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Coalition angers research community

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Liberal backbencher Jamie Briggs has infuriated the research community. Picture: Kym Smith Source: The Daily Telegraph

THE Coalition, which says it will take \$103 million from "ridiculous" projects in the humanities and redirect the money to medical research, has been told to leave grant allocation to the experts.

"Australians should ask: Do we want politicians picking and choosing which grant proposals deserve funding?" said Catriona Jackson, chief executive of the science and technology peak group STA.

"Scientists and research funding agencies understand that governments set priorities for research and that this is entirely valid given we do not have the resources to fund everything.

"Priority setting is very different from political picking and choosing. Only a quarter of research grant bids that go to the ARC each year are successful. Only the best of the very best get through the very careful peer review, expert-driven process."

Yesterday the Coalition issued a brief press release promising an audit of "increasingly ridiculous research grants" awarded by the ARC. And Coalition costings showed a \$103m cut from "reprioritising" ARC funds over four years with new spending on dementia, bowel cancer, diabetes and tropical health.

This appears to mean a 1.8 per cent cut to the estimated \$884m ARC budget for national competitive grants in 2013-14 with bigger cuts to come in following years, to the extent that the Coalition's new priorities favour other institutions such as the National Health and Medical Research Council.

The office of shadow research minister Brett Mason was not commenting yesterday and a spokesman for shadow treasurer Joe Hockey could not clarify the implications for the ARC budget.

The "ridiculous" grants statement came from the Coalition's chairman of the scrutiny of government waste committee, Jamie Briggs.

"The Coalition would look to targeting those ridiculous research grants that leave taxpayers scratching their heads wondering just what the Government was thinking," his statement said.

"Taxpayer dollars have been wasted on projects that do little, if anything, to advance Australians' research needs."

He singled out four projects, two involving philosophy and Hegel, one to do with "urban media art" and adaptation to climate change, and an exercise in anthropology "Sexuality in Islamic interpretations of reproductive health technologies in Egypt".

This last project was used in a university seminar on "How to get (or lose) the (ARC) assessor's attention in the first two minutes". The seminar dealt with how to craft catchy titles and appealing summaries, given that assessors are overwhelmed with grant applications.

There is a history of Coalition figures ridiculing ARC grants, typically in the humanities and social sciences, as useless or activist.

In 2004-05 the then Liberal education minister, Brendan Nelson, vetoed several projects, and appointed outsiders, including former *Quadrant* magazine editor Paddy McGuinness to vet grant applications.

Belinda Robinson, chief executive of Universities Australia, said there was no contest between a robust system of peer review and any superficial reading of project titles.

Opportunities would be lost if we turned away from curiosity-driven research and its useful surprises.

"If we followed this path, penicillin would never have been discovered, if Einstein hadn't been fiddling about, we wouldn't have had people on the moon," she said.

STA's Ms Jackson cited the discovery of lucrative wireless technology by CSIRO scientist as he searched for exploding black holes.

The University of Western Australia's Krishna Sen, president of the arts deans, said the latest Coalition "attack on social science and humanities research seems out of kilter with the much more thoughtful parts of the Coalition's work in the area of higher education including, the New Colombo study abroad program.

"Rigorous, independent peer review is the only proven way of improving the quality of research in any discipline.

"Overt political interference can only diminish the quality of academic research and in many instances deprive government of the evidence-base needed for good policy making."

Former vice chancellor Steven Schwartz, now with the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, said it was easy to criticise research in areas such as philosophy.

"Most people really don't understand it, and if you just look at the title, it might sound frivolous or wasteful, but it's very difficult to tell, because when you start reading it you might find there's more to it.

"There may, for instance, be long term projects that lead to changes in understanding that may not be predictable."

However, historian Philippa Martyr, who has written against "grantsmanship" in Quadrant, said her analysis of one ARC funding round turned up "projects that came very close to party political statements, and others that seemed to be repetitious investigation of already very well-ploughed fields.

"This is not innovation, or research excellence, or original investigation.

"These grants that I highlighted totalled some \$3.3 million, mostly spread over three years.

"If I could find this much wasted money in this limited sample, I am certain a thorough audit could find more."

When it came to "the more nebulous types of project," Dr Martyr said it was reasonable for would-be grant applicants to ask themselves a few questions.

"Would I borrow money to fund this project? Would I be prepared to pay for this out of my own money? Would I be prepared to have my humanities project proposal evaluated by a team of (for example) cancer researchers who are on the verge of a breakthrough in prostate cancer prevention?"