



Central Queensland
UNIVERSITY

Response to Evaluation of Knowledge and Innovation Reforms Issues Paper

Central Queensland University

In the interests of brevity, the University has elected to address specific of the Key Consultation Questions posed by the review and issues paper which it regards as most pertinent to its emerging research profile.

- **Are the funding principles for research still relevant? Should they be amended in any way?**

The funding principles for research as outlined in *Knowledge and Innovation* remain relevant.

- **Do the *Knowledge and Innovation* reforms encourage the attraction and retention of high-performing research staff?**

No. Indeed, the implementation of the RTS effectively prevents regional universities from attracting or retaining high performing research staff. It is acknowledged sector-wide that regional universities struggle under the provisions of RTS funding formulae and that a nominal slip in performance can quickly send a regional university's research profile into rapid decline. Accordingly, high-performing research staff routinely elect to pursue employment with GO8 universities and non-regional institutions which are not hampered by the impact of the RTS. Staff seeking continued employment in an environment capable of rewarding and nurturing research performance will consciously avoid regional institutions.

- **Do the *Knowledge and Innovation* reforms allow the possibility of an individual institution's markedly improving its funding position in a reasonable time by good research management?**

Yes, but only if that institution is not a regional university. Although reforms such as the RTS, have prompted Central Queensland University to direct careful attention to its research profile and that has in turn resulted in evident improvement in each of our research performance indicators, there has been no return realised on that improvement. This is a characteristic of the Knowledge and Innovation reforms that essentially prevents regional universities from competing successfully for increased research funding. In short, while the national research performance continues to improve more rapidly than institutional performance, reforms such as the RTS will effectively prevent universities such as Central Queensland University from realising any return on its enhanced research activity and output, regardless of good research management practices.

- **Has beneficial concentration of research occurred?**
At institutional level, yes. The RTS and the release of Commonwealth Research Priorities forced Central Queensland University to critically consider its research foci and to determine where it had the most strength and potential to grow in research. This has in turn assisted the University in concentrating its research efforts in particular areas and enabled rapid returns on strategic investment in certain disciplines. The University now publicly identifies its research strengths as being in plant sciences, process engineering and railway engineering and in sustainable futures. A national concentration of research is emerging in response to the identification of National Research Priorities, however it is hard to define at such an early stage. The next triennium should reveal a national concentration which aligns with the Commonwealth Priorities, as long as those priorities remain constant.
- **What changes should be made to the formulae for current performance-based block funded schemes?**
Removing publications from each of the formulae could be considered. The resources used in collecting, submitting and verifying publications income by institution exceed the income received for publications at Central Queensland University. Funds previously allocated against publications performance should be allocated against external income, as that source of funding is evidently important to the long-term future of research in Australian universities (especially regional universities).

The separations mechanism should be removed from the RTS and replaced with a transparent, refined mechanism which directly and promptly rewards timely completion of research higher degrees.

Further exploration of these suggestions is detailed elsewhere in this paper.

- **Should the double weighting for NCGs be restored?**
No. This would be a regression. While NCGs were regarded as the most important secondary source of funding for Australian publicly funded universities, it was appropriate that they should attract double weighting. However, Knowledge and Innovation reforms have actively encouraged and in some instances forced universities to pursue funding from external sources such as business and industry. In an environment which encourages real-world solutions to real-world problems, restoring a double weighting for NCGs would suggest that NCGs are more important than external funding. It is apparent that in the environment created by the Knowledge and Innovation reforms, external income from business, industry and other sources is more valuable and important than NCG funding. The majority of NCG funding goes to GO8 Universities, which suggests that re-instating a double weighting for NCG income would further benefit GO8 universities and bring little direct benefit to regional institutions such as Central Queensland University.

