

Summary:

- Current funding arrangements make it difficult for research centres to undertake ARC and NH&MRC funded research. Some support for overheads and/or salaries or a doubling of the weighting for national competitive grants would help.
- The RTS scheme is unlikely to be effective in placing research students into good research environments or in concentrating training in areas of excellence. The allocation of more postgraduate fellowships through ARC and NH&MRC grants would be more efficient and effective.

I am the director of the ARC Key Centre for Human Factors and Applied Cognitive Psychology. Our funding from the ARC will run out at the end of 2004 when we are supposed to be self funding. We are in an important but niche area and there are not enough students at any one university to support a high quality program in the area. In order to overcome this problem we have nodes at several universities and have created a course work masters program, which is delivered over the web. This will provide some financial support after our ARC funding ceases. However, it is not enough to support a strong program. Without access to the undergraduate teaching dollar we will be dependent on consulting income and commercial research contracts, if we are to be self-funding. Currently the University returns to the Centre 15 cents in the dollar from the money earned under the IGS. This will not cover the overhead costs associated with an ARC or NH&MRC grant, much less the salaries. In my discussion with other centre directors I have become convinced that this is a general problem for centres when their ARC funding runs out. Far too many either fail or become overly commercial.

One way to make ARC and NH&MRC grants affordable for centres would be to have these agencies cover at least some of the overhead and/or salary costs associated with their grants. At the very least the ARC should specify that investigators can apply for funds to buy themselves out of commercial research or consulting just as they can request funds to buy themselves out of teaching. Restoring the double weighting for national competitive grants would be an alternative way to help. Note that a double weighting for national competitive grants is extremely unlikely to make a researcher turn down commercial and government funding which will pay salaries and overheads. If there is a reluctance on the part of some academics to seek funding outside the national competitive scheme it is far more likely to arise from a narrow focus on immediate tactical goals on the part of the company or agency, the reluctance on the part of some government agencies to pay overheads, and the problems incurred when a project is cancelled at the last moment.

The RTS has certainly focused attention on selecting students who are more likely to complete and on identifying structural problems which impede completions. Unfortunately, some of the structural problems involve things which improve research training and/or suitability for industry placements like having students gain industry experience or undertake additional coursework. For example, we had planned to require our PhD students to take some courses from our Masters in Human Factors. This would produce a unique cohort of scientist-practitioners in the Human Factors area. However, this has been a casualty of the RTS as it will slow down completion.

The RTS is a very blunt instrument for placing research students into good research environments and in concentrating training in areas of excellence. There are two problems. First, university administrators and indeed anybody outside the immediate research areas have difficulty in identifying the boundaries between research areas. Secondly, individual academics and department heads are quite happy to subvert the process. For example, heads may extend the boundaries of an area of excellence so that more of their staff are covered. In addition, individual academics may advise prospective postgraduate students to reword their application so it appears to fit into the designated area of excellence.

A more efficient and effective way of placing students into good research environments and in concentrating training in areas of excellence would be to distribute more postgraduate fellowships in conjunction with ARC and NH&MRC grants. This is the procedure followed in the US and Canada and in those countries the best postgraduate students are more likely to go to the best research environments and to be supervised by the best researchers.

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