Excellence and relevance – two sides of the same coin

MAX BRENNAN
Australian Research Council, Gpo Box 9880, Canberra, Act, Australia

Abstract. Direct Government funding of higher education research began in 1965 with the establishment of the Australian Research Grants Committee. The emphasis was on (pure) basic research and excellence was the sole selection criterion. The emphasis shifted in 1988 with the establishment of the Australian Research Council and the enunciation by Government of a research policy which focused on the relevance of research to Australia's social and economic development. The Council’s 1992 Mission Statement identified the five major benefits which the Council’s programs should deliver to the community. Two "structural" priorities, international links and higher education-industry links, were identified and new programs established. A third, research training, was given additional emphasis in an existing program. Thematic priorities will be addressed in all programs following an analysis of the balance of funding between research and research training strategies being developed jointly by researchers and research users.

Introduction

The Australian Research Council (ARC) is the successor organisation to the Australian Research Grants Committee (ARGC) and several other departmental or ministerial committees. The ARGC was established in 1965 in response to pressure from leading researchers for a source of research funding outside the individual universities who were generally perceived to be funding research in an uncritical manner without adequate peer review procedures. Initial funding for the ARGC was provided by transferring funds from university operating grants; a "clawback" that was to be repeated when the ARC was established a little over twenty years later.

From the outset, the emphasis of the ARGC was on pure basic research.1 This followed the orientation of the academics in the faculties supported by the scheme (ARGS) – mainly arts, engineering, and science.

Clinical medicine and dentistry were, and are, supported from a separate source, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NH&MRC); relatively few applications were received from the other professional faculties. There were some projects supported that were of a strategic or applied nature, but they were a small minority.

The selection process for grants was a very simple one: excellence was the sole criterion, determined through the classic peer review process employing expert assessors, including a significant proportion from overseas. The funds allocated to the individual discipline areas were similarly determined, with an attempt being made to fund projects in all fields down to an equal level of quality. It was only when a particular discipline panel (responsible for determining grants within a particular field or group of fields) believed that they were not getting a "fair share"
of the funds that the method of allocation was changed; but never on the basis of “relevance” or national importance; only to arrive at a different formula based on relativities in terms of quality.

It is perhaps worth observing that pure basic research is sometimes referred to as “curiosity motivated research”. This simple phrase conceals an important feature of such research which impacts on the peer review process. Generally speaking, for such research to be highly rated in the peer review system, the curiosity that is satisfied is not merely that of the researcher proposing the project: in a very real sense, it is the collective curiosity of the researchers in that field (or perhaps several fields).

The reviewers will judge not only the quality of the research and the researcher, but also its significance and impact; but those judgments are made within the field, or perhaps more widely within the whole research endeavour; they do not often trespass outside that boundary into the world, and concerns, of the general community.

It should also be noted that, during the eighties, increasing attention was being paid by researchers and institutions to the need for the universities to look outside themselves and the “invisible college” of researchers to the wider community. Applied research and links with industry were increasingly becoming accepted as important and legitimate concerns for academics. Consulting and technology transfer companies or offices were set up by a number of universities. In parallel with this change, or rather preceding it, the institutes of technology, were active in applied research – usually, through contracts with industry and other users; rarely underpinned by basic research – although there were isolated cases of researchers in these institutions winning ARGC grants.

The unified national system

The year of Australia’s bicentenary, 1988, saw two major changes in higher education. First, the binary divide was abolished and the Unified National System (UNS) was established. Under the old arrangement, the nineteen pre-1987 universities were funded at a level which included provision for research and research training; the colleges of advanced education and the institutes of technology (on the other side of the binary divide) were funded only for undergraduate teaching and postgraduate coursework. In the UNS all institutions are funded on the same basis using the Relative Funding Model which models undergraduate and postgraduate teaching costs and provides for some research costs through the “Research Quantum”. The Federal Government’s objective in establishing the UNS can be simply stated as being to fund institutions on an equal basis for what they do, not for what they are called. The irony of the situation is that, with only a few exceptions, the institutions in the UNS are now called universities!

The merging of the two systems (which has included a number of amalgamations of institutions from each side of the binary divide) has had a profound affect on