

Senator Tony Sheldon

Chair, Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

16 January 2024

Dear Senator Sheldon

The Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee's inquiry into the Australian Research Council Amendment (Review Response) Bill 2023.

ATN welcomed the release of the review into the Australian Research Council Act 2001 (Sheil Review) because it is crucial that the ARC can perform its mandated activities with confidence and with the backing of the higher education sector. It is important that the ARC provides a trusted and stable cornerstone for Australia's research system so our universities can deliver what Australia needs in terms of research and innovation.

ATN's principal recommendation to the review was that significant reform of the ARC needs to be done in conjunction and alignment with the Universities Accord, which will seek consensus on what we want from our national research ecosystem and how it interacts with other pillars of the higher education and university system.

The Accord ought to engender significant reforms of the system, so it is appropriate that the reform of ARC is part of that. In the context of this inquiry, these considerations are limited by the Accord Panel's final report and recommendations not being publicly released yet.

Recommendation 1: The Committee should recommend and undertake a 12 month review of this legislation and its implementation and operation as part of further engagement and consideration of the interaction of the Universities Accord and the ARC. Specifically, how this legislation may intersect with the Accord Panel's recommendations and the Government's response regarding research funding and the establishment of a Tertiary Education Commission and its remit.

ATN also makes the following additional recommendations.

Recommendation 2: The Committee consider the diversity of the ARC Board

The proposed Board membership of five to seven people (including the Chair and Deputy Chair) is potentially too few to adequately represent the diversity of the research sector and broader Australian community, and incorporate the range of skills and expertise required. The Board will have broad and

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extensive powers and so some more guidance on the diversity, background, experience and skills that must be considered when appointing Board members would be useful.

There is an opportunity to help shape a modern research system by considering Board members with expertise in:

- International research funding
- Research ethics
- Data management and research analytics
- Research translation
- Driving collaboration and transdisciplinary approaches to research.

Given the importance of embedding ARC strategies in the Government's broader innovation aims, consultation with the Minister for Industry and Science on Board appointments should be considered.

This could be considered by the 12 month review recommended by ATN to ensure the Board is functioning efficiently and effectively.

Recommendation 3: The Committee should consider the practicalities of the funding rules being disallowable

While it is appropriate that the Parliament has oversight of the funding rules, the Government should consider what mitigations are in place if the funding rules are disallowed. The Committee should seek clarifications and assurances from the Department of Education and ARC. What consequences would this have funding rounds that have been allocated, are in progress, or are due to commence shortly?

Recommendation 4: The Bill should recognise and enhance universities' abilities to fulfill their national security obligations

Given that opacity and a lack of knowledge sharing is a known issue in relation to national security, and the Department of Education's discussion paper notes that "Australian universities hold a primary role in identifying national security risks associated with grant applications and research", it is a missed opportunity that the proposed revisions do not appear to provide any greater transparency to universities.

The revisions would benefit from further consideration to provide appropriately secure briefings to universities themselves, which would in turn enable them to proactively identify and address national security concerns at a local level. This approach fosters greater due diligence and complements the proposed revisions.

If you need any further information from ATN or our member universities, please contact us at info@atn.edu.au.

Yours sincerely,

Luke Sheehy

ATN Executive Director