■ MILES G. NICHOLLS, Feature Editor, Graduate School of Business, RMIT University

As a new feature editor for this column, I assure you that we will "cast the net" very widely to cover a diverse set of research issues. I have undertaken to write the first article on a topic rarely discussed at DSI annual meetings. I'm constantly surprised by the fact that even though we academics are connected with colleagues around the world both electronically and through conferences, we know little about how research is funded and managed in countries other than our own. I hope to have research managers from around the world, including the U.S., tell us all a little about their research-funding mechanisms and how they manage the task of encouraging research from their academic colleagues. As always, feature editors appreciate unsolicited submissions, so if you have something you'd like to share regarding research issues, please let me know.
[Miles Nicholls, Feature Editor]

Managing Research in Australia—Challenging at the Best of Times

by Miles G. Nicholls, Director of Research, Graduate School of Business, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia

Managing research in an academic faculty is a difficult task at the best of times. This is made even more so by federal or state governments changing their research funding schemes as well as the type of research they would like to see undertaken (e.g., less theoretical and more industry and business related as in the case of Australia for business schools).

To effectively deal with the complexities of managing research, Australian schools of business often establish an office of associate dean (research) or director of research. While handling change is all in a day's work for these offices, the added complexity for Australian research managers facing their foreshadowed research funding system is that the proposed scheme is the antithesis of the existing one. The key funding drivers for the immediate past primary research funding system, the 'Institutional Grants Scheme' (IGS), were the quantity of publications (irrespective of quality) (10 percent of the funding) together with research income (60 percent of the funding), and higher degree completions (30 percent). This 'quantum' system has been in place for many years and changing academics' research behavior from producing as many journal articles, book chapters, and conference papers they can irrespective of the quality (and being rewarded accordingly) to producing fewer of much higher quality, is a daunting task. To make the task even more difficult, the government that proposed the new scheme has been defeated at the 2007 Australian Federal election, and the incoming government has indicated that it will not implement their foreshadowed research funding scheme. Adding to the complexity, the incoming government has made only vague references to what they intend to replace it with (other than it will be quality assessment)!

It should be noted that while the 'quantum' funding system of the past was not concerned with the quality of

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research per se, many researchers and universities were and strived to achieve excellence. However, the name of the funding game was clearly quantity at all costs.

The Quantum Era

In order to understand the magnitude of what is about to potentially happen in Australia's universities, let's go back several steps and look at what was necessary to encourage research output under the old 'quantum' research funding scheme (which will be phased out in 2008-2009). I should point out that I am only speaking from experience with a business school environment. Other disciplines may have had their own unique problems. In my previous position as director of research (later deputy head research) in a state university in Victoria, my role was to encourage substantial increases in research publications, higher degree completions, and the generation of research income which, of course, required an increase in participation as well as per capita productivity per se. To do this the senior management team of the business school employed some unique carrots and unusual sticks. This business school was in one of the new universities, that is, a former institute of technology which was created a university by an Act of Parliament in 1992 (similar to the conversion of polytechnics in the U.K.). The prevailing approach adopted by many academic staff around this time was to undertake large amounts of private consulting in conjunction with their main university activity (sometimes sole activity), teaching. Tough times ahead for all!

Changing the research culture through changing the research attitudes of academic staff (that is, members of the faculty) was achieved through two main "tools." A Work Allocation Model (WAM) which was devised to provide academic staff an allocation of research time depending on how much they produced (i.e., a posteriori allocation). Additionally, funding for travel to conferences of interest was also used and this increased with output. There was also the provision of an annual research prize ($5,000) which capped it all off. These were essentially the 'carrots.'

The 'sticks' consisted of having to meet an annual requirement of producing at least one 'acceptable' publication each year, for which a block allowance of 250 hours was made available in the WAM each year. Failure to meet this requirement would mean that staff would have an increase in workload the next year of 250 hours, that is, they had to pay back the time. This and the fact that less research inevitably led to more teaching (seen as a 'punishment' by many) spurred on the research. The university and the school had a very short time frame in which to ramp up research output, as the funding was essentially from a finite pool and other universities were also competing very fiercely (a zero sum game). This approach to research encouragement was really management-led rather than a result of leadership or collegially determined change—a time-frame imperative. Quality all through this era, (say, 1998-2003) was very much on the back-burner for this school.

