550 years, $66m lost in R&D cash fight

EXCLUSIVE

ANDREW TROUNSON

HEALTH and medical researchers this year spent the collective equivalent of 550 years of research time just applying for grant funding, reinforcing calls for a more efficient system.

A new survey of 285 grant applicants conducted by Queensland University of Technology researchers reveals applicants spent an average 34 working days writing an application, at an estimated cost in salaries of $66 million.

The National Health and Medical Research Council received 3727 applications, of which only about 20 per cent were funded.

The survey is part of research about to be submitted to the British Medical Journal. It comes as Nobel prize-winning astrophysicist Brian Schmidt ramped up his campaign for a review of the research granting system to make it more efficient.

In The Australian today he criticises the reliance on time-consuming peer review of projects as questionable and cumbersome. He complains that key people with specialist knowledge of research projects are too often excluded from review panels for perceived conflicts of interest.

After panel discussions, he said, decisions still ended up being based largely on a researcher's track record. "It isn't at all clear this cumbersome process is actually able to judge good projects from bad because of what is ultimately a lack of specific expertise in the subject area of each grant," Professor Schmidt writes.

Professor Schmidt is lobbying for a review of the Australian Research Council that funds non-medical research, but the issues are relevant to the NHMRC, where grants are also based on peer review.

The NHMRC and ARC recently announced a combined $1 billion worth of research grants for next year.

QUT researcher Nicholas Graves, who with colleagues in the faculty of health conducted the survey, said the system was unsustainable. "We are getting busier and busier. ... and it's not sustainable to be spending six to seven weeks on a grant application," he said.

Professor Graves said the project information sent to reviewers should be culled to just 10-12 pages instead of more than 100. The aim, he said, should be to reduce the time spent on grant applications to just 10 days.

Professor Schmidt wants the ARC to devote its money to larger teams of researchers based on track record, and for longer five-year rolling periods, rather than having to re-apply every three years.

ARC chief Aidan Byrne defended the role of peer review as one of the "core tenets of the academic process".

Professor Byrne said he was open to considering longer grant periods, but warned such a move would further reduce already low success rates of 22 per cent. He said the ARC reviewed its processes every annual round.

A spokesperson for Innovation Minister Chris Evans defended the ARC's grant making as "a robust, highly competitive process that has been developed over time and in line with international standards".

HIGH EDUCATION P35
Making a case for charity

Universities need to be pro-active in their efforts to raise funds

DANIEL McDIARMID

IN 2006, visiting University of Bristol vice-chancellor Eric Thomas told an audience at the University of Adelaide that fundraising had become a vital and legitimate activity for universities, but it had to be approached in the right way.

It was two years after he had chaired an inquiry into voluntary giving to British universities.

In his report, he emphasised the need to develop a culture of asking and for vice-chancellors and “lay leaders” to take a prominent role in fundraising activities.

The recent Review of Philanthropy in UK Higher Education by the Higher Education Funding Council for England is a report card on progress made in soliciting private support by universities and other higher education institutions.

As well as charting the extent to which universities took seriously Thomas’s message, this is a review of two British government initiatives that are of interest to Australian universities: a scheme that provided government funding to lift the capacity of fundraising offices and a scheme that matched private donations at selected universities.

The Bradley review contained a matching gifts proposal (comprehensively ignored by government), and a proposal to fund capacity building for fundraising appeared in a draft of the report, but didn’t make the final version.

The results? In 2006-07, 131 British institutions reported £500 million ($762m) from 130,000 donors. Five years later the figure was more than $1 billion from 200,000 donors, with 16 per cent more institutions reporting an increase of 35 per cent in funds raised and 54 per cent more donors.

What is surprising is the figures aren’t higher given that both Oxford and Cambridge (which account for 50 per cent of giving to British universities) have conducted successful campaigns for more than $1.5bn each over periods reviewed.

The HEFCE review, chaired by Shirley Pearce, vice-chancellor of Loughborough University, reads like it is written by fundraising insiders. Much of the well-rehearsed case for increased investment in fundraising is repeated in the report, and there are occasions where evidence to the contrary is glossed over: for example, the fact some universities that received money to build their fundraising capacity actually raised less than institutions that did not receive assistance.

The few Australian and New Zealand institutions that are making a substantial commitment to fundraising development will see in this report an endorsement of their approach.

The agnostic will find some good material to help in their decision-making — in particular, the breakdown of data by different ages of universities. The sceptical will find the lack of data on return on investment annoying and will remain unconvinced.

The federal government will introduce a statutory definition of charity from July 1 next year. Will Australian universities seek to come within the definition of “charity”?