- **Should the research publications element be removed from the formulae?**
Yes. While academic publications remain an important part of a research profile at individual and institutional level, the return from DEST in the form of 10% of various block funding allocations is disproportionate to the time and resources involved in collecting the data. The 10% value should be redirected to other of the funding formulae components. Universities may elect to reward and encourage publication with internal allocative mechanisms. It is important that institutions and the Commonwealth continue to recognise the significant role which publications play in the overall research outcomes for the individual, the institution and the nation.
- **Should Australia adopt an RAE-type mechanism to allocate block funds?**
No. An RAE model would disadvantage regional institutions like Central Queensland University, by virtue of the University having an emerging research profile. Those universities with established profiles are better able to attract and retain eminent researchers, which better enables them to secure more positive peer reviews, more substantial outcomes and to maintain a stronger overall research profile. The RAE model fails to accommodate the highly variable nature of universities in Australia, from different physical size to geographic considerations and historical indications (such as converting from a CAE with a teaching focus to a University with a combined teaching and research focus).

The RAE model basically flattens the national hierarchy of universities and has each institution competing on an equal footing for funds. Obviously, Central Queensland University does not support such a model, when it is apparent that the University already finds it difficult to compete with GO8 institutions under present funding models.

The costs of implementing the RAE model should also prove to be a disincentive for introducing such a model. In an environment which is highly competitive for research funding, it is doubtful that publicly funded universities would endorse such a costly process of distributing already limited funding.

- **Should granting councils be funded to allow them to cover the full cost of the research which they support?**
Yes. Smaller institutions find it difficult to provide adequate support to successful grants which fail to cover the full cost of the project described. Casting annual budgets to accommodate grants which fail to cover full costs is difficult at institutional level and is complicated by the lag between making the grant application and activation of funding. Where funding falls short by tens of thousands of dollars, that shortfall is usually accommodated by calling on funds earmarked for other research activities at Central Queensland University. In essence, the success of one researcher in securing grant funding can be to the detriment of another researcher who was relying on other, internal funding programs which are cancelled or reduced in order to supplement the successful grant. This process is not conducive to early career or emerging researchers, at institutional or national levels.

A budget which enables Councils to fully fund grants will better enable universities to direct their block grant and other income to the pursuit of quality research outcomes, including but not limited to increased enrolments in research higher degrees, provision of a quality research training experience and incentives for emerging researchers who are not yet able to successfully compete for council grant funds.

Provision of funding to those Councils which will allow full funding of grants should not be to the detriment or at the cost of existing funding models. It should rely on the provision at Commonwealth level of an increased overall quantum for research councils to pass on to institutions.

- **Has the RTS succeeded in encouraging a focus on the quality of student supervision?**

To some extent, yes. At institutional level, the introduction of the RTS resulted in immediate attention being directed to the quality of supervision being provided to research higher degree candidates. As a result, more attention is paid to the provision of quality and appropriate supervision for all candidates at Central Queensland University. For example, the University now provides extensive training for supervisors and has policies pertinent to eligibility to supervise research candidates. A recently developed exit survey will also provide the opportunity for candidates to make confidential assessment of the quality of supervision they are afforded.

Despite those well intended reforms, the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ) showed little improvement in the University's overall performance in the delivery of quality supervision in the most recent year of data collection. It is important to ensure that institutional and government perceptions of improved quality of supervision align with the true assessments provided through experiential data provided by students, who are best equipped to assess the quality of the supervision they receive.

At a national level, the plethora of studies into supervision of research candidates suggests that a focus on quality supervision is occurring. Indeed, DEST has funded some such studies and groups such as DDOGS (Deans and Directors of Graduate Schools) have considered how to define "quality supervision" for some time. A definition of "quality supervision" will assist in assessing institutional performance against that criterion.

- **Is the RTS formula too complex?**

Yes. Many institutions found the initial process of retaining or trading places complex. There have been occasions where DEST has provided written advice to Central Queensland University regarding its RTS funding which was incorrect, as DEST had failed to account for the University's decision to retain gap places in the first year of the RTS. This suggests that even DEST found the formula initially difficult to manage.

Although most universities have now developed an understanding of RTS formulae and how they impact on funding allocations from year to year, passing on that understanding to researchers is difficult. Indeed, anyone removed from the relatively exclusive research sector finds the formulae complex and difficult to understand. Modelling assists in managing the impacts of the formulae, but relies on the provision of particularly accurate data, which is often not available at the time when modelling is most important in strategic planning.

The implementation of formulae which DEST has difficulty describing and implementing in a uniform manner presents enormous problems to end-users who are endeavouring to understand them, succeed within them and explain them to other stakeholders. It is noteworthy that many industry and business leaders who align their operations closely with University research activities fail to comprehend the RTS formulae, despite close examination of same.

