

Political interference in research funding

Education Minister Stuart Robert recently vetoed six research projects that had been approved for funding by the Australian Research Council. In a trenchant riposte to Coalition governments' repeated abuses of ministerial discretion, the co-authors of one of these vetoed projects – **Judith Bessant, Faith Gordon and Rob Watts** – press the need for legislative protection of the ARC's grant assessment process. As they write in their article, 'If disinterested observers had doubts about this hostility towards universities on the part of Scott Morrison's government, those misgivings were dissipated in an "unfortunate gift" delivered on Christmas Eve 2021.'



Extracts from the article

'While 587 Australian Research Grants were funded under the Discovery Program, six grants were vetoed by the acting Education Minister, Stuart Robert. The news sent shockwaves through the academic community in Australia and attracted international comment.'

'This is an example of extreme political interference in research that is greatly out of step with comparable jurisdictions such as Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Aotearoa New Zealand. However, as we all know, this is part of a longer political pattern in Australia under Coalition governments.'

'The Australian federal government's interference in what is entirely an independent process overseen by the ARC College of Experts has happened before. In 2006, Minister Brendan Nelson vetoed seven ARC grants. Under Scott Morrison's government, Simon Birmingham vetoed eleven grants in 2018–19 and Dan Tehan vetoed five grants in 2020.'

The authors

The co-authors of this article are:

- **Professor Judith Bessant**, School of Global, Urban and Social Sciences, RMIT University
- **Associate Professor Faith Gordon**, ANU College of Law, Australian National University
- **Professor Rob Watts**, School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University

They were in a team of seven researchers who learned that their application titled 'New Possibilities: Student Climate Action and Democratic Renewal' was 'Recommended to but not funded by the Minister'.

Interviews

The authors are available for interview. Please direct requests to Peter Rose at editor@australianbookreview.com.au | (03) 9699 8822