It was important to British universities. Thomas noted in his Adelaide address that many universities had been founded on philanthropy, and that “some donors viewed universities in much the same way as charities because, like charities, they pursued honourable and noble aims”.

The HEFCE report is even stronger on this point. “Universities are charities, making a significant charitable impact. They have therefore not only the right but the obligation actively to seek and responsibly to handle philanthropic gifts.”

Are the Australian and New Zealand universities ready to claim their charitable status and to step up to effective fundraising?

Dr Daniel McDiarmid is principal consultant with Global Philanthropic.
A $20m gift to Sydney University by John Grill, left, with vice-chancellor Michael Spence, shows the philanthropy trend

‘Some donors viewed universities in much the same way as charities because, like charities, they pursued honourable and noble aims’

ERIC THOMAS
VICE-CHANCELLOR,
UNIVERSITY OF BRISTOL
$37m fillip for overseas study

BERNARD LANE

A NATIONAL campaign to sell overseas study to Australians could make a big difference, according to outward mobility expert Rob Malicki.

The government’s $37 million AsiaBound grants program includes $3m for a campaign to promote the benefits of outward mobility, highlight opportunities for study in Asia and the incentives available.

“This is very clever because one of the barriers that Australian universities have identified is that a lot of students don’t understand the benefits of studying overseas,” Mr Malicki said in a video comment on the new program.

As far as he knew, this was the first time that government had put serious money into such a campaign, he told the HES.

Murdoch University’s professor of Southeast Asian studies, David Hill, said building awareness of in-country travel would be essential.

“Australian students, by and large, don’t think about study abroad. We need to change the psychology of students so they see (in-country study) as a desirable part of their degree.”

Universities Australia’s chief executive Belinda Robinson said the sector would help design the promotion campaign.

Mr Malicki said the significance of this campaign, and of more generous OS-HELP rules, had yet to be widely understood. For students going to Asia, there will be bigger loans available, as well as specific $1000 loans to cover intensive training in Asian languages. However, the opening up of the OS-HELP scheme will apply to students heading anywhere overseas, the office of Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans has confirmed.

OS-HELP will no longer be restricted to students going to an overseas university but will be available for a range of study experiences, including clinical placements, and not just in Asia.

In a recent speech at the Australia-India Institute, Senator Evans gave examples of study experiences well beyond the familiar trips taken by students with a languages major.

“‘In addition to study partnerships and scientific exchanges we want to see nursing students doing placements in small Indian community clinics; medical students getting experience in Indian hospitals; young engineers tackling building projects in Indian cities; and media students spending time in a Bollywood studio,’” he said.

Mr Malicki said: “We’re going to see an explosion in the number of students taking up the OS-HELP scheme.”

He added that it was not yet clear whether the Asia-focus of the new incentives would reduce the money available for other regions. He said one often overlooked benefit of international study was that it was linked to students completing on time, and universities saving money.
Henry’s white paper is a long-term recipe for the future

SIMON MARGINSON

THE white paper on Australia in the Asian Century, the government’s most important policy initiative since the carbon tax, slipped out of the headlines quickly.

It was pushed aside by the US presidential election, the Melbourne Cup and other pressing events. And it was a largely bipartisan report without scope for an all-in stoush between Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott. Conflict and point-scoring are reportable but consensus is not, though consensus is more productive.

The white paper’s reception in universities ranged from tepid to cynical. “Where are the programs? Where’s the money?” sang the chorus. This missed the point of the strategy in Ken Henry’s white paper. It was intended to be a slow burner. The short-term debate was less important.

Up to now engagement with Asia has been the property of the Asia specialists, those who can speak the main Asian languages, and the enthusiasts in government, business, media and universities with a personal history in the region. These groups are certainly growing but remain on the periphery of middle Australia, the Anglo-Irish-European-Australian population.

Up to now engagement with Asia has been the property of the Asia specialists, those who can speak the main Asian languages, and the enthusiasts in government, business, media and universities with a personal history in the region. These groups are certainly growing but remain on the periphery of middle Australia, the Anglo-Irish-European-Australian population.

Nor can engagement with Asia be carried primarily by Asian descendants in Australia, most of whose families arrived in the past 35 years. It needs to reach the hearts and minds of Mr and Mrs SCG, Mr and Mrs MCG (add Mr and Mrs Gabba, Bellerive, and so on) and their sons and daughters.

“Change is needed in the way Australians think about and engage with the region,” the white paper says. “The active support of the community will be critical in challenging traditional mindsets, in identifying new opportunities and intensifying our regional engagement.”

