



15 January 2024

Senator Tony Sheldon
Chair, Legislation Committee
Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Via email: eec.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Senator Sheldon

Australian Research Council Amendment (Review Response) Bill 2023

My thanks to you and the other members of the Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment Legislation Committee for this opportunity to comment on the *Australian Research Council Amendment (Review Response) Bill 2023*.

Overall, Charles Sturt University supports the provisions in the bill. We believe that these amendments to the legislation underpinning the Australian Research Council (ARC) will strengthen the independence and governance of the ARC and support its mission to foster the best Australian research. The changes to the Act will also protect the ARC and researchers from unwarranted political interference in funding decisions.

The University particularly welcomes the restoration of the ARC Board and the inclusion of a member who will represent regional, rural and remote Australia. The restoration of the Board and the requirement for its members to have 'substantial experience or expertise in research' brings Australia and the ARC back into line with global best practice in competitive research funding. This includes the widely accepted principle that decisions about research funding should be made by researchers and on the basis of excellence, impact, and need, rather than short-term political objectives. This principle should be formally embraced in all Australian research funding programs.

The inclusion of a Board member with a background in or experience of regional, rural and remote Australia is long overdue, and a recognition of the need to support and grow research capability outside metropolitan centres. Ready access to subject matter experts, new knowledge, and high-quality research infrastructure is essential for building more diverse, resilient, and inclusive communities, boosting industry productivity and innovation, and responding to challenges and opportunities like climate change, an ageing population, or artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies. This is as true for regional communities and industries as it is for their metropolitan counterparts, a point that should be taken into consideration in research policy and program design and reflected in research funding outcomes.

We are concerned, however, that a Board with as few as five members may be too small to carry out effectively the range of responsibilities expected of it, or to reflect the breadth and diversity of Australian research and Australian researchers. We urge the Committee to consider recommending an amendment to the bill to require the Minister to appoint no fewer than five and no more than seven

members to the Board, in addition to the Chair and Deputy Chair. A clear position on whether the CEO is to be a full or *ex officio* member of the Board would also be useful.

We also note with concern the statement in the Explanatory Memorandum to the bill that the costs of implementing the recommendations of the recent review, including the appointment and operations of the Board, are to be met from within the ARC's existing resources. The ARC's range of responsibilities has expanded steadily in the more than 20 years since it was established as an independent statutory agency, and now includes the assessment of research excellence and impact, research integrity, and managing complex ethical issues, to name a few. Funding to the ARC's operations has not kept pace with its expanding remit. The bill formalises many of these responsibilities and introduces some new ones (such as to 'promote and conduct activities to shape and foster the Australian research landscape and community, including by supporting academic career pathways [and] expanding Indigenous knowledge systems') again without ensuring the ARC has the funding it needs to do so.

We urge the Committee to recommend increased funding for the ARC's operations, and for an amendment to the bill to introduce appropriate indexation arrangements for future Special Appropriations in line with the commitment in the Government's response to Recommendation 9 of the ARC review.

Finally, while it is outside the scope of this inquiry, we hope that the Committee will make a strong statement on the need to boost public and private investment in research – pure and strategic basic research, applied research, and experimental development – in a wide range of fields. Research underpins Australia's productivity and the well-being of our population, and is vital to solving the real world challenges the nation faces now and into the future.

Yours sincerely



Professor Renée Leon PSM
Vice-Chancellor and President

