THE AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH COUNCIL AND THE INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR IN THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES*

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Unlike other Western democracies, Australia makes negligible provision for scholars, who work largely outside institutions, notwithstanding the fact that much valuable research is produced and published by such individuals. This exclusion is symptomatic of a much grosser distortion in the general administration of research funding.

This paper addresses firstly the apparent perception of the nature and value of research on the part of the Department of Employment, Education and Training and their political masters in the context of government policy as a whole in the tertiary sector; secondly, the impact of this policy on the life of the academic, especially the academic in the humanities and social sciences; and thirdly the likely impact of the policy on the nature and quality of current research.

INTRODUCTION

Unlike other Western democracies, Australia makes negligible provision for scholars who work largely outside institutions, notwithstanding the fact that much valuable research is produced and published by such individuals. The Australia Council has occasionally provided support for historians or biographers but its charter, appropriately, is designed to cater for creative writers and performing and other artists. The more appropriate funding body for the independent scholar is, one might expect, the Australian Research Council (ARC). In fact, however, independent scholars have almost as much chance of winning grants from this body as had the Biblical camel of passing through the eye of a needle, for the ARC is virtually a closed system, that is, it is one which perceives research almost entirely as an activity that is restricted to universities. The only area of research funded by the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) which the ARC does not oversee concerns scholarships for overseas postgraduate researchers, while the membership of the various panels and committees is entirely academic apart from the odd bureaucrat and representatives from industry on the Collaborative Research Grants Panel. When the reports put out by the ARC refer to 'wide representation from the research community at committee and panel level', then, they mean the university research community. If one looks at the one area where one might expect to find an established niche for independent researchers or those outside aca-

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demic institutions, i.e. Research Fellowships, it turns out that these too are mainly tied to universities in that in order to obtain one of these fellowships it is generally necessary to win support not just from individuals within the academic community in the form of references but in terms of a statement of support in the form of space, library facilities and computing and other facilities from a specific university. Thus, research fellowships, valuable as they are, are really another means of expanding the staff of universities.

This exclusion of the independent scholar, however, is symptomatic of a much grosser distortion in the general administration of research funding. It is a distortion which is not just materially deleterious as far as the independent scholar is concerned, but is also intellectually deleterious at a national level and, I would argue, economically wasteful. In order to appreciate the full extent of this distortion, it is necessary to set the situation of the independent scholar in the wider context of the grants culture as it has developed since the so-called Dawkins reforms. Therefore this paper will address firstly the apparent perception of the nature and value of research on the part of DEET and their political masters in the context of government policy as a whole in the tertiary sector; secondly, the impact of this policy on the life of the academic, especially the academic in the humanities and social sciences; and thirdly the likely impact of the policy on the nature and quality of current research.

It is no secret that the ARC is compelled to subscribe to certain bureaucratic prescriptions about what constitutes relevant research. The budget structure of the ARC and the guidelines set down by the *Employment, Education and Training Act 1988* reveal the extent to which the government wishes to impose its own perception of the value of research onto the academic community, emphasising in the case of Research Centres the necessity of co-operation between higher education and industry, in the case of the Collaborative Research Grants Program the priority of research which has the potential for economic and social benefit to Australia and which will encourage collaboration between institutions and industry, and in the case of large grants generally the priority of four research areas: material science and minerals processing; scientific instruments and instrumentation; cognitive science; and Australia's Asian context. All this is a marked departure from previous practices under the relatively relaxed situation under the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission.

But bureaucratic intervention in the way universities organise their research has been and is becoming far more extensive and intrusive than this and is having far more serious consequences. We are now living in a culture of aggressive competition for research funds in which research itself is less the end than the means. Possibly as a result of the Dawkins 'reforms', which had an initial levelling effect, universities are now more competitive and enmeshed in rivalry and more knit into a hierarchy than ever before. For the last two years in a process which is continuing they have been assessed and classified according to quality by panels of academics set up by DEET. We can all remember the fuss when the University of Sydney failed to make the first band and was forced to rub shoulders in Band 2 with the University of Wollongong. But this rivalry is not as petty as it seems — it

