

19 January 2024

Committee Secretary
Senate Education and Employment Committees
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Re: Australian Research Council Amendment (Review Response) Bill 2023 [Provisions]

To the Committee Secretary,

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Australian Research Council Amendment (Review Response) Bill 2023 (the Bill).

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 the University of the Sunshine Coast.

This submission reflects the positions of RUN institutions, and in doing so, also aims to represent the views of the communities which RUN universities serve; the one-third of Australians who live outside of metropolitan centres in regional, rural and remote locations.

Object of the Act

RUN welcomes the amendments to the object of the Act which clearly strengthen and clarify the role of the Australian Research Council. RUN welcomes the stronger focus on the Australian Research Council's impact and purpose in the facilitation of research of national importance to Australia. RUN is particularly pleased to see the inclusion of the role that the Australian Research Council can play in expanding Indigenous knowledge systems and evaluating the excellence, impact, and depth of Australian research.

Most importantly, the amendments clarify the role that the Australian Research Council has in upholding peer review as a core process to identify excellent research – a key element of Australia's reputation for research excellence.

The Australian Research Council Board

RUN supports the increased focus on the role, remit and composition of the Australian Research Council Board and support the outlined functions and powers of the Board. Despite supporting the functions and powers of the Board, RUN has concerns about the proposed number of Board Members and feel that the number of Board Members is likely to be insufficient to meet the breadth of expertise required to perform all the functions expected of it. RUN recommends that the number of Board Members is increased.

RUN welcomes the inclusion of a dedicated Board Member who understands regional Australia. A dedicated Board Member that understands regional Australia and who can represent the unique perspectives and opportunities of regional, rural, and remote Australians will result in an increased diversity of opinion, expertise, and ultimately will increase the opportunities for regional Australia to further benefit from the world leading research occurring at regional universities.

Funding of Research and the Australian Research Council

RUN supports the intent of the legislative amendments that make the functions of the ARC more responsive to Australia's evolving security needs in the most transparent manner possible.

The Explanatory Memorandum identifies a direct financial impact of approximately \$0.6m per annum plus an additional \$0.9m per annum in indirect support costs which are to be absorbed from within the Australian Research Council's current annual departmental budget. Additionally, the expanded legislated role of the Australian Research Council, and the function that the Australian Research Council will be required to deliver to the research community through fostering academic pathways, expanding Indigenous knowledge systems and supporting research integrity, will add a significant impost on the Australian Research Council. Therefore, RUN recommends that the Government consider increasing the funding allocation to the Australian Research Council to ensure these additional duties are adequately funded and met.

Conclusion

Overall, RUN welcomes the introduction of the Bill noting the strong alignment between the Bill and the outcomes of the Trusting Australia's Ability: Review of the Australian Research Council Act 2001. RUN is particularly supportive of the amendments to the Australian Research Council Board – especially the inclusion of the board member with regional expertise.

RUN recommends that the resourcing of the Australian Research Council be further investigated and that the size of the Australian Research Council Board be increased.

Please do not hesitate to contact the RUN Secretariat on 0408 482 736 or via e-mail at execdir@run.edu.au to discuss any elements of the submission further.

Kind regards,

Alec Webb
Executive Director, RUN