29 July 2016

Go8 response to the new research block grant arrangements for universities Consultation Paper – May 2016

Introduction

The Group of Eight (Go8) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department of Education and Training consultation on the implementation on new research block grant arrangements for universities.

As the consultation is highly technical in nature the Go8 response will be limited to key points and some additional specific issues from the consultation paper identified as important. Individual Go8 institutions may provide specific feedback to the full range of consultation questions.

Go8 Key Points

1. **Simplification of the research support block grants.** The Go8 supports the increased transparency and the clear incentives in the simplification and flexibility of the new research block grant for research support.

2. **Low indirect cost funding.** The Go8 remains concerned that the level of funding in the Competitive or Excellence portion of the Research Support Program represents a level of support for the indirect costs of undertaking Australian Competitive Grants research that is unsustainably low.

3. **Extra research block grant funding.** The Go8 applauds the injection by the Government of an additional $50 million each calendar year indexed from 2017 through the Research Support Program to increase incentives for engagement with business and end-users.

4. **The removal of ERA performance as a funding driver.** One of the stated key objectives of the current reforms is to support the delivery of world class research. As such, results from Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) – Australia's respected international benchmarking of research *performance* – should be a key indicator in the Research Support Program block grant.

   The previous use of ERA in the allocation of (part of) the SRE block grant was cumbersome and opaque and the current reforms seem to be a missed opportunity to include ERA performance in a simplified and more meaningful manner.

The University of
Western Australia

Monash
University

The Australian
National University

The University
of Adelaide

The University
of Melbourne

UNSW
Australia

The University
of Queensland

The University
of Sydney

These reforms also represent a missed opportunity to include ERA results as an indicator in the allocation of research training funding – as advocated by the Go8 in the response to the review of the research training consultation[1].

While Category 1 income earned is widely consider a proxy for research excellence it is, at the end of the day, an *input* measure to research and not a designed *performance* measure of research, as is ERA.

5. **Greater institutional autonomy in research training.** The Go8 welcomes the consolidation of the RTS, APA and IPRS into the one Research Training Program (RTP) block grant and the resulting institutional autonomy in research training. The previous arrangements which saw the number, duration and funding level for both the APA and IPRS scholarships centrally controlled was a barrier to institutions strategically managing their research training in alignment with institutional priorities and also introducing innovative research training practices.

While the final arrangements for research training are still to be determined (through the current consultation process), the end product will be greater autonomy for institutions which is critical for Australia.

Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students represent around 65%[2] of reported researcher FTE in Australian Higher Education and are critical not only to the Higher Education research effort in the national interest but by their future role in driving innovation in Australian business.

6. **Proposed 10% cap on use of Research Training Program funds for international students**

The Go8 does not support a 10% cap on RTP funding that can be provided to directly support international students.

HDR training for international students is a mechanism for attracting top intellectual talent to Australia, forging future international research connections for Australia, addressing quality HDR student shortages in key disciplines - particularly STEM – and as an instrument of soft diplomacy for Australia.

Driving Australia's $19bn international education industry is the brand of Australian universities – and most particularly the Go8 institutions – as representing world class, research, innovation and higher education. To maintain and enhance the performance that underpins this brand requires international collaboration at the postgraduate, postdoctoral and researcher level with prestige research intensive universities and networks of universities across the globe.

7. **Grandfathering of research training arrangements.** The proposed changes to research training arrangements while long overdue provide significant transitionary challenges for universities, particularly

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[1] Go8's response to the Review of Australia's Research Training System
https://www.go8.edu.au/publication/go8s-response-review-australias-research-training-system
[2] ABS Research and Experimental Development, Higher Education Organisations, Australia, 2014
http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/8111.0

with arrangements to be in place by the start of 2017. For this reason the Go8 strongly recommends grandfathering arrangements that see currently enrolled HDR students complete their degree within the framework in which they enrolled and the new arrangements applying to students commencing from 2017 onwards.

