

The University of Ballarat

Response to the Issues Paper: Evaluation of Knowledge and Innovation Reforms

The response by the University of Ballarat is centred on what it considers to be the national benefit accompanied by particular views reflecting the University's mission of serving its region.

Terms of Reference and Scope

Funding Principles: This University considers that the funding principles remain relevant, especially those referable to excellence, institutional autonomy, linkage and collaboration.

New Principles: A further principle that merits consideration is that of graduate outcomes. Graduate destination surveys provide both the university sector and the nation with valuable information on opportunities following completion of a degree. Given that the *Knowledge and Innovation* package is to drive the nation's international competitiveness in research, it is of some moment to foster those research areas that provide gainful and relevant employment for graduates.

Block funding Mechanisms

Abolition of block funding or transference to granting councils: Block funding provides universities with opportunities to respond rapidly to emerging areas of research strength. The capability to respond rapidly is of paramount importance. If the block funds were allocated to granting councils this capacity would be lost. The turnaround time to fund a particular research initiative would move from months to years. The suggestion of transferring to granting councils also carries with it a further administrative cost.

Changes to current block funding mechanisms: None at this time. The mechanism has been in place for a comparatively short period of time and is serving the principles well.

Double weighting for competitive grant funds: This suggestion does not foster the search for funds from all sources. The funds available for competitive grants are limited and if given double weighting will drive researchers to compete more intensively for this limited pool. The nation will benefit more from incentives to encourage researchers to access funds from the widest possible range of sources, not just competitive sources.

Collaboration with outside bodies: Following on from the immediately previous response, incentives to collaborate with outside bodies provide a pathway to access to funds from those bodies. It also provides the opportunity to carry out research of relevance to those bodies.

Simplification of the formulae: The formulae as they stand are in general, serving the principles well. One modification to consider is to delete completions by full-fee international research students from the mix.

Adoption of the RAE system: The experience of the RAE system points to lessons of remarkable expense for no clear change in research concentration. It is slow, cumbersome and expensive.

Research publications and quality measures: Any estimate of quality measures on a national scale would be; expensive, open to interpretation and vary greatly with the research discipline. The research community requires incentive to publish the outcomes of their work and this is achieved through the weighting that it currently receives. A surrogate measure of the quality of publications comes from peer review at the time of grant application. That is sufficient.

Removal of research publications from the formulae: The research community responds to incentives. Reward for publications is one of those incentives. In the current formulae the weighting is about right. It does not dominate, but sends the clear message that the complete researcher publishes the outcome of their research. It also is of varying importance to the various disciplines. Publication is of greatest importance to the social sciences and the humanities where grants do not assume the centrality that they do for the biological, physical and medical sciences.

The 5% capping: The cap provided a smooth transition as the formulae were bedded down. The transition is now over and competition between universities for funds should be on their performance.

Regional protection measures: The importance of universities in the regions to the nation is well recognised and while the protection provided was only required for a small number of universities, it served its purpose. It is suggested that this protection is now phased out.

Usefulness of HREDC: This remains very helpful and should be retained.

More viable systems: Not really. The present competitive system with its checks and balances provides the nation with research that is diverse and rewards those who meet the principles underpinning *Knowledge and Innovation*.

The Research Training Scheme

A shift to Masters degree rather than Doctorate: There is no evidence for this.

Increasing the time allowed for a full-time student from 4 to 5 years: There is no advantage in this proposition; in fact it may be counterproductive. Given the reward in the present system for timely completions, universities are reassessing the characteristics of a doctorate. The limit of 4 years is more than sufficient time to answer a question that makes a significant contribution to knowledge. By extending it to 5 years, there is a distinct possibility that research postgraduate students will be asked to do more than is required for a doctorate as presently understood.

The detrimental effect of using a similar formulae by institutions: None that we are aware of. In fact it has had the opposite effect. It has focussed the minds of researchers on the three major characteristics of successful research whether reward exists or not. They are timely completions (good for students and supervisors), publications (good for researchers, students and the university) and funding to carry out high quality research (good for researchers, students and the university).

Less flexibility, particularly with part-time and mature age students: In most circumstances, yes. Without specific data, the feeling is that enrolling full-time students in the sciences is preferred to enrolling part-time humanities students.

Aversion to granting leave of absences, suspension of candidature or conversion from full-time to part-time study: There is no evidence for this. If a student makes a reasonable case for any of the above reasons, there should be no justification for refusing the request.

The Institutional Grants Scheme

Achievement of the stated objectives of the IGS: Has worked well and it is to the advantage to institutions, that their respective faculties, schools and departments, and individual researchers all know their value to the university. Whether a particular university allocates the funds strictly via an IGS formula is not of concern. The central issue is that it is the universities themselves who are making that decision. They are, in general, in the best position to determine the allocation of funds to best serve their strategic priorities. This, in many senses, is a strong reflection of supporting flexibility and diversity in the system.

As to the suggestion that university research should be driven by the peer review processes of the ARC and NHMRC, much already is. While the peer review process is a fundamental tenet of all research, the ARC and NHMRC do not have a mortgage on that process. Whether competitive or non-competitive, the peer review process prevails. All grants awarded are judged as worthy through the use of review mechanisms. The idea of ARC and NHMRC awarding all IGS funds reinforces the case that the only research

worth funding resides in the wisdom of the ARC and NHMRC. That is clearly not the case.

Changes to the IGS formula: The University considers that the current IGS formula is fair and equitable and reflects the primary attributes of good research.

Research Infrastructure Block Grants and Related issues

Confusion with different formulas: The formulas are simple and straightforward and are not confusing.

Attaching RIBG funds to competitive grants: As outlined above in response to other consultation questions, the University of Ballarat is of the firm view that all grants should be considered when determining the allocation of RIBG funds. Grants for research, and often grants of a substantial nature, are gained from other than competitive sources. Competition for grants *per se* does not ensure high quality research. The outcome of the research is clearly of greater importance, not where the funds come from.

Regional Support Package

The introduction to the section and the subsequent sections (8.2-8.4) provide clear and valid reasons for specifically supporting research activity carried out by universities in the regions. There is therefore no necessity to re-state the case, except to reinforce that universities in the regions must be encouraged and supported to continue research of importance to the regions.

Continuation of the support package beyond 2004: The current regional assistance package was only required for 5 of the 13 regional universities. The corollary to this is that the remaining 8 competed successfully with all other universities. Three of the 5 universities eligible for assistance are well-established institutions (Newcastle, La Trobe and James Cook) and their need for assistance may well be for reasons other than those related to their regional location. The University of Ballarat recommends that the assistance package in its present form be discontinued and replaced by a research loading similar to that contained in Minister Nelson's reform package. A 5% regional loading for research would be in line with other measures for regional universities. The loading could be specifically directed toward the social sciences and humanities.

Review of eligibility criteria: The criteria used under the Nelson reform package should be adopted.

Alternative mechanisms for support: See response under "Continuation".

Comments on the overall framework for the benefit of rural and regional Australia: See initial comments under this section.

Contestability of Funding for the Institute of Advanced Studies of the Australian National University

If the IAS is to be permitted access to contestable funds, it should, almost by definition, join all other segments of the university system and be funded for its recurrent activities from the operating grant. The case for retention of the block funding system for the IAS and at the same time requesting access to other funds is incongruous. The price for entry should be that all of IAS' block grant is contestable. The playing field would then be level.

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