It is confusing and perhaps confounding to have successfully filled all of the University's RTS places and have potential applicants waiting for us to find more places for them, when other institutions have un-filled places. Common sense would suggest that those un-filled places might be allocated to those institutions which can fill them, which would in turn increase that institution's potential ability to realise returns in the form of completions. It is difficult for CQU to regard the RTS as a tenable funding system when a surplus of places is not redirected, hence hampering our best efforts to grow.

It is reasonable to assume that this response will be common to Australian publicly funded universities, as the majority of those institutions have had difficulty in either employing or explaining the RTS to users and stakeholders. Accordingly, the response to this question is brief, on the assumption that other universities will dedicate considerably more attention to it.

- **Should the separations pool mechanism be retained?**

No. In its present form, the separations pool mechanism fails to provide an incentive for universities to encourage the timely completion of research higher degrees. Various focus groups have modelled data on separations formula and in each instance, it is apparent that separations fail to return adequate funding to universities for subsequent years of student intake and research training. A more direct means of rewarding timely completions is required. A more transparent formula for that process is also required. Further consultation with research administrators may assist in the development of a transparent, widely acceptable formula for returning funds to the central pool for completions, whilst reinforcing the need for timely completions at institutional level.

- **Is further streamlining of the RRTMRs appropriate?**
Yes. Provision of core data to demonstrate research performance should be sufficient to demonstrate on an annual basis to DEST that research training has been delivered and monitored. A triennial report which requires narrative and is more comprehensive is considered reasonable. The present requirement for lengthy annual reports with exhaustive data collection is an impost on the time of universities and research administrators.
- **Should the regional support package be continued beyond 2004, taking into account the role and contribution of regional universities to Australia's science and innovation system?**
Yes, the regional support package should be continued beyond 2004. Regional universities make a significant contribution to the nation's science and innovation system. Cognisant that sustainable futures is an identified Commonwealth Research Priority, any action which restricts the growth of regional communities would seem contradictory. It has been argued that the majority of research into regional development and sustainability occurs in regional institutions, despite the majority of NCG funding for those disciplines ending up in metropolitan universities. Central Queensland University prides itself on its dedication to pursuit of research outcomes with regional relevance and global significance.

The act of providing protection for regional universities in the first place was tacit acknowledgement by the Commonwealth that the RTS was in essence detrimental to regional universities. A decision to withdraw regional protection would send a clear message to regional communities that its population must relocate to a metropolitan centre if they wish to be part of contemporary research activities. Withdrawing regional protection has the real potential to see the rapid demise of important institutions nation-wide. The data presented in the Issues Paper clearly identifies James Cook University as one institution which has repeatedly been required to call on regional protection funds, which is a message that the RTS is not providing a sustainable level of funding for that university. Yet, if removal of that regional protection occurred, the nation would potentially lose the contribution of a University which focuses much of its research on saving and protecting the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park – one of our natural wonders. Similarly, regional protection provides a safety net for Central Queensland University as it continues to develop what has until recently been an embryonic research profile. The process of converting from CAE status to University status involves more than an Act of parliament and it cannot be reasonably expected that emerging universities (which also happen to be primarily regional universities) should compete with established universities in metropolitan centres. Central Queensland University hosts the Rail CRC, which is one example of the national and global significance of its research activity. Without regional protection, the University could not continue to allocate RTS places to priority areas such as the CRC, which has the potential to lead to decline in each of the performance indicators identified in the RTS.

Without regional protection, Australia will return rapidly to the binary university structure implemented in the Dawkins era. The disadvantages to academics, staff and students in regional universities will be considerable. Should the Commonwealth choose to remove regional protection, it will send a clear message to the nation that worthwhile research activity will only take place in metropolitan universities. This has the potential to bring a rapid adverse socio-economic impact to regional communities across the nation.

- **Should the eligibility criteria for regional assistance be reviewed?**
No, although a definition which accounts for local populations, economic development and remoteness may preclude some Universities from accessing regional assistance funds and subsequently free up more funding for those regional universities with a genuine need for support.