledge and understanding of our world, its peoples and societies.’⁹ The global pandemic of the past two years has highlighted the essential nature of Humanities research. Where science has provided life-saving vaccines, understanding human nature and social forces plays a critical role in ensuring they are used.

Humanities research can also have unexpected impacts. *The Power of the Humanities Report* highlights a case study where a supercomputer methodology created to tell whether an anonymous play was written by Shakespeare was then adapted to diagnose cancers.¹⁰

Research in HASS is linked closely to the creative industries sector, which makes very significant contributions to Australian social, cultural and economic life. The Austrade website summarises this:

The Australian government recognises that a creative economy contributes to cultural diversity, social inclusion, environmental sustainability and technological advancement. Creativity is key to innovation, driving sustainability and prosperity. Creativity and innovation play an important role in Australia’s resilience to recent global economic challenges, helping Australia to register 22 years of uninterrupted economic growth.¹¹

The engaged, impactful nature of humanities research, including in Medieval and Early Modern studies has also been recognised in the inaugural Australian assessment. In the 2018 ARC Engagement and Impact Assessment, Humanities projects were recognised as having had environmental, social, economic, and cultural impact, that is, as having impact across the full range of possible domains. A project rated ‘High’ from Charles Sturt University, for example, which engaged with Medieval Studies, was recognised as having had social, economic and cultural benefit.¹² In the same Assessment, the activities of the ARC-funded Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions, which was principally focussed in Medieval and Early Modern studies, were central to the ‘High’-rated Engagement narratives from History and Archaeology at the University of Western Australia and Language, Literature and Culture at the University of Queensland.

The highly successful ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions exemplifies the engagement and impact that characterises Australian Humanities research. The Centre collaborated with community, arts and government organisations from the Kalbarri Development Association Inc, to Opera Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria, Sydney Dance Company, the Koorie Development Trust, NSW Department of Family and

⁹ ‘Foreword’ in Turner, G., and Brass, K. (2014) *Mapping the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences in Australia*. Australian Academy of the Humanities, Canberra.

¹⁰ Marks, K. (2015) *The Power of the Humanities*. Australian Academy of the Humanities, Canberra. pp. 2-3.

¹¹ *Creative Industries*, 2022. <https://www.austrade.gov.au/international/buy/australian-industry-capabilities/creative-industries>

¹² <https://dataportal.arc.gov.au/EI/Web/Impact/ImpactStudy/674>

Community Services, theatre, music and arts companies, festivals, galleries and museums, schools, and Australian and international research institutions. Findings from researchers' projects were used to produce radio, tv, art, drama, computer games and more, enhancing Australian culture, and contributing to arts and cultural industries, including economically. Methods and findings also informed contemporary applied research, particularly relating to democracy and political engagement, law, media, social care, and well-being.¹³

Conclusion

Vetoing funding for Humanities projects recommended by the ARC impinges on academic freedom, goes against international principles agreed by liberal democracies, undermines Australian expertise and peer-review processes, and fails to recognise the value of Humanities research in Australian social, cultural and economic life. A fit-for-purpose and best-practice system of public funding for academic research should not include power of veto by elected official or bureaucrats, but should rely solely on peer-review by experts. ANZAMEMS, therefore, strongly supports the proposed amendment.

¹³ A detailed report of findings, research outputs, and industry collaborations was submitted to the ARC at the close of the funding period.