

Research Policy Changes

The Minister was Dr David Kemp, whom I knew well. The Policy Discussion paper referred to was issued in 1998.]

Dear Minister,

Thank you for the opportunity to read *Excellence in Diversity*, the Policy Discussion Paper. It arrived very shortly after my letter to you, and it is good to know that you are preparing yourself to make a public statement on research. Before I enter into a commentary on the present paper I feel that I should remind you of how viscerally important the thing called 'research' is within the higher education community. It affects the way in which scores of thousands of academics regard themselves, and how they are regarded by others. Because research leads to the output which enables these judgments, and there is no comparable alternative, the structures and rules under which research is carried out are pre-eminently important to them, and to change them is always to offend large numbers of people, no matter how virtuous the purpose.

Since the cricket season has just started, and since research is also a game, you need only to think of the fuss that would be caused if a series of rules which affected the length of overs, the disposition of fields, the speed of the ball and the alternation of bowlers were all proposed to be introduced by the governing body. Ten years ago I made this general point to an earlier Minister, who was unconvinced, as were the then Secretary of the Department, the FAS in charge of Higher Education Division, and members of the Minister's private office. Two years later, after an almighty and continuing political row about how the new Australian Research Council was to be funded and managed, the Minister agreed that he had under-estimated the issue!

I need to say this because the present paper is much more powerful in its intended effects than the original establishment of the Australian Research Council, which after all had been proposed after a two-year inquiry by ASTEC and had received the endorsement of most players. Even the ARC's additional funding, by 'clawback' from existing university operating funds, was not new, since the original ARGC had been funded in the same manner. Some of what is set out in the new paper is, to the best of my knowledge, unprecedented. The new paper certainly has 'far-reaching implications' (p. 89), and it will require courage and consistency over the long haul to bring about the changes proposed.

Is it worth doing anyway? That is the central question, and my response is that some elements of the paper's policy are good and could be implemented and others are not, and should not be. What is more, the elements are separable, so that it is possible to implement some parts and not others. Whether the Government would wish to do that is another matter.

The Rationale

As always in such papers, the beginning is a ringing call for the need for change: 'the need for fundamental change is now overdue' (p.4), apparently because the ARC (1998 - present) has allegedly proved to be only an incremental change to the ARGC (1964 - 1988), and as a result 'Structures and mechanisms ... are under strain' (p. 12). The first three chapters, which are over-provided with adverbs and adjectives — always a sign that the writer is aware of the shortcomings in the argument) take us on a somewhat haphazard tour of the contemporary research system, and among other things show us, as they must, that there have been considerable achievements under the system that has operated for the last ten years. With great respect to the writers, any informed reader will come away from these three chapters quite unconvinced that there is any need for fundamental reform. The one huge change over the past few years, the decline in public funding for Australia's universities and for those in the public service who monitor their work, is not referred to, though it is arguably at the heart of any weakness that can be discerned.

This is not the place for a thorough-going response to the first three chapters, but a start could be made by looking at the worthy objectives and principles set out on pp 67/8, and asking how and in what way the present research funding and training system fails to exemplify them. Or, earlier, neither the Johnston study (p. 18) nor the work on innovation (p. 20) shows that the ARC is part of the problem. As for the notion that there has only been incremental change since 1988 (ARC cf ARGC), that can be countered just by looking at the very much greater role that the ARC plays in all aspects of research today compared with the that of the ARGC in its day, a role that is referred to throughout the paper. Some of the work on which the paper relies in its account of our present situation was done, indeed, by the ARC itself. The Council may not be the solution, but it is not obviously the problem.

To say all this is not to deny that a few of the things which are said in the paper have some force to them. I would agree that the Council is always in danger of being diverted from strategic concerns by the need to deal with the programs which it manages; that was true in my day, and seems still to be the case. But divorcing the Council from these programs is a root-and-branch method of dealing with that problem, and exposes the Council to a worse evil, that of being divorced from the consideration of actual people undertaking actual research projects and programs.

What is the desired outcome? I kept searching for that, in the expectation that I could work back from the outcome to the policies. But I could not find an explicit outcome, or set of outcomes, which made the proposed changes necessary. In the international research game Australia seems to be doing relatively well, all things considered. We do not have many research-intensive industries that would generate a lot more private-sector R&D expenditure, but the tax-deductibility possibility has made industry steadily more interested. The industrial-links schemes, the CRC programs, and the sheer shortage of public funding have all pushed researchers into an awareness of developing links with industrial and community partners. I may be out of touch, but I don't see any evidence that 'Higher education research remains largely a dialogue among academics ...' That is certainly not the case in universities like my own. Even in the learned academies, the

bastions of pure research, there is growing awareness that the old days have gone. Won't the movement towards industry and the community continue? I would have thought so. Does it need even more pressure? Maybe, maybe not.

Let me then move from their supposed rationale to the actual proposals for change. They are set out in Chapter 4.

1. Research Training Scheme

Here I would want to start with some well-known and long-standing problems. In my view, too many of the new universities launched themselves into PhD training without adequate preparation (QUT and UC did not), while the older universities have stayed with an incestuous arrangement whereby the best honours students are promised a PhD scholarship so that they stay in the department in which they did their undergraduate work. Neither of these problems is referred to directly — or even obliquely, as far as I can see. And there is nothing at all novel in the principles set out on p. 70. Every university would espouse them. On p. 71 it is said that intending research students will have access to extensive public information about the universities. I don't believe that there exists anything like the information that would be needed if that were to be a real aim.