has very serious funding consequences. The government's policy seems to be that nothing succeeds like success and that to him that hath it shall be given. Thus as far as ARC money is concerned, the amount for small grants allocated to a university — which it is able to administer and allocate independently — is determined on the basis of the institution's performance over the previous two years in attracting large research grants. But this is in the context of much larger changes which have been made to the research effort undertaken by universities, most notably by changing a proportion of research funding from an institutional to a competitive basis. From 1993 Research Infrastructure Block Grants have been allocated to institutions according to their score on a composite research index or a national competitive grant index, i.e. those universities which have been most successful in attracting money from Commonwealth, non-Commonwealth and Industry sources will receive the largest amounts of research infrastructure money. There are further changes in train which will make the competition for research money even more acute, such as the re-allocation of the research quantum of operating grants on an annual basis according to a new composite research index developed in 1994. Meanwhile changes in accounting practices and the increasing administrative burden of responding to the ever fluctuating nature of the Department of Finance's reporting requirements have had a massive effect on the liquidity and flexibility of university administrations.

Needless to say, the impact of this competition for research money has been felt by most academics and especially by academics in the humanities and social sciences. Thrust into an alien field where research ability for promotion purposes is now partly measured by the ability to win grants, and even sometimes crudely by the ability to win large grants — the larger the amount, the more prestigious the researcher — the hapless academic is now pressured to win grants for the sake of the institution, department or school — in short for colleagues. In some institutions even applying for a grant is counted as a positive in promotion or tenure applications and at one university intending applicants are provided with $1,000 grants to assist them in getting their applications together. Other universities employ individuals who are specially skilled in the field of winning grant money. I should add here that in the past only about 20% of applications for large grants in the humanities and social sciences have been successful and that this proportion is bound to fall given the inevitable rush of applications following these changes in policy.

GOVERNMENT PERCEPTION OF RESEARCH AND GENERAL POLICY

One of the catch cries of the present Federal Government has, of course been the idea of Australia as the 'clever country', that one way out of the national economic impasse is the development of knowledge-based industries. Given the perception that universities are the main catchment of 'cleverness' and the hard fact that they are extremely vulnerable to government intervention and control, they have been put under enormous pressure to produce more either with less or with steady state funding – more graduates and more research in the form of units of production. It is true that the Australian government is now spending more on tertiary education than, say ten years ago, but it is also true that the whole tertiary scene has been

transformed within the last ten years — as we all know, student numbers have increased far more than staff numbers. According to Professor Barton of the Australian National University as reported in the *ANU Reporter* , student numbers there have increased by 50% with negligible increases in overall funding. Barton also maintains that the Government is funding the school leaver growth partly out of the reduction in the research quantum — from 30% to 4.7%.[1]

Tertiary education is also, of course, a vulnerable area, electorally speaking, that is the general availability of university education is and has been a *sine qua non* of professed government policy, and given the revolutionary changes since the Dawkins's White Paper of 1988 it has become a highly visible area of public policy. For university administrations this has meant increased emphasis on accountability and transparence, a pressure they have generally attempted to ease by introducing managerialist structures and notions more appropriate to business than to universities and apparently imported from such institutions as the Harvard Business School. For most academics, this contradictory mix of policies — economy plus greater student through-put and more units of produced research — has meant a greatly increased work load, including a greater burden of administration and exposure to a new research climate of economic rationalism which many find alienating. The limitations of this market model for university research have been frequently analysed. Freya Mathews, for instance, in *The Australian Universities' Review* (1990) gives a trenchant description of the new situation:

> Until the present restructuring of the universities was set in motion, research in the humanities was not organised strictly on the production model, though considerations of 'productivity' were of course present. The universities provided a framework within which academics could pursue their research in their own time and, to a certain extent, at their own pace. Researchers were expected to exercise their own expert judgement in arriving at research topics, and were under no obligation to ensure that there was in any sense a pre-existing 'demand' for their particular investigations. Within the humanities, specific funding for research was relatively incidental; time, both for the actual writing and the intellectual gestation of works, was the primary desideratum. The universities, were reasonably effective in satisfying this requirement.
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> In the new regime inaugurated by Dawkins, all research in the universities is organised according to a single set of guidelines. No effective provision is made for the different requirements of research in the humanities and research in law or engineering, for instance. All research is mapped onto a production model which is Fordist in its spirit if not in its letter. It is envisaged that, given the appropriate conditions, 'units' of research may be produced to order — which is to say, effectively to a schedule. It is assumed that this will enable the rate of production to be increased. The conditions which are supposed to bring about this Taylorisation of research and consequent productivity increase are market conditions: competition for funding is the lever which will stimulate output. Funding, in this context, operates in much the same way as does profit in the traditional market: funding, like profit, becomes the carrot, the incentive, which motivates production. As the competition for funding becomes keener, the rate of production increases, and the standard of the product presumably rises.
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> Under the new regime, then, academics are expected to conduct their research to schedule, offer a product for which there is an identifiable market, and compete for a buyer in that market. . . The activity of research, and the ideas to which it gives rise, are no

> longer in this system treated as ends in themselves, but as means to basically mercenary ends. It is inevitable, within such a system, that those who fund the research will in due course seek to control or 'own' its potentially lucrative product; in other words the system will create an inevitable drift towards the privatisation of knowledge.[2]

It seems to me that the current research policy of universities basically applies an engineering model or an applied science model to all research, implying mainly equipment-based needs. But what most academics in the humanities and social sciences need above all is time. Their salaries cover their basic living needs, and generally, but less and less liberally, such requirements as travel to interstate libraries, photocopying, inter-library loans etc are largely covered by the operating grants of their departments. For the humanities or social sciences academic with a large teaching load, supervision of several post-graduate students, and an increasing burden of administration, a grant of money is likely to be of much less value — and indeed is likely to increase her/his administrative pressures — than, say, a grant of six months' relief to write up or pursue research. Money for such academics can basically buy travel, equipment and research assistance. Both travel and equipment obviously require inputs of time as does, less obviously, research assistance. But research assistance is by no means always appropriate for humanities or even social sciences research.

In practice, the new policy has had the effect of actually and seriously eroding the individual academic's research time — at least for the past 80% unsuccessful in winning grants — and in other ways which I describe below. For the hapless academic, under pressure to prove research capability in money terms, and now even pressured in the same direction by loyalty to the individual institution, getting up an application for an ARC large or small grant can mean weeks of work — in the case of large grants falling within the most productive block of research time, the long vacation. It is a complicated bureaucratic process requiring sophisticated accounting and management skills and the forecasting of likely 'outcomes' over a three-year period. Winning the grant can be as much an embarrassment as an advantage. Many academics complain of the long lead time between the application and the granting of money — twelve months. In that time the research assistant or assistants envisaged for the project may (probably will) be engaged on other projects, if it is a collaborative research project, some of the collaborators may have been diverted in other directions, other on-going research projects which have been developed in the event of not winning the grant will have to be dropped. Meanwhile, administering the grant will be a major new responsibility. Most universities leave the day-to-day accounting process to the academic, as well as final responsibility for the budget's acquittal. In a climate of ever changing on-costs — workers compensation, superannuation, recreation leave etc. — this can be a major headache.

At the same time the granting system has become a bureaucratic burden for the entire academic community. Grant applications have to be refereed by at least four academics, so that the thankless task of refereeing is added to all the other jobs which clutter up the most productive research periods. In some discipline areas, such as economics, academics have actually refused to take on this burden — according to the Research Grants Outcomes Report of 1986-90 in economics the response rate was not more than half in 1988 and 69% in 1989. In addition, the

various ARC panels or committees which judge small grants applications have to be staffed and academics are also involved in the 'outcome' process, in the various evaluative procedures either set up by the ARC or within the universities themselves. It is an irony that determining performance indicators has become a complicated, costly bureaucratic process which must have in practice seriously eroded performance, although, also ironically, there is no bureaucratic measure of this erosion. From the point of view of economic rationalism, the costs of all this are far from transparent.

