

**SUBMISSION TO THE EVALUATION OF THE KNOWLEDGE AND INNOVATION REFORMS**

**CHARLES DARWIN UNIVERSITY**

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### **The effectiveness and efficiency of the RTS**

The University has a number of problems with the Research Training Scheme (RTS) in its current form, which it believes has the potential to be disadvantageous to a relatively small and regional institution such as Charles Darwin University.

A major concern with the RTS and its rigid formula driven approach to the distribution of a fixed number of Government funded places, is that it is predicated on a belief that the unified national system has reached an appropriate equilibrium and that growth in research training activity for *all* institutions should only result from place redistribution deriving from a standard formula based competition between them. The Scheme has the potential to drive greater proportions of research training into large, metropolitan universities at the expense of smaller, regional institutions and lacks sensitivity towards capacity building in a region resulting from the training of HDR students at regional institutions.

***The contribution of HDR student training to regional development could feature more strongly in the mechanisms by which HDR places are allocated.***

As the RTS is a relative funding formula small institutions such as CDU, which may improve their performance in the current formula elements of completions, external income and publications, relative to previous years but do not improve as quickly as the national average, which is heavily weighted by the larger institutions, can actually go backwards in terms of RTS funding received.

***It seems counter-intuitive that institutions can receive less RTS funding when they improve their performance in absolute terms particularly when on a percentage or per capita of staff basis they make significant strides.***

In its current form, we believe that the RTS does not properly account for the increased variability in the influential parameter of student completions, which a University such as CDU can experience because of the relatively small HDR load and high proportion of part time students it has in comparison with many other universities.

***Smoothing approaches associated with the RTS may not be adequate to prevent CDU being exposed to unreasonable fluctuations in RTS places and accompanying severe management problems.***

Given that the completions component of the RTS model includes all HDR completions and not just those from the RTS, institutions are compelled to increase the commencing load of HDR students in order to minimize negative downstream financial impacts. As a result institutions are taking on fee paying HDR students, most often with a fees waived scholarship. This is leading to a significant number of marginally funded HDR places within the sector, a situation that RTS was specifically introduced to prevent. CDU believes it is critical that the Commonwealth rethinks its decision to cap HDR load at 21,500 places, a decision that is inconsistent with a national focus on the further development of a knowledge and innovation based economy. *Backing Australia's Future* recalibrates the system in terms of undergraduate student load by transferring 28,000 marginally funded undergraduate places across to fully funded places.

***A similar initiative is required for HDR places through a removal of the current cap on RTS load and an increase in the RTS funding pool.***

At an administrative level the RTS involves an undue level of micromanagement. This is largely due to the potential negative influences of granting leave of absence, suspension of candidature and/or allowing students to change from full-time to part-time. The separations pool is based on a six-month time frame and there is a penalty for non-academic separations (e.g. leave of absence or extended sick leave). The allocation formula is such that these non-academic separations can have a substantial negative impact on CDU with its relatively small HDR load. Further the scheme mitigates against HDR students taking leave to work in an industry or other organization where the learning during the leave might significantly advantage their future study and influence their future views of mobility across the research system.

***We recommend that the separations pool mechanism be removed.***

A further concern in relation to management and planning is the uncertainty about the allocation of RTS funding for the upcoming year, which is not known until November/December.

**Comment:** Charles, I feel quite strongly about this particular problem..

Claims have been made that the RTS has been a driving force behind improvements in research training, including quality of supervision and better linkage of training to areas of research strength. There are difficulties in attempting to measure the impact of the RTS when there have been a number of other pressures for change in the system, including the AUQA Audit process and the national Quality in Postgraduate Research Conference Series. The RTS has sharpened the focus on completion times, which is a management outcome, not necessarily linked to quality of research education. It may be encouraging universities to push HDR students into “safe research” projects.

### **The effectiveness and efficiency of the IGS and RIBG**

The CDU has a number of concerns in relation to the Institutional Grant Scheme (IGS) and the Research Infrastructure Block Grant (RIBG), not least among which is the prospect that these funding models will increasingly move research funding towards the larger, more established institutions and away from the smaller and regional universities. ***CDU is concerned that these main Commonwealth schemes in support of University research lack an investment element for building research capacity and as with the RTS are based on the assumption that the system as a whole is mature enough to rely on a completely contestable funding regime.***

It appears that intention of the Higher Education funding reforms outlined in *Backing Australia's Future* is to uncouple funding for teaching and learning from research, with the Commonwealth Grants Scheme directed towards the teaching and learning component of an institution's activities and the salary component of an academic's research time expected to come from the IGS (and RTS) allocations. At present CDU (and many other universities) do not use the IGS to fund the salaries of Teaching and Research staff and could not do so without compromising the current use of IGS monies for the strategic development of research capacity in the Northern Territory.

*If IGS is to be used to fund components of academic salary it is essential that the pool of funds available for IGS allocation be significantly increased.*

*In relation to the RIBG, CDU believes it is essential that this program is maintained in the form of a block grant and is not moved across into the general project based contestable funding pool.*

Ensuring that institutions such as the CDU receive a component of block funding for research infrastructure is critical to the development of the Northern Territory. Additionally CDU wishes to draw attention to the fact that the RIBG funds received by institutions reflect only a fraction (20-25%) of the actual infrastructure costs required to support the Category 1 (National Competitive) grants on which the RIBG allocations are based.

*The CDU believes that the cost of research should be fully funded rather than marginally funded and supports an increase in the RIBG funding pool. However this cannot be at the expense of the RIBG block grant which is essential to enable the university to buy-in to CRC's, Major National Research Facilities and other relevant programmes essential to strengthen their identified areas of excellence.*

**Comment:** Think something like this must be said. I have made the point to the competition/cooperation review group that you cannot be in it if you do not have the \$\$\$

Because the IGS and RIBG depend on the distribution of a fixed pool of money in relation to relative performance of universities, as with the RTS it is possible for a university to improve its absolute performance on the IGS and RIBG formula components but receive less monies through these schemes, a less than desirable situation. Small universities with their fewer researchers than larger institutions can be subject to greater fluctuation in research output which the current smoothing measures do not fully address leading to variations in income which in the absence of protection mechanisms could be severe.

#### **The effectiveness and efficiency of the Research and Research Training Management Reports (RRTMRs) and the external quality verification framework**

CDU believes the RRTMR to be a useful strategy and reporting tool and acknowledges the efforts made by the Commonwealth in recent times to reduce the duplication in reporting requirements.

*However, CDU requests that there be consistency in what is required for the RRTMR from year to year and that there be a more timely publishing of RRTMRs on the DEST website. In addition, CDU believes that it would be appropriate for those institutions whose RRTMRs meet Commonwealth requirements in a given year to be given the option of submitting an exceptions report for Part A of the RRTMR for the following two years.*

#### **The effectiveness of the Regional Support Package**

*CDU believes the continuation of this package or an alternative mechanism that differentially supports regional Universities for a further 3 years beyond the original timeframe of 3 years is important to facilitate effective strategic positioning in regard to research missions and aspiration.* It is critical that the Commonwealth recognizes that

the sector is not in equilibrium and that there is a continuing need to invest in strategic growth.

In terms of the way the Regional Support package is applied ***CDU believes that as the IGS and RTS have different purposes they should be protected on an individual basis*** rather than the present arrangement whereby a university receives protection on the basis of the combination of outcomes of the two schemes.