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A case for Global Research Compacts

The Federal Budget's launch of the transition to fully funded research has been strongly welcomed by the sector. It addresses a plethora of problems within Australia's universities – broadly associated with the 'politics of cross-subsidies' – which were caused by the chronic failure to cover the indirect costs of research. As these impediments diminish, it will be easier for our universities to develop and pursue distinctive missions. This will be further helped by a move to develop far better data on what it actually costs to do the different things that universities do. As a result it will be much easier for universities to plan and deliver rational resource allocations.

However, this has implications for another feature of the contemporary university research landscape: the transition to viewing international engagement as part of the core business of doing excellent research. No longer just an 'optional extra' to domestically-oriented research, it is now seen as a pre-requisite to delivering useful social, environmental and economic outcomes from our research.

Effective international work is a 'productivity multiplier' – it allows for economies of scale and scope to be exploited together with reduced duplication of efforts. This is particularly important when major global challenges exist for which urgent coordinated national responses are important.

As it is becoming easier for core research funding to support

international cooperation, dedicated funding to support international research cooperation is being reduced. Researchers should therefore be given the 'room to maneuver' in quickly setting up cooperative links by using their core research funding – and to be far more relaxed about how much of their budget they spend on international

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cooperation. This is preferable to the additional red tape associated with 'add-on' funding for international engagement, which is often not fit for purpose because the lead times are too long and the synchronization with overseas funding rounds and procedures is poor.

International cooperation becomes 'endogenous' rather than 'exogenous'. However, with the move to fully funded research this raises an interesting issue:

Cutting-edge research that is fully funded must provide adequate support for international engagement.

How can this be achieved in practice?

The distinctive missions associated with Compacts, which the

Government has proposed as a mechanism to provide universities with a more flexible and outcomes-oriented funding policy approach, may be helpful here – and not just within Australia. Globally, there is a growing challenge in developing and governing major multilateral research collaborations and perhaps there is a role for Global Compacts that intersect with more nationally focused Compacts. A Global Compact targeting a particular research objective would provide a mechanism via which an international network of universities and government agencies could support the (pooled) additional costs of mission-oriented research based upon international cooperation. In most cases, as current experience tells us, this sort of arrangement just needs to facilitate exploiting latent synergies between existing – already funded – research. Whilst a small amount of additional funding may be required, this effectively leverages existing funding in various countries and multilateral programmes.

Global Compacts could be formed via inter-governmental agreements and would benefit from the existence of standard legal templates defining how the financial and intellectual property arrangements would be executed. For instance, one species of Global Compact could be specifically designed to interface with the European Union's Framework Programme for Research and Technology Development – reducing the risks and transaction costs of participating non-EU nations.

On a national level each university would be free to define its own distinctive mission – to include strategic participation in specified Global Compacts. Funding for the full costs of research would then be able to factor this participation in Global Compacts into the equation via the university specific Compact.

In the current transition to fully funding the cost of research, with international cooperation as part and parcel of the model, I see no reason why Australia could not also be seeking to play a catalytic role designing the architecture for a system of Global Research Compacts. This would 'future proof' the current reforms.

I propose a two-pronged approach of:

1. leaving a window open for a system of domestic Compacts for universities that will be able to interface with a system of Global Research Compacts; whilst at the same time
2. pursuing multilateral discussions over what an effective system of Global Research Compacts could look like.

As a start, an option to participate in the EU Framework Programme built into the new system of Compacts in Australia could provide a core of discretionary funding to each university (based upon track record). This funding would allow for 'agile' and strategic allocations by that university to provide for its researchers to participate in future Framework Programme projects.

The Forum for European-Australian Science and Technology cooperation (FEAST) is actively investigating these issues. We have advocated the establishment of an International Bureau, based upon a model developed in Germany, for improving how we handle the wide range of Australia's international cooperative activities – including inter-governmental aspects. For instance, we are currently embarking on a major 'stocktake' evaluation of the benefits, costs and the risks associated with Australia's current pattern of research cooperation with Europe. This will contribute to discussions of the value for money that Global Research Compacts might represent. Details of the stocktake evaluation are listed on the FEAST website*, where also interim findings will be placed as they emerge. The exercise is expected to conclude at the end of 2009.

*www.feast.org