Managing University Research: Key Policy Issues

Anthony J. Rodrigues

We examine the pursuit of research in a community of persons that constitute a University. The responsibilities of the different sectors of that community, as well the commitment required of the institution in order that research may flourish are discussed. Some generic principles and policy issues pertaining to university research are highlighted. Finally we outline a case on the politics of a research quality framework in a developed country. A contextual analysis of the case emphasizes the need for and importance of universities having balanced research policies.

1. Introduction

There have been numerous attempts at defining research which is not easy for "research is as elusive as the truth it seeks" [Bonneau & Corry 1972]. Attempts have been made to decompose it into simple elements such as frontier research and reflective inquiry. Other attempts have been made to categorise it into:

- Basic and applied,
- Pure and mission oriented, and
- Fundamental and operational.

However, in all these versions a common spirit of research emerges, which, must stand for the advancement of knowledge through scholarly, scientific and creative activity.

2. Elements of Research

1. **Intellectual Curiosity** whether in response to a problem or simply for new horizons. For example to explain why certain data have the patterns they do; or to discover order in data seemingly without coherence, or to conduct inquiry beyond the boundaries at which data previously known had ended.

2. **Learning.** An advance in knowledge is rarely possible without an understanding of what was known before. This prior learning is needed so that the worker can distinguish between his own difficulty of understanding the subject and those problems in the subject that are without adequate explanation and exist for all others.

3. **Creative mind.** Seeking answers to problems requires a mind willing to apply lessons learned as the work progresses towards its logical or logistical
conclusion. This activity elicits a commitment which motivates the work with a heightened attention to its problems. It is this attention that is creative not the self that researches.

4. **Sustained work.** A high level of energy and uninterrupted time are needed to sustain research. This arduous process may be motivated by the quest for results, however, the intermediate results of the work being a process of trial and error appear to go round in circles often demotivating the worker to the point of exhaustion only for the cycle to start over and over again until there is clarity (order) and the loop is no more.

Research is then an activity pursued by the community of persons that constitute the university. It is useful to consider the responsibilities of the different sectors of that community, as well the commitment required of the institution in order that research may flourish.

3. **General principles of a University’s research policy:**

3.1 Recognises that the international reputation of a university is largely based on its research reputation.

3.2 Remain committed to excellence in research, research training and research consultancy throughout the academic community.

3.3 Prides itself on its vibrant and positive research environment, frequently interdisciplinary in nature.

3.4 Covers the full range from investigator driven research carried out individually or in teams which adds to the international knowledge base, to research consultancies which more directly and rapidly benefit the community we live in. This depth and breadth in R&D provides quality personalised research training experience for higher degree by research students.

3.5 All staff appointed to carry out teaching, research and research training should continue to have the opportunity to do so.

3.6 Recognises the important nexus between undergraduate teaching and research.

4. **Importance of Research to a University**

4.1 The University should recognise that research forms a necessary and vital part of its function as a University. Through its policies and practices, it should seek to encourage the pursuit of excellence in the research that is undertaken. The University and its Schools should support areas which demonstrate or hold the promise of showing excellence.

4.2 The University should recognise the importance of research for assisting in:

- achieving the national and international goals of enhancing the quality of life and enhancing wealth creating potential;
- promoting an academic and intellectual ethos within the institution;
• ensuring relevance and vigour in the courses, and enthusiasm among the staff in the institution;
• attracting and retaining staff of the highest calibre;
• promoting and supporting excellence in undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, and providing a platform for future development of courses at these levels;
• promoting and developing excellence in postgraduate study;
• enhancing the reputation of the institution, its Schools and the staff therein;
• enhancing the level of external income to the University;
• promoting relations with local, national and international partners, including industry, business, commerce, governmental organisations, professional bodies, educational establishments, charities and the community in general.

5. Key Policy Issues

5.1 The University should attach considerable importance to research for the reasons given in section 4. All Schools should have some opportunity to undertake research, although the level of support for and expectation of Schools may vary selectively over time and between Schools.