The white paper has been crafted with care to achieve this. It is bipartisan in tone and leaves the opposition feeling comfortable. It is impeccably Australian-centred rather than Asian-centred and talks in plain local language. It will become one of the bibles of government because it is hard to disagree with.

If Australia in the Asian Century had pulled a raft of new programs out of that hat, a surplus-fixated government would have cut them in half. The government would have looked less Asian at precisely the time when China, South Korea and India are rising, we will miss a significant strategic opportunity. Worse, our long-term survival as a nation will be placed in real doubt.

Henry’s objective is to mainstream the Australian engagement with Asia on a much bigger scale now, at a time when China, South Korea and India are rising, we will miss a significant strategic opportunity. Worse, our long-term survival as a nation will be placed in real doubt.

“Change is needed in the way Australians think about and engage with the region,” the white paper says. “The active support of the community will be critical in challenging traditional mindsets, in identifying new opportunities and intensifying our regional engagement.”

The white paper has been crafted with care to achieve this. It is bipartisan in tone and leaves the opposition feeling comfortable. It is impeccably Australian-centred rather than Asian-centred and talks in plain local language. It will become one of the bibles of government because it is hard to disagree with.

It has been wrapped in an argument with maximum reach across the country — if you jump on the Asian bandwagon now, then you and the country will prosper. This is crass and the report has much more to it, but the argument provides the government with legitimacy, inclusion and economic momentum.

And there is plenty that assists university international offices, if they adopt a tactical approach. “We will provide more financial support and information for students who study in Asia,” it says. Universities can develop much larger study abroad programs, short-stay and long-stay, with government sharing the cost.

Simon Marginson is a professor in the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne. He recently completed an Australian Research Council-financed study of the global activities of leading research universities in the Asia-Pacific region.
State should butt out of our universities

Proposed changes would give the state government unprecedented ability to interfere in the running of universities and TAFEs, writes Colin Long.

It is true that the Australian National University is financed by this Parliament, but it is managed by a council that is, as far as possible, an independent body, on which we have a variety of people with a variety of experience.

The words are those of Robert Menzies. He would surely be turning in his grave to know that his political descendants in the Victorian Coalition government are proposing a bill that will fundamentally undermine the independence of university councils.

The Baillieu government has introduced to Parliament the Education Legislation Amendment (Governance) Bill. Its primary purpose is to strip TAFE boards and university councils of their elected staff and student representatives. In the case of universities, it is remarkable that an allegedly "conservative" government would seek to destroy, in one fell swoop, centuries of constitutional tradition that protect universities from the heavy hand of state interference.

The government’s changes to university governance arrangements not only remove elected representatives, they provide the state government with unprecedented ability to interfere in the running of universities. If passed, the bill will make it possible for a university council to consist of one council appointee, the chancellor, vice-chancellor and head of academic board and seven government appointees. In other words, the government could capture control of the university’s governance.

The principle of university autonomy is recognised internationally. UNESCO’s 1997 Recommendation concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel is explicit about the importance of elected representatives in university governance:

Higher-education teaching personnel should have the right and opportunity, without discrimination of any kind, according to their abilities, to take part in the governing bodies and to criticise the functioning of higher education institutions, including their own, while respecting the right of other sections of the academic community to participate, and they should also have the right to elect a majority of representatives to academic bodies within the higher education institution.

Why should anyone care? Universities get public funding and should be accountable for it, shouldn’t they? Yes, universities receive public funding, although less than 50 per cent of their budgets are now provided by government, and only a bit over 2 per cent is provided by the state government.

The point is that universities are supposed to be places where learning and research take place without fear that uncomfortable truths will be suppressed, where freedom of inquiry and of speech trump the quest for control by politicians or others with commercial or sectional interests.

Fundamental to this autonomy is the university council, which developed over centuries as a kind of parliament to represent the broad community that had an interest in the institutions’ wellbeing and activities. Governments could appoint some council members, but never more than a few, and, until relatively recently, a wide range of people was sought. Integral to the council were the staff and students who made up the “community of teachers and scholars” from which the term “university” is derived.

This is reflected in the fact that universities have “members” – the staff, students and graduates – who are now to be excluded. No institution that seriously lays claim to the title “university” could seek to exclude from its governing body those who represent the institution's essence.

The pressure on university councils has been building for some time. As the idea of the university as a community of scholars seeking truth has been forcefully replaced with the concept of the university as a cog in the government economic and training machine, politicians and university bureaucrats have been...
gradually attempting to convert councils into boards of directors of what they see as companies selling degrees and conducting research that can be commercialised.