The results of this approach were excellent . . . well, mostly! Per capita research publications increased from 0.2 to 1.6, research participation went from 22 percent of all academic staff to 90 percent, and research income per capita rose 300 percent. Research funding (from the IGS) rose accordingly and this contributed significantly to the financial security of the school. Some unexpected and unwanted behavior occurred as a result of the implementation of the policies; namely, an excessive level of competitiveness, sometimes a mistrust of figures and data, and an expectation that international travel was a 'right' for performance. However, under the circumstances, overall a fair result.

The Quality Era

With the previous federal government's new research funding scheme, the Research Quality Framework (RQF, which was very similar to the U.K.'s Research Assessment Exercise) having been foreshadowed for several years, universities have been re-inventing their research strategies yet again. Even with the change of government in 2007, a quality assessment scheme of some form for research funding is inevitable. Now increases in *quality* and participation are required. Thus having nurtured a culture of "more is better," the new mantra becomes "quality not quantity—and make it high impact research while you're at it." The task before many universities is a huge one with new strategies required for increasing quality in research. While a few of the strategies that were implemented in the quest for increased quantity can form the basis for new strategies in the quest for quality, they cannot be implemented in the same way, that is, by decree. There is a need for a 'democratization' of the quality enhancement process (for more details here, see Cargill & Nicholls, 2007). WAMs cannot simply mechanically increase research allowances for academics since quality is the criteria for success now, not quantity. Hence a measure of quality together with a system for 'negotiating' with staff appropriate research allowances is required. The democratization of research encouragement does not mean abdication by school management, rather more leadership and, strangely, this concept does not sit well with some academic managers. This transition period between quantity and quality has coincided with my new position as director of research in the newly formed Graduate School of Business at RMIT University.

While the Graduate School was new, it was formed mainly with academic staff from other schools within the business faculty. Consequently, there was an entrenched 'quantum' ethos present. As Cargill and Nicholls (2007) point out, the quality enhancement issue requires a great deal of concurrence and internalized motivation from academic staff to effect the quality transition. Superficial compliance and token output is not acceptable. Unless change is seen as being led by the people of the organization affected, rather than

being managed by managers, the organization will reach a "stuck point" (Sturdy & Grey, 2003). A higher degree of collaboration with academics is called for—but not a total hands-off style or a complete democracy. Effectively, this translates to "academic staff need to be *worked with* rather than *worked on.*"

The need for ownership by academic staff and a greater participation stems from the type of strategies that need to be adopted to achieve this quality increase (Sturdy & Grey, 2003; Tsoukas & Chia, 2003; Burnes, 2004). Quality cannot be commanded and quality goals must be made clear and management must create the 'template' by clarifying available resources and unmovable constraints. Mechanisms for open, transparent and actionable discussion must also be available and their use encouraged in the development of the strategies for this change. Strangely enough, academic groups may creatively devise schemes within their own midst to get better quality outcomes in short time frames. An example might be uneven distribution of resources such as time allowances and funds to allow certain colleagues with the greatest potential to chase quality on their collective behalf. School management would have little success in decreeing such a strategy without some degree of hostility and resentment**.** It is also important to continue (in a modified way) much of the support provided by the strategies adopted for enhancement of research output (such as workload model research allocations).

Within the three years of existence of the Graduate School, many of these aspects discussed above have been introduced (to varying degrees) and the results to date are very encouraging, although there is clearly a long way to go. Not surprisingly, I have found that there is one legacy that is proving really hard to eradicate, that of the constant fall back by academic staff to the idea that "more is better." It would seem that we as research managers taught them their first lessons too well and changing research management strategies turns out to be quite a challenge!

Postscript

There are some anecdotal indications from various funding authorities that the quality measurement style of funding research is being looked at in the U.S. as well. I hope that this article has some value for U.S. associate deans (research).

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Submitting articles to *Decision Line*

Members are invited to submit essays of about 2,000 to 2,500 words in length on topics of their interest, especially articles of concern to a broad, global audience. Please send essays (including brief bio and photo) to either the respective feature editor or to Editor Krishna Dhir.

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