

National interest test for research grants could further erode pure research

Written by Gavin Moodie, Adjunct professor, RMIT University

A few days have now passed since [we learnt](#) that in 2017 the former Minister for Education and Training, Simon Birmingham, secretly rejected 11 grants recommended by the Australian Research Council.

Naturally enough [the research community reacted with outrage](#), and since then criticism has snowballed. Andrew Norton, The Grattan Institute's Higher Education Program director [weighed in](#) while others lined up to express their dismay.

Read more: [*Simon Birmingham's intervention in research funding is not unprecedented, but dangerous*](#)

'National interest' test

Now the new minister for education [Dan Tehan](#) has announced a "new national interest test" for research grants. He also announced that the Coalition government will follow Labor's lead and reveal when an application recommended by the ARC is rejected by the minister:

As Minister for Education, I can guarantee the sector that I will be transparent in reporting ARC grant funding decisions. I have asked the ARC to add an additional category to the grant outcomes so applicants are notified of instances where a project is 'recommended to but not funded by the Minister'.

Because of the secrecy of the minister's rejections, the only previous known rejection of ARC recommendations was in 2005 by the then Coalition minister for education [Brendan Nelson](#).

But the idea of a national interest test for ARC grants isn't exactly new.

What's going to change?

The ARC's current funding rules, signed by Birmingham on 22 August 2017, include these [selection criteria](#)

:

d. Benefit

- Will the completed Project produce significant new knowledge and/or innovative economic, commercial, environmental, social and/or cultural benefit to the Australian and international community?
- Will the proposed research be cost-effective and value for money?

What is likely to be new is a narrower restriction of grants to the government's [science and research priorities](#)

adopted after a consultation process led by the former Chief Scientist Ian Chubb.

The minister has asked the ARC Chief Executive Officer Sue Thomas and a panel of experts to update these priorities for the ARC and to align the ARC's "financial structure" to the priorities.

This is a long way from the traditional understanding of peer research grants that should only have one criterion: how much the proposed research would extend knowledge.

It also could be narrower than the view common in the 1990s, and partly expressed in the government's science and research priorities, that since it's impossible to be strong in everything, the government should concentrate research in selected areas and institutions. That, at least, accepted the principle that Australia should aspire to contribute to the world's stock of fundamental knowledge.

Read more: [Some questions for Simon Birmingham, from two researchers whose ARC grant he quashed](#)

What do we want from research?

A focus on “national interest” could easily restrict research grants to those projects with obvious utilitarian benefits, and would accentuate the erosion of pure basic research from 40% of all higher education research in 1992 to 23% [in 2016](#) .

While this may assuage critics of “useless” university research, it gets close to introducing a “pub test” for ARC grants, as observed by highly respected Orientalist [Roger Benjamin](#) , whose was behind one of the grants rejected by Birmingham.

It's also ironic that at least some of the grants rejected by Birmingham would have supported research into Western civilisation, something right wing members of the government are keen to have funded by the Ramsay Centre.

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