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Tabloid derision threatens Australia's research capability, universities head says

Group of Eight's Vicki Thomson defends 'blue sky' research in the academic sector after Daily Telegraph labels some 'nutty'

□ Simon Birmingham says he wants researchers to be focused on 'tackling some of the issues Australia faces'. Photograph: Dean Lewins/AAP
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The derision of academic research by tabloid newspapers risks undermining Australia's research capabilities, the head of the Group of Eight has warned.

This week the education minister, Simon Birmingham, [announced the rollout of long-mooted plans to make the \\$3.5bn in funding that the Australian Research Council dishes out each year more focused on "impacts"](#).

In a press release, Birmingham said he wanted researchers to be focused on "directly tackling some of the issues Australia faces" including "how to help families and businesses".

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"Research is about discovery, but it also needs to be about directly tackling some of the issues Australia faces," he said.

"We want to keep universities focused on research that has wider economic and social benefits."

The Daily Telegraph has [labelled some academic projects as "nutty"](#), a response that Vicki Thomson, the Group of Eight chief executive, said risked undermining the value of basic research.

While Thomson said the Go8, a coalition of Australia's elite universities, was broadly supportive of the government's attempts to make research more impact-driven, applied research was often only possible as a result of the basic research overwhelmingly conducted in the academic sector.

“What we have to be careful about is that we don’t skew the balance one way or the other [because] the risk is that it’s very easy to trivialise basic research because sometimes there is no obvious outcome,” she said.

“There’s certainly some validity in the government expecting some accountability but to then cherry-pick a research item with an esoteric title and claim it’s having no input to our society, I’m not sure politicians or the media really have the credentials to do that.

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“Researchers aren’t PR experts, they’re researchers, and sometimes a research title doesn’t lead itself to a news grab but that doesn’t mean it should be undermined.”

Universities Australia chief executive, Belinda Robinson, echoed those comments, saying some of the world’s most profound – and often income-generating – research breakthroughs had come from “blue sky” research.

“You simply can’t judge the long-term value of a research project on a title and a short blurb – that’s like judging a wine by its label,” she said.

“Imagine if [Alexander Fleming](#) had put in a grant application to fund ‘an examination of mould growing in a dish on a window sill’ and the tabloid derision that would have ensued – yet without his huge discovery we wouldn’t now have penicillin to treat pneumonia, meningitis and a host of other life-threatening infections.”

She pointed to a “vast list of modern inventions that came from broad research looking into something else” such as GPS, WiFi, MRIs, and the discovery of the first human cancer gene.

“Clever countries invest in both types of research – projects that are directly applied research, often in collaboration with industry partners, but also the curiosity-driven discovery research that can lead to the truly seismic shifts in our knowledge and revolutions in technology,” she said.

The government first announced plans to make university research more focused on “end users” such as businesses in its [National Innovation and Science Agenda](#) almost two years ago.

From next year the ARC will use “engagement indicators” to measure how university research contributes to “economic, social and other benefits” by assessing measures such as how research engages with businesses.

It will also look at the income made by commercialising research, including how much income is made per researcher, and explanations of research impacts in “plain English”.