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We would be best served if the ARC were allowed to do its job

By **DAVID GRANT** and **ANDREW O'NEIL**

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In an opinion article in these pages last week, Education Minister Dan Tehan (“New test will strengthen the criteria”, 7/11) sought to defuse tensions and further justify his earlier decision to impose a “national interest” filter on Australian Research Council grants. It is not altogether clear that he has achieved either.

The minister argued: “If you’re asking the Australian taxpayer to dig into their wallet and pay for your research you should be able to articulate clearly to them how that research will benefit the nation.”

The Australian public does indeed underwrite much of the path-breaking research undertaken in this country.

However, despite Tehan’s attempts to reassure them that their interests are being safeguarded, his proposal means taxpayers should be more, rather than less, concerned about the future of Australian research.

Under the minister’s proposal, future research projects that have successfully run the gauntlet of exacting peer review will now have to pass a new “national interest test”.

As well intentioned as this idea may be, there remains a concern that the test will be open to manipulation.

Even if it is an extension of something that the minister says is already implicitly in place at the ARC, it will be perceived as influenced in its design by government agendas and thus having the potential to infect decisions that shape Australia's research future with political intent rather than unbiased and objective assessment.

Just as problematic is that where a grant does pass a national interest test administered by the ARC, it still will be required to jump another hurdle: that of a minister exercising the right to overrule the ARC's recommendation based on their own interpretation of the test.

Tehan has promised to disclose any such future ministerial veto over individual projects. This important and helpful change to process is to be welcomed as enhanced transparency is overdue.

However, it is not clear whether future ministers will be under any obligation to disclose the reasons they vetoed specific projects other than that they failed the test.

This would leave us in the same position we are in now — there still has been no reasonable explanation as to why former education minister Simon Birmingham vetoed 11 ARC grants.

So the worry remains that, under Tehan's proposal, we still will not get away from the possibility of government using the taxpayer as a proverbial stalking horse, a means to legitimise knocking back projects with which ministers don't agree on political grounds.

Put another way, what is being proposed will not prevent a repeat of the behaviour that has led to us being mired in the present controversy.

Nor does the proposal do the ARC many favours. As the guardian of Australia's main national competitive grants scheme, the ARC is a precious commodity. Its high level of authority and operational integrity rests on its independence from the political process.

Ultimately, rigorous peer review informed by expertise should determine research funding outcomes and help drive up research quality. This process is a big part of the reason Australian universities have fared extremely well in international rankings of research and scholarship. Those rankings, in turn, help to attract the international students who underpin education as this country's third largest export sector.

Taxpayers want to know their money is being spent appropriately and not being squandered when it comes to research. That is the job of the ARC within its budget envelope, not ministers.

If governments want to do what's best for taxpayers, it may be best to allow experts to judge what is fundable world-class research and leave it at that.

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