



Australian Historical Association Statement on the Recent Interference in the ARC Grants Process

The Australian Historical Association (AHA) objects in the strongest terms to the most recent instance of political interference in the awarding of Australian Research Council (ARC) grants. The decision, announced on Christmas Eve by the Acting Education Minister, Stuart Robert, to veto six grants previously approved by a panel of experts assembled by the ARC, undermines the integrity of the highly rigorous peer review process and the expertise of the College of Experts. It also politicises research in Australia, undermining its independence. It threatens the academic freedom that this government professes to support.

In late 2021, for reasons that have not been made public, the announcement of a number of ARC grants was delayed by up to two months. Scholars were left waiting until the 24th of December when most university research offices were already closed, for the Discovery Projects to be announced. At the very least, under the present arrangements, the Acting Minister has an obligation to offer a proper explanation for why he has overruled the College of Experts and vetoed projects which have followed the rules set out by the government.

The six Discovery Projects targeted by the Acting Minister were all from the humanities, originally recommended for funding by the ARC's College of Experts. The rejected projects focused on climate activism, modern China, and English literature. That the actions of the minister were politically motivated and had nothing to do with the merit of the projects or of the researchers is obvious.

This is the third time, that we know of, that a Coalition Education Minister has acted to override what is a most highly competitive, and rigorous academic grant scheme. Previously, in 2005 and again in 2017, this tactic was used, and always with projects in the humanities.

This interference harms Australia's international research reputation. The recent head of the European Research Council, Jean-Pierre Bourguignon, reported this week that he "had never heard of a minister cancelling research grants after experts had done a proper process of evaluation" and that the interference "affects very negatively [the government's] international image, especially for countries who are working hard at attracting scientists from other countries such as Australia". Closer to home, it damages the careers of humanities scholars who are teaching the young professionals and citizens of tomorrow.

The AHA calls for the reinstatement of the vetoed projects and a commitment from the Morrison government to legislate for the independence and academic freedom of the ARC's funding application processes. We invite all political parties to do likewise. This political interference must end.

Professor Melanie Oppenheimer
AHA President

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