

25 February 2022

Committee Secretary
Senate Education and Employment Committees
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Via email: eec.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee,

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) welcomes the opportunity make a submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee on the Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill 2018.

RUN is a national collaborative group of seven regional Australian universities: Charles Sturt University, CQUniversity Australia, Federation University Australia, Southern Cross University, University of New England, University of Southern Queensland, and University of the Sunshine Coast. All RUN members are comprehensive universities who undertake research that has meaningful impact to not only our regional communities but the entirety of Australia.

RUN firmly believes in the importance of a strong and independent Australian Research Council and a research grants process system where research grants applications are assessed utilising a robust peer review process. The utilisation of a peer review process in determining the success of research proposals is recognised internationally for the high level of rigor applied to the proposals by subject matter experts. It should be noted that this process is highly competitive and not every research proposal is granted, rather the existing methodology results in a relatively low success rate for applicants. This has, in part, resulted in the Australian research grant processing ecosystem having a substantial reputation internationally and is reflected in the excellent research performance of Australia's universities on the global stage.

RUN acknowledges that the Government is ultimately responsible for deciding the level of investment in Government funded research grants, and for setting out the priorities and parameters for that funding. Additionally, RUN believes that the allocation of that research funding, as it is elsewhere in the world, is best decided by a rigorous peer review process where subject matter experts identify excellence in applications. The implementation of the National Interest Test, as part of this process, is designed to ensure that scarce public funds are spent in the national interest. The response to the National Interest Test from research grant applicants is considered by the CEO of the Australian Research Council before their recommendation of research grant funding to the Minister for Education. This quality assurance system ensures that only the highest quality applications are funded and has led to Australia's stellar reputation for a strong, fair and competitive research ecosystem that supports research, both basic and applied, across a myriad of disciplines.

This reputation could be undermined if the existing system was subject to interference, loss of trust, and a lack of transparency. A helpful step in maintaining Australia's global reputation would be to increase the transparency of decision making, especially at the CEO of the Australian Research Council and the Ministerial level to ensure that our robust processes, especially where research grants are unsuccessful, do not fall victim to damaging speculation or rumour.

It should be noted that RUN is supportive of the submission from Universities Australia.

Please do not hesitate to contact me on either +61 408 482 736 or at execdir@run.edu.au to discuss any element of this submission further.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alec Webb". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Alec Webb
Executive Director, RUN