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Australia: new government, new research opportunities

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Research trends



Australia: new government, new research opportunities

With a new Labor government instated in Australia in December 2007, changes in research funding policy and procedure were expected. Now, four months into its term of office, the government has instigated a number of reviews of science and technology and is beginning to announce the impact that these will have.

When it comes to opportunities to attract research funding in Australia, there are at least 130 different funding schemes to which academics can apply via the Australian Competitive Grants Register (ACGR). However, universities also receive so-called 'block funding' from the government based on several factors (Figure 1), especially student profile; this includes student numbers and type of discipline.

The Australian Research Council (ARC) is an authority whose mission is to advance Australia's research excellence, to be globally competitive and deliver benefits to the community. In doing so, it advises the government on research matters and manages the National Competitive Grants Program (part of the ACGR), a significant component of Australia's investment in research and development. At the time of writing, the Australian government has suggested that it will preserve the independence of the ARC, for which it has already established an independent advisory council.

Meanwhile, the government has committed to creating a charter for public research agencies including the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, Australian Institute of Marine Science and the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation. The charter aims to identify the responsibilities of each organization to guarantee that they carry them out.

Promoting flexibility

But what do these changes mean for individual researchers and institutions? We ask Professor Alan Johnson AM, industry expert at **Research Management Services International**, to elucidate. He succinctly shares his own definitions of research and innovation: "I define research as turning money into knowledge, and innovation as turning knowledge into money."

He goes on to explain how this applies to the situation in Australia: "The government aims to determine how the national innovation system (the flow of technology and information among people, enterprises and institutions which is key to the innovative process on the national level) should perform in order to improve both innovation and research. In practice, this means two major changes: firstly, there is likely to be a radical shift from centralized sectoral reform to mission-based compacts between the commonwealth and individual institutions. This will promote operational flexibility, and covers education, research and research training, community outreach and innovation. This will

allow universities in particular to negotiate with the government to determine their own research priorities

Secondly, the Research Quality Framework (RQF) project has been abolished. The RQF was intended to be a national assessment of university research based around measuring quality and impact, similar to the UK's **Research Assessment Exercise**. The government has suggested that it will use a more metrics-based system instead. While universities are able to put funds that they had allocated internally for administering the RQF back into research, competition for funding from the ACGR schemes is likely to intensify.

Funding trends

While the overall amount of money allocated to research in 2008 is not expected to rise significantly from 2007 levels, there has been a shift in research priorities over the last seven years. Higher education research expenditure on commerce and management increased by 51% between 2001 and 2005, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The expenditure on Earth Sciences, however, rose far less during the same period: 21% for Biological Sciences, 27% for Chemistry, 17% for Physics and 31% for Mathematical Science. "As a result," Johnson concludes, "Australia may have a significant knowledge and expertise gap in science and technology in the coming years."

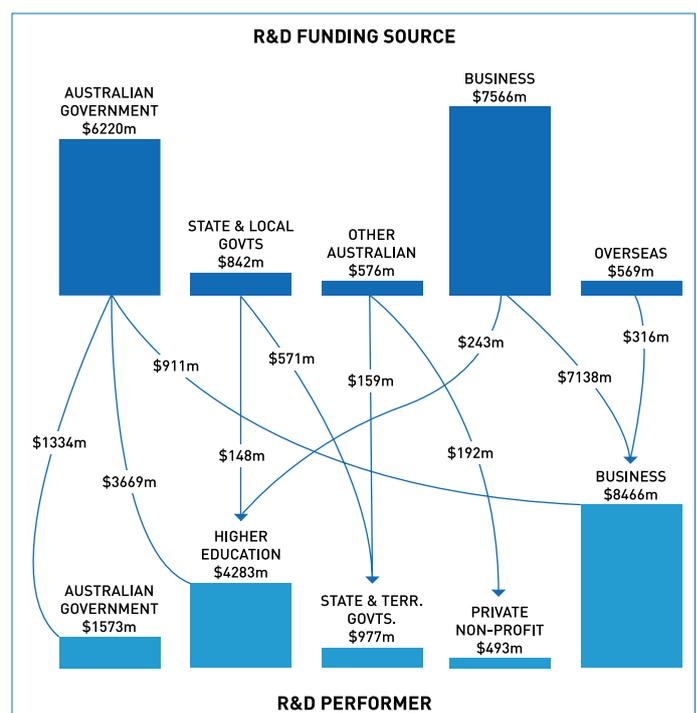


Figure 1 - Apparent flows of funding and spending (in Australian dollars). Source: 'Public support for science and innovation' by Australian Government Productivity Commission, March 9, 2007.