

9 March 2022

Opening Statement to the Education and Employment Legislation Committee on the Australian Research Council Amendment (Ensuring Research Independence) Bill 2018

The Regional Universities Network thank the committee for the opportunity to appear here today. At the outset I would like to say that the Regional Universities Network supports the statement made here today by Universities Australia and their submission to this committee.

The Regional Universities Network 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.

The Regional Universities Network believes in the importance of a strong and independent Australian Research Council and a system where research grants applications are assessed utilising a robust peer review process. The strength of Australia's research grant processing ecosystem has in part led to Australia's strong international reputation for excellence and this is reflected in the phenomenal research performance of Australia's universities on the global stage.

While we acknowledge 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, we believe that experts are best placed to decide the allocation of those funds. The role of experts in deciding the allocation of research funding, according to Government guidelines, is of paramount importance and a globally accepted process. The National Interest Test is designed to ensure that scarce public funds are spent in the national interest and the responses of researchers are currently considered by the Australian Research Council as part of their recommendation for research grant funding.

The importance of trust and transparency in decision making for the Australian Research Council's grant allocation system cannot be underestimated in ensuring Australia's stellar reputation remains intact. If the existing system was subject to interference, or even the perception of interference, Australia's research reputation will suffer. The Regional Universities Network believes that increasing the transparency of decision making, especially in relation to the application of the National Interest Test would be in the interest of all stakeholders. We would be happy to work with the Government in discussing measures to increase the transparency of decision-making processes in relation to the National Interest Test.