

Review of the National Innovation System

Individual Submission – Mark Ellis, Sydney

Declaration of Interests and Affiliations

Macquarie University:

Manager Research Office
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Other Organisations based at Macquarie University:

Member of the Management Board of the Children and Families Research Centre
Member of the Grants Panel of the Labour-Management Studies Foundation

I recently moved to Australia and into research management after 20 years in the commercial sector, eight of those years in general manager positions. I have degrees from Westfield College and Imperial College, and an MBA from the Cranfield School of Management.

Submission

As a “professional manager” I have been struck by the enormous opportunity that Australia has to streamline its policies, structures, management and administration of research funding along the entire value chain. I am equally struck by the apparent lack of leadership within the sector to define and drive these improvements.

Australian researchers and Australian research institutions are encumbered with layers of rules, regulations and administrative requirements for in excess of many of their overseas colleagues/competitors. They are also, in general, less well supported by competent managers, administrative resources and IT systems.

These issues are cultural, pervasive and cross organisational boundaries. The solution would be multi-faceted, difficult and require strong leadership.

As a start, I suggest that some specific initiatives might include:

1. Simplification of grant application and post-award management activities, looking at processes both from the researcher through to the awarding body, and through the full lifecycle of the research project. Let researchers be accountable for their planned outcomes not for how they achieve them, and minimise transaction costs.

2. Simplify and streamline the requirements relating to international collaborators on Australian funded research, including pre-approved bi-lateral agreements for IP.
3. Require that universities embed into their quality process the requirement to regularly review and improve administrative burdens put upon researchers and upon researchers with management responsibilities – this review should be conducted from the perspective of the researcher not from the perspective of the organisation and should consider administrative burdens imposed by all levels of the organisation.
4. Encourage leadership in research management through encouraging industry bodies to define career paths and by enabling them to award scholarships for management training at all levels.
5. Review the data required at researcher level to support grant applications, government reporting, quality evaluation and university business processes and find ways to minimise data duplication and increase accuracy.

To achieve these improvements needs leadership from the managers and administrators from all types of organisation within the sector and interfacing with the sector. That leadership may require some catalysts for it to come about, including the creation of an environment where recommendations for improvements are welcome and are actively considered, and mechanisms for funding those recommendations deemed to be of value.