

Article for Jane Richardson on Research Priorities, 31 January 2002

Predictably, the Government's decision to push a large chunk of Australian Research Council funds into four designated priority areas has caused a certain amount of 'outrage' in research circles. The criticism does not, of course, come from people in the designated areas. They are keeping their heads down and their lips and pens still, as befits those who have suddenly come into real largesse.

There are three kinds of criticism. One says 'Oh dear, here we go again, trying to pick winners! Don't they ever learn? We must fund excellence wherever it is. Picking winners will just encourage second-rate research.'

The second says 'Well of course, we have to have some priorities, but not at the expense of pure research across the spectrum. After all, we never know where the next real breakthrough is going to come from. The Government should provide new money for its priorities.'

The third agrees that there have to be priorities, but the really important thing is the process through which they are determined. There must be real, extensive, serious public consultation. If the outcome is not what was wanted, then the critics will argue that the consultative process was flawed.

Anyone who has been involved in research policy for any length of time will have encountered all of these criticisms. I have heard them all, many times, over the past twenty years. And of course there's something to be said on behalf of all of them.

The problem is that the money at the heart of all this is taxpayers' money, generated by the Government through the revenue system and available for many other uses. From the perspective of a Minister public money is there to ensure that Government goals of one kind or another are achieved. It doesn't 'belong' to the recipients but to the Government.

I should make clear at once that I am in favour of explicit priority-setting in research as in much of the rest of public expenditure. The alternative is implicit, or concealed priority-setting. The balance of research spending in universities is to some degree a function of the course choice of undergraduate students: if, for example, most students wanted to do, let us say, thingatronics, then there would be a big increase in the numbers of academic staff in thingatronics, and a likely consequential increase in the number of research grants in thingatronics.

The current pattern of un-targeted research funding is in part a reflection of past student course choices, and can hardly be argued for on rational grounds. It is just the way things are. Academics stay longer at university than students do.

Priorities occur in other ways. Very generally, Australia does proportionately more work in biology and less in physics and engineering than does, say, the USA. We don't have the felt need for physics that an industrial superpower

engaging in space exploration has, but we do have a large and unique landmass with exotic flora and fauna, and we have depended heavily in the past on the agricultural and pastoral industries. A lot of the CSIRO endeavour is built around these 'traditional' Australian needs. CSIRO depends on the universities for the supply of staff of all kinds. So the universities, too, reflect this sort of felt national priority.

It is always a problem when past priorities have to give way to new ones. You can see this in universities when new programs are brought in, nearly always at the expense of existing ones. These days, there is rarely any new money to cushion the blow.

The early Australian Research Council, along with the Australian Science and Technology Council, tried to provide a decent way of dealing with all this ten years or so ago. Our proposal was a four-year White Paper on research priorities that would allow for a lot of public consultation but also provide a decision moment repeated four years later. The time interval was not to be tied to the electoral cycle. Our proposal also provided a way of dealing with large and lumpy research needs, like a research vessel for oceanographic research, a decent telescope (or part of someone else's), or buying in to really big overseas research installations, like CERN.

What happened? Well, after an encouraging start, the closer we got to finality the more scared some of the stakeholders became. The final blow, however, was something else altogether: the defeat of Prime Minister Hawke in Caucus and his replacement by Paul Keating, who was much less interested in the whole business anyway. ASTEC paid the price for daring to suggest that some things might be more important than others by being reviewed out of existence. The ARC then pulled its head in and concentrated on what went on inside the higher education system.

The replacement of Hawke by Keating happened a little more than ten years ago, and in the past decade not a lot has been heard of research priorities or any good way of deciding on them, let alone of funding them. We've recently had a lot of talk about innovation (again, not something at all new), but new money for all this is still a few years away.

My guess is that the Minister's initiative is connected to all that. There is no extra money, but you could create some by squeezing the ARC's Large Grants Program. If the money were applied to 'priority' areas that have some face validity (and these do) then you could show that you were advancing Australia's industrial and technological future more quickly. And the downside? Well, OK, a lot of grants aren't going to be made in other areas, but they wouldn't have advanced Australia in these directions anyway.

It is these implications which make people so upset. Why are they doing this to us? Don't they understand the importance of free, unfettered research? Actually, they don't, and nor do many people outside the higher education system. This is the great weakness of the universities in arguing with

Government. There is a great deal of rhetoric about research in universities which has the status of Holy Writ in our corridors but is shrugged away elsewhere.

Part of it is about autonomy. Academics prize their independence, and a central part of that independence is the right to determine in what field, what topic, one will carry out research. Tacked on in the 1960s, when research funding to individuals began, is that one also has the right to receive public funding to carry out the research.

I don't think that many people in Government accept that extra right. Actually, I don't accept it either, although I once did, especially when I was a researcher! Ten years of arguing with Ministers for more money for the Australian research endeavour taught me many things, and the most important is that researchers have to be able to show that the money they spend on research in some explicable sense advances the public good. Why else would any of us freely give up our own money for someone else to do what they want to do?

For this reason I have little respect for the notion that somehow 'excellence' ought to rule. Nobody knows what excellence is, and there is much more of it proclaimed to be about, in my view, than is reasonable. My own estimate, ten years ago, was that the ARC had around 200 absolutely excellent grantees, a small proportion of the total set of people who won grants. What is more, excellence is hard to use as a discriminator across research areas. You can't compare an excellent chemist with an excellent physicist in any meaningful way when they both want money.

I came to the view a long time ago that it is quite sensible to propose that at a given moment some areas of research, all things considered, are more important and more deserving of money than others. It is important that the method used to decide what those areas are is *prima facie* sensible and consultative, and important also that there is some kind of audit of what happened after the money has been expended. But not to engage in this kind of priority-setting seems to me really silly in a country of fewer than 20 million people.

The task for those whose areas aren't chosen is quite simple, and should be undertaken by all researchers all the time. It is the need to proclaim what is it you do and why you should be able to spend other people's money on it? Who will jump for joy if you're successful? The reluctance of my own base of the humanities and the social sciences to argue like this in any sustained way (indeed, in any way at all) continues to fascinate and depress me. They have a great story to tell, and always seem to want to leave it to someone else to tell it.

In the present case the method by which these areas was chosen has not been revealed, and how Australia is expected to capitalise on, for example, breakthroughs in nanotechnology is no more explicit. But if the Minister has acted precipitately in this domain it is because, once again, the research community is being seen as too inward-looking. We should be able to do these things well ourselves. Plainly we don't.

Don Aitkin retired at the end of last week as Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of Canberra. He was a member and Chairman of the Australian Research Grants Committee, Foundation Chairman of the Australian Research Council and a member of the Australian Science and Technology Council.