

# NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF RESEARCH FELLOWS

## NHMRC Incorporated

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The National Association of Research Fellows of NH&MRC Inc. wishes to comment on three aspects of the Discussion Paper.

### A. **The balance between project grants and block grants (pp.135-136)**

It is proposed in the Discussion Paper that the balance of funding should be tilted away from peer-reviewed project grants and towards block funding. No justification is given beyond noting, on page 136, that the costs of allocating some funds are high compared to the sizes of the grants, and that there is little variation over time in the proportion of research income received by institutions from Commonwealth sources. This infers that the outcome would be the same were there to be a shift to block-funding, but ignores the reality that precisely who consumes these resources changes over time, as determined by outside peer review. The advantages of peer review are clearly stated on page 136 of the Discussion Paper. Block funding, in contrast, tends to result in funds going to the same individuals over long periods. While possibly cheaper to administer, a shift to more block funding could be a less effective use of limited resources.

While block-funded institutes etc. play an important role by allowing a large group to work on an established topic, in our view a shift of resources in this direction would represent a disservice to the quality of Australia's scientific research, to the standard of Australia's universities, and to the value received for government investment in science. Some effects of such a shift of resources are noted below.

#### **1. Reduced opportunity for new scientific talent and ideas to emerge**

##### *(a) New Talent*

Under the project grant system, and the Fellowships it supports, undergraduate

university departments across the country house those who can win NH&MRC or ARC project grants. Thus talented people get a chance for their ideas to succeed on originality and merit, and their presence has a positive effect on the university department that houses them. Indeed, the importance of competitively-funded, high calibre research being carried out by individuals or groups in the same departments that teach undergraduate students (tomorrow's researchers) cannot be overstated. The way forward for new talent will be compromised by a shift in funding away from the project grant system and towards block-funded institutes, etc.

Whereas all individuals supported under the project grant system are individually peer-reviewed, as is their degree of funding support (70-80% of applicants get none), individuals in a block-funded institute can expect a share of the block grant, enabling their work to continue, for as long as the institute as a whole is funded. Job security is therefore higher inside a block-funded institute (though job flexibility may be lower). In a recent survey, the Acentric standards/productivity of NH&MRC Research Fellows inside or outside block-funded institutes was found to be equally high. Moving funding towards block-funded institutes, and away from peer-reviewed project grants, where competition among scientists to survive is already the fiercest, would therefore further reduce the survival chances of equally talented individuals who are already under the most pressure. Clearly, the most efficient use of limited resources requires a balance between talent and continuity within the scientific workforce.

*(b) New Ideas*

New ideas exposed to the rigours of the project grant system are subjected to nation-wide reviewing. Thus those ideas which are ultimately supported by allocation of funds have been transparently subjected to the very highest levels of criticism and review.

All ideas start small, usually from one person. It is already extremely difficult, because of competitive pressures, for an individual with an original idea to get it funded through the peer-reviewed project system. A shift of funding away from the project grant system would increase this difficulty.

**2. A detrimental effect on undergraduate teaching standards**

The Committee will have heard from universities their alarm at the harmful effect that a shift of funding from competitive project grants to block-funded institutes would have on the ability of undergraduate departments to carry out research. The harmful effects of a reduced level of research on teaching standards in undergraduate departments has often been reiterated. Many NH&MRC Research Fellows are housed in such departments, and as a group share this concern.

**B. Research infrastructure to be associated with grants (pp. 133-35)**

We applaud the proposal that the proportion of the research infrastructure funding now channelled through the Research Infrastructure Block Grants programme be allocated as a component of the research project. These funds are intended to cover the infrastructure costs associated with individual grants, and this way it will happen in practice. It will need arranging so that universities are unable to charge researchers for items that rightfully should be funded through the Research Quotient, which will still go directly to them. Because of the variable way in which universities at present treat infrastructure funding, the proposal, if implemented, would need to be explicit and include provision for monitoring.

**C. Definition of "All researchers and institutions" (p. 165)**

Dot point 4 on page 165 states that all researchers and institutions should be able to compete for project-based research funds. This could be read to imply that IAS staff and those at the various NH&MRC block-funded institutions should be able to compete for ARC and NH&MRC project grants, as well as being funded through their institution's block fund. This is inconsistent with the spirit of references to block-funding and project funding document, and may be conveying an unintended impression. If so, it needs rewording.

Yours sincerely,

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