IMPACT ON RESEARCH

As for the nature of humanities and social sciences research itself, what effect have these so-called economic rationalist policies had? In the current grants culture, as I have already indicated, size has become the most significant performance indicator. Winning a large grant is more prestigious and valuable for both individual and institution than winning a small grant and winning a large large grant is more prestigious and valuable than winning a smaller one. As the authors of the Report on Research Grant Outcomes in Australian History point out, 'grant size does not necessarily have anything to do with the scholarly needs of Australian history.'

> A basic difficulty is that there is no necessary relationship between quantity (the size of a grant) and quality (the importance of the final product of the research on which the money was spent). There is a basic difference as between subject areas in that in some areas (e.g. science and technology) research is normally more costly than it is in other subject areas (e.g. Australian history). But these quantitative differences bear no necessary relationship to qualitative appraisal. A project costing, say $250,000 in science may be comparatively routine within its own subject. A project costing $25,000 — or, for that matter, $5000 — in Australian history may have much more important consequences within the subject area of Australian history than a project costing $250,000.[3]

These authors also point out that some grant applications, whose main virtue is one of size, are got up by academics as a matter of corporate spirit, because of the perceived benefits to their school, or faculty or university via the piggyback effect, rather than because of their intrinsic research merit.

This report concludes by suggesting that the grants culture is having two important distorting effects on research in Australian history.

> The significance given to large grants can have two important effects.
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> 1. Subjects where research most naturally demands large grants can also become those which get the largest share of small grants. This may be the reverse of what should happen. There could, in fact, be an inverse relationship between the need for large grants and the need for small grants. Research needs in some subjects may be best served by large grants. Research needs in other subjects may be best served by a lot of small or smallish grants.
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> 2. Within the field of Australian History the entire research approach may be distorted by 'getting up large projects'. These may have merits when they are related to the support structure of the subject — bibliographic data bases, etc. — or in large, coordinated, multi-based projects such as the Bicentennial program. (Although some university administrators are now discouraging projects which involve cooperation between

> numbers of History schools in different universities because they think their own universities will not score well enough,) But there is no necessary merit in size itself. An emphasis on size can mean that projects are organised, not by the consideration of obtaining the best work in Australian history, but of obtaining grants of a certain size. This means that the mere conventions of grant-making can have an effect on what is researched in and what is written about Australian history.[4]

A research project in the humanities which is dependent on a large grant also usually implies either collaborative work and/or research assistance, that is it is a project which is necessarily devolvable. The possibility of employing a research assistant can of course speed up work or open out large scale projects but it is not necessarily the best way of conducting research in the humanities. Similarly, some collaborations, hastily got together for the purpose of winning a large grant may prove to be ill-advised or ill-fitting. One Professor in the Report of Research Outcomes in Australian History gives an overall view:

> Where the primary emphasis falls on data gathering according to relatively well-defined criteria, or while the project is fairly open-ended and experimental, there can be great payoffs in the collaborative approach and in the employment of research assistants as collaborators. Where the project has a strong interpretative element, the closer it gets to the point of completion, the stronger will be the directive hand of the principal researcher. In such a project, I believe, there is simply no substitute in the way of research assistance for the undivided time of the main researcher/writer. [5]

Others in the same report suggested that the scientistic nature of the guidelines and time-tabled nature of the process create pressures for clearly defined, readily devolvable projects which are unsuitable to conceptually ambitious work. Hence there is a shortage of publications that have opened up new areas in Australian history or altered approaches — a shortage of risk-taking thinking. To quote from the report:

> Professor Reynolds amongst others, said that most historical work should be done by the primary researcher and that immersion in the documents was of vital importance in the build up of an intuitive understanding of the past. He said he was not sure that the existing procedures encouraged the more innovative or imaginative projects.[6]

Given the pressures inherent in the contemporary grants culture, one wonders how many projects have been funded which were arbitrarily 'got up' rather than flowing naturally from the projectors' research; how many academics have invested valuable research time in getting up applications which in normal circumstances they would never have contemplated and which in the event were unsuccessful; what research opportunities have been lost due to the need to structure grant applications according to potentially winning formulae; and lastly, how much worthwhile research by independent scholars could have been funded by the same amount of money?

