

# Australian Technology Network

FIVE UNIVERSITIES: ONE VISION



Curtin University  
of Technology



University of  
South Australia



RMIT University



University of Technology,  
Sydney



Queensland University  
of Technology

## Research Funds in Quandary

With the Federal Government's reforms to university operating grants now moving into the implementation stage, the attention of policy makers is turning once again to research. It is only four years since major changes were made to general university research funding, and some five years since health and medical research was reviewed and boosted following the Wills Report. Both sets of reforms are now under review. While there are many important matters to be canvassed in the current process, there are three broad areas which stand out. First, the level of private investment in research and development in Australia is woefully low. Second, the level of public investment falls far short of our national capacity to undertake high quality important research, and third, we lack a clear and coherent set of policies about the best way of distributing resources for research among our universities.

The last of these points harks back to the arguments raised at the beginning of the Federal Government's reforms of last year about building a few select "world class" universities which could compete with the richest and best universities overseas. Submission after submission to the Nelson Review revealed the facile nature of that proposition, though it persists in some of the rhetoric about "concentration and selectivity" in research funding.

The ATN group of universities has no quarrel with the need to allocate scarce research funding to the most promising research, indeed as newer universities we have greater levels of concentration and selectivity in our internal research funding than is the case with most older universities. However we strongly argue that Australia also needs diversity in the type and location of university research. We must certainly engage with the international research scene, but we must also be realistic about what we can afford and what we need.

Further, Australia has many social, economic and environmental issues which need innovative approaches and research attention. On the economic front, Australian industry is notoriously reluctant to invest in research and development, and while many positive moves have been made to bring business and universities closer together in research there is still a long way to go. In the UK the Blair government has been so concerned about poor levels of business research that it commissioned the Lambert Review of business-university collaboration. It is noteworthy in this respect that business research and development intensity in the UK is nearly twice that of Australia. The Lambert Report late last year paid particular attention to the problems for

university-business collaboration in having one arm of policy concentrating university research resources in ever fewer institutions. The solution is not to abandon selectivity on the basis of merit, but to provide greater diversity in public support for research in light of the many different public policy goals of research.

The ATN places a high priority on research conducted in practical contexts. This may mean a greater focus on applied and collaborative research with industry. One very good example of this lies in the profile of the ATN's research students. As well as the typical younger student pursuing training in academic research, ATN universities support significant numbers of older, part-time students who undertake research projects in parallel with their employment. Often such research is devoted to projects which are designed to introduce greater innovation in the student's workplace. There is no linear and sequential path from research to innovation – in many cases application is an immediate and core part of the research.

In addition to research highlighting collaboration with industry and the professions, ATN universities are also leaders in opening up new research fields and disciplines such as in the creative industries, and in bringing together diverse areas of academic research to work on practical problems. The research work of ATN universities thus contributes in a powerful way to the diversity of Australia's national system of innovation.

If Government, business and industry are serious about their commitment to the national research and innovation agenda, there needs to be an increase in infrastructure funding to levels of international comparators and an increase in research funding through the Australian Research Council. The fact remains that the ATN's research capacity has grown because we have rewarded performance and targeted funding to key strengths.

The ATN strongly supports the allocation of research funding on the basis of merit, with periodic review to ensure that patterns of research activity align broadly with the knowledge needs of our society.

Universities develop and evolve over time, and different universities have much to offer. The ATN group, with its strong and primary focus on the generation and application of knowledge in areas as broad and diverse as engineering, environment, information technology, biotechnology, allied health and creative industries, exemplifies many of the goals of research policy that have been articulated by government and industry.

Our challenge is to see that the mechanisms of research funding support, rather than work against, these goals.