Specific issues arising from the consultation paper (numbering as in the consultation paper)

2. *Research Support Program (RSP)*

Issue 2: Measuring Performance

- The Go8 acknowledges that with the increased flexibility in spending of the RSP over the previous arrangements that a requirement for accountability exists. However, the suggested measures of the number of researchers and research support staff supported directly or indirectly by the RSP; the type and number of research outputs directly or indirectly supported by the RSP; and the number of research projects supported directly or indirectly by the RSP are unworkable.

  The increased flexibility with which the funds may be spent acts against being able to report in this way. Trying to do so would not only introduce a significant internal reporting and systems upgrade impost, it would also potentially result in "gaming" of the reporting for best effect.

- It may be practicable to report on the percentage of research supported by the RSP undertaken in ERA rated areas of world class or above – depending on the administrative load of the specific reporting mechanism. This would build in a welcome link to the quality of research activity being supported.

3. *Research Training Program (RTP)*

Issue 4: Eligibility criteria

- The Go8 agrees broadly with the simplification of eligibility for support under the RTP to the four points identified in the consultation paper.

  In addition, the Go8 would observe that the removal of Honours equivalent as an eligibility requirement is positive in giving greater pathway options and is more reflective of the reality of HDR recruitment. However, to accompany this eligibility requirement institutional processes for candidature confirmation must be rigorous and options provided for a "graceful" pre-completion departure from HDR studies;

Issue 5: Benefits

- The Go8 broadly supports the suggested increased flexibility for stipend levels to allow a greater level of support for topics/students aligned with institutional/national priorities, for disadvantaged groups and for high living cost locations.

Issue 6: Length of support

- The Go8 recommends that institutions have the discretion to set the length of support for a PhD at four years on a case-by-case basis (rather than the 3 years plus two possible extensions of six months suggested in the consultation paper). This would allow for structured programs that have an extended industry engagement component, a broad career development program or other genuine requirements for extended candidature.

  With this flexibility, institutions should be careful of setting an expectation that the length of a generic PhD is four years, although the 50% loading of HDR completions in the RTP allocation formula should mitigate this risk.

- There should be flexibility in conditions to allow HDR students greater opportunities to work – both inside and outside the university. However, in doing this great care must exercised to ensure that this increased flexibility does not distract the HDR student from the primary activity – research – and does not impact on completion times/rates.

- There is a need for clarity on whether HDR candidature (and stipend) may cover the period post thesis submission and pre the approval of the degree. It is suggested that institutions be given discretion to extend RTP support post thesis submission if in this period they are undertaking approved industry placement/training.

Issue 7: Application, selection and offer processes

- The Go8 supports that domestic HDR students be offered RTP support for scholarship support through a transparent competitive, merit based process determined by the institution. Tuition support for domestic HDR students should not be required to be subject to a competitive process.

- The Go8 suggests the same process for international students – that is a competitive process for allocating scholarships but not for tuition support from the RTP.

Issue 9: Continuing students

- As noted in the Go8 Key Points section continuing HDR students should be grandfathered under current arrangements and the new arrangements apply to students commencing from 2017 onwards.

Issue 10: Measuring Performance

- Higher Education Providers face significant internal systems issues in obtaining comprehensive completions data for reporting. Before this level of reporting could be considered there would need to be precise and negotiated definitions of the data to be collected to ensure cross-institutional comparability

- Stipend level reporting is sensible – but again, as with completions, consideration would need to be given to the precise structure and details of the reporting.

- The Go8 supports the reporting of HDR data tagged with Field of Research code for each student.

- The Go8 acknowledges that it is important – in the context of the National Innovation and Science Agenda (NISA) and the ACOLA review of research training – to report on industry engagement. To make this practicable and useful reportable categories of industry engagement will need to be both well-defined in a broad sense and allow for flexibility in the particulars of the engagement activity.

4. Measuring Engagement

Issue 11: Removing HDR fees

- The Go8 accepts the removal of HDR fee income from Category 3.

Issue 12-14: Changes to sub-categories of Categories 2-4

- The Go8 supports the recommended changes to reporting sub-categories in Categories 2-4 – subject to a sharpening of the definitions of reporting categories.