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**Australian Academy of Science submission on the
*Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill 2018***

The Australian Academy of Science welcomes the opportunity to comment on the *Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill 2018*.

The Academy:

- Supports reform of the *Australian Research Council Act 2001* (the ARC Act) to provide greater efficiency, transparency, clarity, and probity, particularly around the use of the Ministerial veto.
- Suggests that the Minister should be required to issue a “practice note” outlining the circumstances upon which section 51 powers will be utilised
- When section 51 powers are utilised, the Minister should be required to issue an explanation to Parliament within 15 sitting days.

Application of national interest

The rationale for applying the Ministerial veto - “national interest” and “value for money” – disregards the capacity of the Australian Research Council (ARC) to make recommendations that include consideration of these matters, informed by experts during their assessment. Using the Ministerial veto as a *de facto* national interest test is inappropriate: it lacks transparency and clarity. Notably, it may not be appealed.

The application of the Ministerial veto introduces a randomness in a system that should be designed to preclude it to the maximum extent possible; there is nothing to suggest that a different Minister given the same list would make the same decision. It becomes more within the realm of ‘feel’ or ‘instinct’ than a defensible reaction to something missed by experts. It is damaging to the affected researchers, their institutions, and to confidence in the grant review process. It is detrimental to Australia’s reputation as an innovative research nation substantially free from political intrusion at the wrong level: not in the setting of goals, objectives and clear guidelines for granting schemes, all legitimate areas for Ministerial involvement, but after assessment of applications by experts, and their consequential conclusion that an application is worthy of funding.

ARC reform is needed

The importance of the Australian Research Council (ARC) is inarguable. It is one of the few avenues for explicitly funding basic science. Such a role is vital if we are to maintain a level of national preparedness against the unpredictable, like pandemics, and nourish new knowledge, including the scientific knowledge that can lead to applied science that helps secure Australian jobs and industries – both existing and new.

In recent years ARC programs have been under increasing pressure, exhibiting low success rates, increasing blowouts in decision timelines, and an increased regulatory burden. This creates uncertainty, anxiety, and a difficulty in strategically planning a research profile at both individual and institutional level.

Given the impact on jobs and careers of researchers, deadlines by which the ARC CEO must make recommendations to the Minister are essential.

ARC grants are critical to the Australian research sector. The Academy strongly supports efforts to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the ARC grant system, including the transparency and probity of the ARC competitive grants and their assessment. The Academy also supports limiting bureaucracy to the essentials.

To discuss or clarify any aspect of this submission, please contact Mr Chris Anderson, Director Science Policy at Chris.Anderson@science.org.au.