

Australian Universities Accord Interim Report – Submission from the Australian Association of von Humboldt Fellows (AAvHF) and the Australian Association of University Professors (AAUP)

Three biggest reflections on the Interim Report.

1. The importance of international collaboration and research training at our universities for Australia's research effort.

The AAvHF and AAUP are in complete agreement with the views expressed in the Interim Report that international collaboration is crucial to Australia's success in its research endeavours and that research training needs to be increased. These views are stressed in multiple statements of the Report, such as:

"International collaboration opens doors and creates opportunities for Australian expertise to solve problems around the world." (page 94)

"The research strength of our universities should be protected and increased." (page 106)

"To provide critical and advanced skills in key sectors of the economy, Australia needs to train enough people to doctoral level." (page 108)

"Building the research workforce delivers benefits for the wider society, as many of these individuals will work outside higher education, helping to drive new and innovative ways of approaching problems, based on the expertise they gained in their research training." (page 108)

2. Protecting research basics and developing funding mechanisms.

The AAvHF and AAUP are also in full agreement with the Interim Report that funding for basic research is crucial. The results of research cannot be predicted; neither can the applications of the results. Results cannot be made to order. Major advances arise out of curiosity-driven research, with applications often arising many years after the fundamental research has been conducted. Trust in the research process is essential. Trust is established through ensuring the autonomy and academic freedom of the researchers, as outlined in the AAUP's [Professional Ethical Framework for Australian Academics](#).

Thus, the Government needs to consider funding in basic research as a long-term investment, with translation of the results into practical outcomes not as the primary driver for the awarding of funding. The AAvHF and AAUP supports the following statements of the Interim Report:

"To protect research basics, the Review is giving further consideration ...to developing a funding mechanism that explicitly recognises the importance of research, innovation and scholarship." (page 113)

"...further consideration needs to be given to the future of research training programs, including the financial support and career structure necessary to build the next generation of research leaders, and empower a more diverse cohort of early career researchers." (page 109)

3. Abolition of ministerial intervention in the approval of research grant funding.

In the Interim Report the question of ministerial intervention in the approval of research grant applications was not addressed. However, in the light of points 1 and 2 above, the Report's acceptance of the importance of international research collaboration and the importance of funding basic research, the AAvHF and AAUP strongly encourages the Review Panel to consider this issue prior to releasing their final report. The Review Panel has already stressed the importance of international collaboration, but such collaboration would be severely hampered if political intervention into the approval of research grants is allowed to continue. This was clearly recognised by the Review Panel of the Australian Research Council Act 2001, who, in their final report, published in March 2023 stated: "In every iteration, Ministerial interventions have drawn international attention, and placed at threat the capacity of Australian researchers to form research links with international university and industrial collaborators. The practice of over-riding expert advice is anathema to world's best practice and objections have been raised by foreign governments, comparable research agencies, international learned academies, scientific and academic societies, and in the pages of the world's leading scientific journals."

In his media release "Response to Australian Research Council Review" from 22nd August 2023, the Minister for Education Jason Clare clearly expresses his opposition to political interference in the approval of ARC grants. There he is quoted as saying: "Over the last few years, the ARC has been bedevilled by political interference and Ministerial delays" and "I promised last year to end that and that's what we are doing". The Government has now accepted the ARC Review Panel's recommendation of creating an ARC Board to approve the funding of grants, but in its response to the Review's report the Government proposes to maintain the right of the Minister not to fund grants or to recover funds if the Minister becomes aware of national security concerns in relation to a grant or proposal. The continuation of any Ministerial intervention in the approval of research grants is incompatible with the support of the Accord Review Panel for international collaboration. The AAvHF and the AAUP urge the Accord Review Panel to consider in more detail the question of national security. We consider that national security grounds for intervention by a future Government have the potential to be abused and that this scenario could still lead to significant damage to Australia's international research reputation. Furthermore, national security is not the area of expertise of the Ministry of Education. If national security concerns need to be considered prior to the final approval of grants, the AAvHF and the AAUP suggest that it would be more appropriate to have these concerns discussed by the ARC Board by including a representative on the board with specialist knowledge of national security. Thus, any security concerns could be raised and discussed at ARC Board meetings.