The scheme as set out on pp 70 - 72 will not make any great difference to what presently occurs unless universities are made unable to offer scholarships to their own graduates (or, to not more than 5%, or some such small figure). What it does do is to transfer the responsibility of managing postgraduate selection to the universities. If this is the desired outcome, than the preceding three chapters ought to say so.

2. Research Training Environment Scheme

Since I have spent eight years in controlling research enrolments at the University of Canberra so that we maintain quality, I am less than impressed by the notion that higher degree completions (HDCs) should count for 50 per cent of the weighting in determining the support funding under this scheme. If the HDCs are themselves weighted so that they represent an acceptable proportion of a university's total higher degree enrolments my objection would be much reduced. I am inclined to favour the rest of this proposal, especially the equality proposed to attach to research income, whatever its source. This is a necessary step, given one of the arguments of the first three chapters. I would support it even more if research income was weighted according to the effort of 'full-time equivalent research' staff, as set out in the Hyde/Aitkin paper. Otherwise what is proposed (and the same is true of the whole set of proposals, despite the disclaimers on pp 82/3) will have a large 'Matthew effect' — to them that hath shall be given ...

3. Research and Innovation Scheme

In my academic life I have spent about equal times inside and outside the Institute of Advanced Studies at the ANU, so I am in some position to comment on the block-funding argument advanced on p. 73. In my view the

block-funding regime in the IAS was good or bad according to who made decisions; it was neither good nor bad by itself. If this paragraph is published as it is you will be deluged by people pointing out the opportunity cost of that block-funding regime — what might have been the case if the IAS had had to apply for grants for some or all of its money? Look how well Melbourne, UNSW (name your own favourite university) does without block-funding, and so on. I wouldn't make this point at all, since it is an unargued assertion.

If it is, however, the chief defence of the proposed scheme then that is a great worry, because the intent of this scheme seems to be to transfer the costs of running the various ARC schemes to the universities. How that is in the public good I cannot imagine, and is not argued for in the paper, which grossly underestimates the costs to the universities (p.87). But much worse, at one stroke there is removed from the Australian universities any element of a nationally competitive research funding system that applies to individuals and groups. Again, how is this to the national advantage? I cannot for the moment think of any country where a system like this applies. Why is competition somehow bad? It is a theme running through our culture, and is part of the Government's own rhetoric (and indeed part of the Opposition's when it was in power). To return to cricket, it is as though we would not have a national cricketing academy as part of the AIS, and regard the selection of an Australian team as an academic exercise only. I simply can't see the point of this, unless it is, one again, to get rid of the ARC's programs and give them to the universities, which will not be able to run them as well or as efficiently. If this is the desired outcome, then the first three chapters should say so, and explain why it is a good thing.

The merit-review process looks like an Antipodean version of the British Research Assessment Exercise, which is one of the truly bad features of the British funding scheme. We have been blessed to be unburdened with it, and British visitors, academics and civil servants alike, recognise that we do very well without one. Indeed, it has been the competitive elements of our funding system which make it unnecessary. To lose them and gain the merit-review process of the kind set out would be a most unwelcome double whammy, and it is impossible to see it as being in the national good. I feel that it is unnecessary to go into the details of the scheme, which is a barren thing. And to echo an earlier point, an Australian Research Council whose sole purpose is to undertake this kind of task is a body that would attract people who knew how to measure but not how or why to undertake research. The detail on p. 78 just fills one with a kind of helpless dread — who thinks these things up? Have they ever carried out a research project of any complexity? Have they ever judged people in a research context? One can be sure of few things in our future, but I am prepared to bet that within a very few years such a body would be terminated and the task of creating a national research council with comprehensive functions and proper funding begun all over again. What a waste of time and money it would all have been.

4. Peak Facilities Scheme

Australia has never had sufficient determination or national purpose to state firmly that some kinds of national facilities are more important than others, and to fund them properly. I will support any proposal to bring candidates for such funding before some kind of national scrutiny, and therefore would support this scheme. Will it have sufficient funds to do its job properly, and a rolling time-scale so that its task is continuous? Will it be able to look at proposals which go outside the higher education sector?

Conclusion

Finally, Chapter 5 asks a series of questions as a basis for discussion. My answers will be obvious enough and need no restating. I am left feeling that a paper like this, especially if there is any intention of implementing its main proposals, will leave the responsible Minister with no time to undertake any other business. The Research and Innovation Scheme in particular looks like a solution in search of a problem.

The main problem in the research domain is clear enough: there isn't enough money to provide enough successes in the grants business or enough scholarships for the would-be PhDs. If the Government is not prepared to find the money, because other priorities are higher, then it would be much less exhausting for everybody for it to say so, and ask the ARC to give out the message that a 20% success rate is going to be the limit, and that the research community had better become accustomed to it. This elaborate scheme seems to me a kind of camouflage for that unfortunate situation, and it would be a great pity if it were put into place. If the purpose is to save money it would be best, and easiest in the long run, to say so up front. If it is felt that the cost of administering the schemes are too high (and I wasn't persuaded by the argument on p. 59, because no alternatives were proposed), then the ARC should be asked to develop much cheaper and tougher ways of coming to necessary decisions (I would agree that too much effort seems still to be applied to equity issues at the level of grant-giving, and too little to outcomes). But the price must not be the abandonment of a national competitive system which identifies and develops research excellence. You saw how important such a system was in teaching last night; the lesson is no less important in the research domain.

I am sorry to sound so negative, but the Australian research endeavour is altogether too important for the the nation for it to be saddled with a scheme like the one outlined in the paper. And to finish as I began, let me urge you again not to underestimate the importance of these rules and structures to 40,000 or so academics. I have been here before, and I know what the public outcry is going to sound like.

With best wishes,

[DA]

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