Russian grant-holders opinion on competitive funding: Results of a survey

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This paper describes results of a survey conducted among the Russian Foundation for Basic Research (RFBR) grant-holders. The aim of this paper is to examine the attitude of grant holders to new multi-channel funding system and to assess its significance for Russian scientists involved in research in natural and applied sciences. It is a first attempt to get a fair and general picture of what scientists think about competitive funding. In 1999, 1440 questionnaires were distributed by mail. The response rate was 31.8%. The results of the survey clearly show that proposal writing has become a substantial part of research activity in Russia. Each respondent received more than 5 grants during 1993-1997. The RFBR and foreign funding agencies, particularly ISF, INTAS, and the Civilian Research and Development Foundation equally evaluated Russian scientists’ performance: about 69% of RFBR grant-holders were awarded a grant from foreign agencies. The present findings are being used, as a practical matter, to guide and inform the Ministry of Science and Technology Policy which is responsible for the promotion R&D in Russia to organize a special training for students and post docs on proposal writing.

Introduction

Before 1992 the government was the only source of R&D funding in Russia. Since 1992, however, the opportunities to submit competitive proposals to domestic and foreign agencies has become available. In addition, the Russian Foundation for Basic Research (RFBR), which was set up in 1992, became the main funding body operating in Russia.1 The RFBR is a government organization whose primary goal is to support the most promising research initiatives in all fields of fundamental science on a competitive basis. The RFBR budget consists of about 6% of the total sum in the annual federal budget that is given to science. Nearly 70% of the RFBR budget is earmarked for support of research groups (up to 10 persons) or individual scientists. The duration of any such projects cannot exceed three years (the norm is two years).
This paper describes the results of a survey conducted among RFBR grant-holders. This survey was undertaken to supplement statistical analyses of data on grants and grantees stored in the RFBR database and to help to interpret these data. The RFBR supports a comprehensive database which includes information on approximately 13,000 projects that were distributed by the foundation to 11,600 principal investigators (grant holders) over the period 1993 – 1996.

The aim of this paper is to examine the attitude of grant holders to the new multi-channel funding system and to assess its significance for Russian scientists involved in research in the natural and applied sciences. It is a first attempt to get a fair and general picture of what these scientists think about competitive funding. The paper is a part of the European Union (INTAS 96-0036) project of which the main goal is to analyze the impact of the new funding policy on research being done in Russia.

Method

This survey used the “critical incident” approach in which an individual is questioned on details of a recent event. This follows a long tradition in Western research, begun by Bernal and exemplified in the research programs directed by Griffith and Garvey. This choice of approach determined a second major orientation of research: the use of questionnaires sent to large samples of potential respondents having a range of experience, disciplines and geographic locations. A preliminary questionnaire was tested in 45 interviews. Each interview was preceded by intensive and detailed preparation by investigators. The interviews produced a variety of data on the grant holders’ opinions about funding agencies activity and process of grant distribution. After discussion of interviews results some questions were deleted from the questionnaire and some added. The combination of interview and questionnaire gives a fair and general picture of what the scientists think about the new funding system.

Questionnaires were distributed by mail to two groups of scientists. One group consisted of 1000 grant holders randomly selected from the RFBR database. The other – an “expert group” – consisted of 440 users of the selective dissemination of information service department of the All Russian Institute for Scientific and Technical Information (VINITI) of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS). The members of the “expert group” are outstanding scientists, members of the Russian Academy of Sciences, who have served as peer reviewers in different committees and referees in many circumstances. The questions were designed to gather information about the following: (a) sources and scope of each respondent’s knowledge about activities of domestic and foreign agencies; (b) personal experience from interaction with the organizations, and