EVALUATION OF RESEARCH

Meanwhile, what is being done to evaluate research outcomes? — surely a key area of concern given the stress on accountability and transparency and the policy of tying operating grants to research activity. It is of course an area of great difficulty, but it is not a large ticket item in the overall budget of the ARC, with only

0.6$m allocated to the purpose in 1994 out of an overall budget of 303.6$m. Generally speaking, evaluation is left to the academics themselves, and in the new management culture within universities there has been enormous pressure to develop reliable performance indicators — with often farcical results. During the process at the Australian Defence Force Academy (ADFA), for instance, one Head of Department produced graphs measuring research according to the number of pages published — one hopes in a spirit of Swiftian satire. In the ARC's *Report on Research Funding Programs 1994* there is the following paragraph:

> Evaluations of Large Grant funding are carried out of research funding for the most recent five year period where outcomes are likely to be largely complete. Each evaluation is undertaken by three eminent researchers whose experise covers the field concerned but who did not seek support from the Department's research programs during the period concerned and were not involved in the allocation of grants. Their main task is to determine whether research output and impact are appropriate to funding input.

To date sixteen reviews have been undertaken. In the social sciences/humanities area there are only three so far, and interestingly they are much less useful in determining research outcomes than they are in documenting the complaints of academics and the flaws in the system. The three areas so far covered are Economics (1986-90) British and European History (1983-87) and Australian History (1981-85). There are other evaluative practices carried out under the relatively small budget — reports by the various discipline panels and, according to the 1993 ARC report, the establishment of a group, appropriately titled PEG (Performance Evaluation Group) — to look at appropriate performance indicators. This last has done some initial work but the huge inherent difficulties of the task are cryptically implicit in the final sentence of this section of the 1993 Report describing the setting up of a consultancy to develop advice on how indicators of research performance may best be used in the allocation of research funding. Neither PEG nor the consultancy is mentioned in the 1994 report.

Basically, it seems to me that evaluation has been barely addressed — while the difficulties (even impossibility) of determining the quality and impact of research reflects on the inherent shortcomings of a policy which perceives research as units of production. Under such a policy, all one can measure, as the ADFA professor realistically perceived, are rates of production.

In conclusion, I maintain that in the interests of academics, independent scholars, the quality of research, and taxpayer's money, drastic changes to the way research funding is managed should be made. What has developed in Australia by a process of rapid accretion is not just a bureaucratically driven model, but one developed within a specific, particularly narrow bureaucracy i.e. DEET. As its title indicates, DEET's priorities of employment, training and even education, make research an adjunct, not a priority in itself and, moreover, a 'good' which must have readily perceived material benefits. Government departments are not only not equipped with staff who can assess the value of research or the needs of different types of research, they are concerned with the allocation of public money, so that it is not surprising that

their main object is simply that — the allocation of public money to the institutions which come under their charter within a bureaucratic, managerialist context and according to the utilitarian terms of that charter. However hard working and incorruptible the members of the various ARC panels are — and I believe that they have those qualities in a very high degree — they are working within parameters which are externally set and uncongenial to the traditional aims of university research in non-applied science fields. While both bureaucrats and the universities struggle to fulfill the contradictory policies of short-sighted politicians, the main end of all research — work of high quality which is also by definition disinterested — is being edged to one side. What we need is a different funding model and a different funding structure — possibly one like the USA's National Endowment for the Humanities.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 *ANU Reporter*, 26, 12 (19 July 1995), p. 9.

2 'Destroying the gift: Rationalising research in the humanities.' *The Australian Universities' Review* 33,1 & 2 (1990), pp.19-20.

3 Donald Horne, Ken Inglis and Jill Roe. *Report of a Panel to Evaluate the Research Funding of Australian History 1981-1983*. ARC Grant Outcomes Evaluation Program. Review of Grants Outcomes No.3. Canberra: AGPS, 1992, p. 31.

4 Horne, Inglis & Roe, pp. 31-32.

5 Horne, Inglis & Roe, p. 32.

6 Horne, Inglis & Roe, p. 33.