5.2 Within the context of selective support, the focus of decision-making about the balance of research and other activities for a School, its disciplines and its staff should lie within the Schools. It is here that knowledge of available resources and expertise is most detailed and where strategic and operational objectives are set.

5.3 The University and its constituent Schools should consider that excellence in research, teaching, consultancy, professional practice, course development and management merit parity of esteem.

5.4 While recognizing that individual staff will be suited to different parts of this range of activities the University does not expect that all staff will be engaged in research as defined in section 6; although it does expect that all staff will be engaged in scholarship.

5.5 The University has the ultimate responsibility for taking an overview of its research portfolio and, through a Research and Consultancy Committee and the strategic planning process, should, where appropriate, negotiate with Schools on the balance of their activities. The priorities as they relate to research should be set out through the University Corporate Plan, which should be monitored through the Annual Operating Statement.

5.6 Schools will be encouraged by the University to be selective in the areas of research that they pursue, harnessing and developing the talents of the researchers available to them in the most effective and productive way. Schools will be expected to produce updated strategic plans annually; to monitor the activities contained therein; and to submit a copy of these plans to the Research and Consultancy
Committee annually. Schools should also make public their criteria for deciding how individual staff will balance their time between research, teaching, and other activities. All academic staff, including those on fractional contracts, should have the opportunity to be judged against these criteria.

5.7 The University should both encourage and, where possible, facilitate Schools and researchers to seek innovative opportunities and areas for research both within and between traditional disciplines.

5.8 The University should recognise that research requires resources including adequate time and space. With regard to the resources available and within the context of the overall priorities and selectivity policies agreed by it, the University should provide the Schools with enabling resources, and should monitor Schools in the use of these resources. In turn, Schools should be in the best position to advise on how best to distribute their available resources in order that the aims given here are realised to the best and most efficient effect.

5.9 The University should recognise that the aims given cannot be shown to be achieved unless quality research output appears in the public domain or, in the case of sensitive material, as confidential output. It is expected that such output will be the normal result of research.

5.10 The University should commit itself to providing effective, efficient and equitable support for researchers, via the infrastructure, on such matters as holding and publicising data on funding sources and research opportunities, advising on research bids, publicising the University’s research successes, advising on research expenditure, administering the enrolment and progress of research students, publicising and co-ordinating internal and external policy matters related to research, and performing a central research co-ordination role in general.

5.11 Through School Research Committees and the Research & Consultancy Committee, the University should monitor the implementation of this policy. It will also review research performance, and the use of research resources through a Research Degrees Board, the progress of research students. Performance Indicators should be published against which progress can be measured, and an annual report on these matters be produced.

5.12 Ethics approval of research projects and monitoring of ethical practice in research will be carried out through Schools and the Research Ethics Committee, on behalf of the Research and Consultancy Committee. A report from the Research Ethics Committee on its activities will be submitted annually to Research and Consultancy Committee. A Research Ethics Code of Practice should provide further guidance.

6. Definitions

6.1 The University should recognise that ‘research’ includes a number of activities which share the property of being innovative:
• basic research, which is experimental or theoretical and aims at acquiring new knowledge or offering new interpretations;
• strategic research which is potentially applied but is in an area where the eventual applications are not clearly specifiable at the time;
• applied research which is work undertaken to acquire new knowledge and is directly aimed at practical and applicable objectives;
• near-market research which is innovative work aimed at generating or partially generating a specific product, artefact or idea for the commercial market;
• creative work, particularly in the arts and allied subjects;
• advanced pedagogic research of the type acceptable in national assessment exercises, including innovative research into teaching methodology and development of the curriculum.

6.2 It should be recognised that a continuum exists between these forms of research, and that all are equally commendable activities in pursuit of the University’s research aims. However, it is also recognised that the availability of external funding for research may have the effect of giving preference to certain of these activities.

