

There's a lot of uncertainty in a research career. Most funding – and most jobs – are doled out by the project, or in chunks of a few years at a time.

Recently, however, the situation has been made even worse by delays in announcements of government funding – delays that appear to be caused by government using announcements for political advantage.

How research funding works

The federal government is a major funder of basic research in Australia, issuing close to A\$800 million in grants each year via the Australian Research Council (ARC).

There are a variety of grants for researchers at different stages of their career, and also grants for specific research projects.

Receiving a grant can be the difference between whether a project goes ahead or not, and – if you're a researcher – whether you have a job or not.

Accordingly, researchers put a huge amount of effort into applying for grants. The process is highly competitive, and only around one in six grant applications is successful.

Independent experts at the ARC assess all applications and make funding recommendations to the federal education minister for approval.

Ministerial intervention

Most of the time, the minister follows the ARC's advice. However, in 2018 the then minister, Simon Birmingham, intervened to block 11 humanities grants recommended by the ARC. Many commentators decried the intervention as political, saying it set a [dangerous precedent](#).

Written by Jodie Bradby, Professor of Physics, Australian National University

The current education minister, Dan Tehan, [said late last year](#) that future ARC grants would be subject to a new “national interest” test, but also that he would be transparent if he chose to intervene in any funding decisions.

This year, however, the funding announcements themselves have become a political tool – creating even more uncertainty for researchers.

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

Announcements of particular grants that have in the past been made all at once – such as the large Centre of Excellence grants – have instead trickled out via media releases over weeks and months.

Grants for early career researchers are also usually announced together, in late October or early November. In a clear break from convention this year, only a handful of the expected almost 200 in total have been announced so far – including those from [Griffith University](#), the [University of Southern Queensland](#)

,
[James Cook University](#)
, and the
[University of Western Australia](#)
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Earlier this week a leaked internal email from the University of Queensland stated that it understands “the embargo is lifted by local MPs in conjunction with the minister of education”, and that it is “waiting for its local MP” to make the awards public.

Larger announcements also look like they are being managed for political benefit. New research training centres at the [University of Melbourne](#) and [Monash University](#) were not announced by

their respective local MPs (who are not members of the government), but instead by government MPs from nearby electorates.

The minister's office has not responded to a request for comment.

What this means for researchers

Politics aside, the delay and uncertainty is bad news for researchers.

Applications for next year's funding round have already opened, and researchers who were unsuccessful this year still don't have any feedback on their applications. This feedback is often a crucial tool for improving an application to make it more likely to succeed.

Successful applicants will already know they are successful – but they can't sign funding agreements with the ARC and actually get on with the research until all the grants have been announced. No one knows when that announcement will happen, and it could mean some researchers are left without income early next year.

It could also mean Australia loses out as the top talent takes positions overseas rather than waiting. The ARC says [this will change in future](#) , but that's not much help for this year.

Tracking the ARC

This year, the best way to keep track of what's going on at the ARC has been an anonymous Twitter account called [@ARC_tracker](#) . What began as an automated bot that regularly checked the ARC website for new announcements has become an important source of information and a focal point for researchers dissatisfied with the current process.

The account has kept track of announcements as they have trickled out, and shared reports from disgruntled researchers.

The unknown person who runs the account – who says they are a researcher at an Australian university – has also [explained](#) their concerns at greater length.

While the account has done a service to Australia's research community, the fact that it needs to exist reflects very poorly on the lack of transparency and communication from the ARC and the minister's office.

Where to from here?

This dire situation can be fixed with two simple changes to the process.

First, local politicians with no ministerial responsibility for the sector should not be involved in grant announcements. The money is budgeted for research, not regions, and funding decisions are made on the recommendation of an expert panel via a rigorous process. Ideally, the announcement would be made by the ARC itself to remove any perception of politicisation.

Second, funding announcements for each round of grants should be made simultaneously on a date advertised when applications open. This would give researchers certainty about when they would know the outcome.

Over to you, minister.

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Read more <http://theconversation.com/research-funding-announcements-have-become-a-political-tool-creating-crippling-uncertainty-for-academics-126919>