The Baillieu government’s proposed reforms take this trend to its logical conclusion. No one will sit on a university council who doesn’t have the “right” skills – meaning experience in business. This fundamentally misunderstands – or ignores – the time-honoured purpose of a university council. Councils provide representation of the community’s and the institution’s interests.

The chancellor of the University of Melbourne, Elizabeth Alexander, has made a principled statement condemning the proposed changes. This is presumably because she understands that no institution that claims the status of a university can support measures that undermine the fundamental principle of university autonomy and academic freedom.

If the government has no intention of seeking to control universities, to limit their autonomy and academic freedom, it should not create the means by which it can do so.

Victorians should be aware of what the Baillieu government is doing. With its slashing of TAFE budgets, and now its attack on university autonomy, it is demonstrating contempt for our public education institutions.

Dr Colin Long is Victorian division secretary, National Tertiary Education Union.

“No one will sit on a university council who doesn’t have the “right” skills – meaning experience in business.”
'It’s time’ honoured

Joanna Heath

Labor luminaries past and present gathered in Sydney’s west last night to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Gough Whitlam’s “It’s time” speech exhorting Australians to end the longest continuous period of Liberal government in the country’s history.

The speech, delivered to a packed crowd at Blacktown Civic Centre, marked the launch of the successful 1972 campaign against Liberal prime minister Billy McMahon.

Mr Whitlam was infamously dismissed by governor-general John Kerr three years later.

Whitlam Institute Board chairman John Faulkner compared the speech with other orations including Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg address, Ben Chifley’s “light on the hill” speech and Winston Churchill’s wartime “never surrender” call to arms.

“It has become accepted wisdom that attention spans today are too short, lives too busy, attitudes too cynical, for the soaring rhetoric and the detailed rationale of political speeches,” Senator Faulkner said.

“Two million views of Prime Minister Gillard speaking in Parliament, one million in one day of President Obama speaking on election night last week, five and a half million of former president Clinton addressing the 2012 Democratic Convention should tell us all that the internet does not sound the death knell of the political speech – quite the reverse.”

Mr Whitlam’s speech, 33 pages long, set out Labor’s election policy platform in detail, including proposals to make university education free and to abolish conscription.

Its opening line, “Men and women of Australia!”, was borrowed from former Labor prime minister John Curtin. It ended with the declaration: “I do not for a moment believe that we should set limits on what we can achieve, together, for our country, our people, our future.”

Australian National University professor of politics John Wanna said the speech’s success was partly due to the new phenomenon of mass media.

“It was the first time a massive amount of television was used for a campaign,” he said.

“This was very much a celebrity time, and Whitlam played along with that. McMahon couldn’t do that. He was wooden and solid.”
FED: Clinton applauds Asia white paper

PERTH, Nov 14 AAP - United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has applauded the federal government's strategic white paper on Asian policy and welcomed Australian-Indian naval vessel exercises in the future.

Mrs Clinton is in Perth for the annual Australia-United States Ministerial (AUSMIN) meeting and on Tuesday night launched the Perth USAsia Centre at the University of Western Australia (UWA), aimed at strengthening ties between the US, Australia and the Asian region.

She praised Australia's "burgeoning" relationship with India, which she said was the "world's largest democracy and a dynamic emerging economy".

"We would welcome joint Australian-Indian naval vessel exercises in the future and we are eager to work together in the Indian Ocean Rim-Association for Regional Cooperation which Australia will chair in 2013 and which the United States has now joined as a dialogue partner," she said.

Mrs Clinton said it was important for Australia and the US to work closely together in the region and said the US had encouraged Delhi to participate more in world affairs.

She also spoke briefly about China, saying she hoped to support China in becoming a "responsible stakeholder in the international community".

The $10 million Perth USAsia Centre is a partnership between the US Studies Centre (USSC) at the University of Sydney and University of Western Australia.

Mrs Clinton said it was her first visit to Perth and she recalled her friend John Glenn's space orbit of the earth in 1962.

"Every light in this city came on to signal support for his mission and I will tell you that he never forgot the gesture of friendship from this city of light, so for me to come here is a dream come true," she said.

Mrs Clinton said it wasn't surprising that foreign investment in Australia was "soaring" including more than $100 billion from the US.

She said Australia was a key focus of America's expanding engagement in the region.

WA Premier Colin Barnett also shared his love of space and joked that as a child he "wanted to be American" and insisted on being called Sputnik, prompting a jovial Mrs Clinton to call him "Premier Sputnik".

Senator Chris Evans joked that his teenage son understood American politics better than Australian politics, highlighting the bond between the two nations.

AAP anr/jfm