6.3 The University should also recognise that other related activities are either required or are equally desirable and valid in a School or staff portfolio even though these are excluded from the strict definition of research:
• consultancy mainly aimed at revenue generation through standard testing or standard application of methods;
• substantive consultancy which uses research expertise (not simply routine methods or tests) on a contractual basis in order to achieve a specific contracted goal;
• scholarship* whose purpose is to update staff in subject developments, which in any case is required of all staff;
• necessary or voluntary professional practice which is non-innovative;
• routine curriculum updating and routine updating of teaching methods, both of which are required of all teaching staff.

* Note: There is often a different meaning given to scholarship i.e. work intended to expand the boundaries of knowledge and understanding within and across disciplines by the analysis, synthesis and interpretation of ideas and information, making use of a rigorous and documented methodology and which results in publications of various kind.

Plans to introduce a national research quality assessment scheme for Australian universities were abandoned following the election of a Labor government in November 2007. The cost, however, was high as tens of millions of dollars were spent by the
Managing University Research

Labor’s Acting Minister for Science and Innovation said the new government would abolish the “flawed research quality framework scheme”. It would be replaced by “a new, streamlined, transparent, internationally verifiable system of research quality assessment” see [Maslen G. 2007].

The decision to assess research being conducted in Australia’s universities and other public research organisations was announced by the former Conservative Prime Minister in 2004. An expert advisory group was established and headed by the late Sir Gareth Roberts, who had earlier led a review of Britain’s research assessment exercise in 2003.

A report by the group in 2006, said that fundamental to the research quality framework model was the importance of review by peers and qualified end-users. Sir Gareth Roberts said “My experience in the United Kingdom clearly demonstrates that the only system which will enjoy the confidence and consent of the research community is one based on expert review. I am pleased that the Australian research quality framework (RQF) will be underpinned by this vital principle” see World University News 2008. The report endorsed RQF outcomes influencing future research block funding for universities and stated that the proposed model, once implemented, would establish greater transparency regarding the quality and impact of publicly-funded research.

With the scheme intended to begin in 2008, universities prepared to compete for the A$550 million (US$500 million) in additional research funding. The result was that hundreds of academics faced losing their jobs in a massive staff restructuring with those regarded by their bosses as less active in research were likely to be made redundant or forced to accept teaching-only positions. At the same time, top researchers were being poached from other universities in Australia and overseas with offers of $250,000-plus a year salaries - double the usual amount a professor might earn. Entire research teams were lured from competing institutions in universities around Australia.

By the start of 2007, several universities had already conducted audits of the research strength of their academics, with staff ranked on a one to five scale and those scoring a one or two told they would not be included in the assessment exercise and could face teaching-only careers or retrenchment. Australia’s largest university, Monash, was accused of ‘culling’ its academics in a bid to boost its research strengths by offering lecturers with poor research records voluntary separation packages. One critic claimed 300 staff had cleaned out their offices at the end of 2007 after accepting a $10,000 bonus to quit, although this was more related to a sharp fall in IT enrolments.

In early 2007, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), which represented a majority of the nation’s academics, warned that there was widespread anxiety on campus about the impact of the scheme and that stress levels among academics were high and rising. In a survey of NTEU members, across the sector, the union’s research coordinator, found many instances where academics had been ‘leaned on’ to leave or bring forward their retirements. The union lobbied the then Labor Opposition to abandon the scheme if it won office. With Vice-chancellors also opposed to its immediate introduction, the Labor Opposition agreed and, with the election landslide the RQF became a lost cause.
The newly elected Labor government said it would also address the inadequacies in current and proposed models of research citation. Labor’s model would recognise the contribution of Australian researchers to Australia and the world.

The lessons learnt from this case are that the interpretation and implementation by some universities of the Research Quality Framework appeared to be in conflict with:

- the general principles cited above:
  - 3.5 All staff appointed to carry out teaching, research and research training will continue to have the opportunity to do so;
  - 3.6 Recognising the important nexus between undergraduate teaching and research;
- the generic policy issues raised above:
  - 5.3 namely that excellence in research, teaching, consultancy, professional practice, course development and management merit parity of esteem; and
  - 5.6 that inter-alia Schools should make public their criteria for deciding how individual staff will balance their time between research, teaching, and other activities.

The need for and importance of Universities having balanced research policies cannot be underestimated.

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