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Universities SA expresses concern relating to the cuts in funding for research development

South Africa's research system has grown substantially in the last 16 years. Between 2000 and 2010, after a period of relative stagnation in the 1980s and 1990s, the research output doubled. And then between 2011 and 2015 we have seen further consolidation of this growth by between 40% and 50%. The research output in 2015 gave rise to more than 16,000 research output units, which translates to more than 20,000 research papers. It is not surprising therefore that there was such consternation expressed about the changes in the research funding strategy of one of South Africa's key funding agencies, the National Research Foundation (NRF). Why fiddle with a system that works well?

The NRF is just one of a number of funding agencies. While the Department of Higher Education and Training remains the single, largest state research investment arm through its higher education subsidy system, it is by no means the only government department that invests in research. And of course, in certain areas, there is a considerable amount of research funding derived from industry and from international sources.

In several consultations with Universities SA's (USAF's) Research and Innovation Strategy Group, the President of the National Research Foundation, Dr Molapo Qhobela, described in painful detail the pressures that were being brought to bear on the NRF from two key sources.

- The first is to understand how the NRF, as the key research human capacity building state agency is to contribute to the future sustainability of the research system. There are two primary projects here. The first is to ensure the growth and maturation of emerging scholars, many of whom have already obtained their doctorates but are not yet fully developed as research leaders. And the second is to ensure that the pipeline of postgraduate students continues to grow and diversify so that it draws from the broadest possible demographic base.
- The second, and perhaps more pertinent issue, is the fact that the grant making budget of the NRF has come under severe pressure by cuts to its state allocations due to cuts to the budget of its parent Department of Science and Technology (DST). DST's research support investment in 2016/2017 dropped by a percent on its 2015/2016 allocation even before inflation is taken in account and the actual science vote projections indicate that even by 2019/2020, it is unlikely that the shortfall is likely to be made up. The key problem is that these year-by-year shortfalls generate cumulative effects which are likely to cause irreparable damage to the higher education research system in the short to medium term.

What this means is that the critical role of the NRF in generating new cohorts of outstanding scientists is simultaneously severely hampered by cuts to its research grant making budgets.

USAF is deeply concerned by what appear to be structural cuts to the state support of the research enterprise of our universities. The myriad research activities undertaken by the universities are a direct contribution to the public good. They reside at the heart one of the key purposes of the universities: the generation of new knowledge.

It is well established that this also undermines directly the roles of the universities, DHET and the NRF in producing the next generation of scientists. Postgraduate education can only be executed through the performance of research, within existing active and productive research facilities. If the latter are undermined this also undermines the production of a new generation of scientists.

While we understand the arguments and motivation of the NRF to move resources away from what it calls the Incentive Funding for Rated Researchers (IFRR), we are concerned that this will undermine our small but effective research system. Most of the productive research groups, units, centres and institutes are built around strong individual researchers with substantial track records. It is these individuals who will be most affected by this change.

Whilst we acknowledge that the NRF is redirecting a significant proportion of its funding into what it calls the Competitive Programme for Rated Researchers and this may help to alleviate to some extent the significant reduction in the IFRR, our concern is that in a global context where competition is becoming tougher, our small, successful postgraduate and research system is vulnerable to slippage.

The budget cuts to the research enterprise only add to the strain that public universities are already taking due to the great uncertainty and instability that arises from a lack of clear funding policy. The funding pressure being faced by the research function of our universities adds to those resulting from diminishing state subsidies, which, in turn, have added undue pressure on tuition fees. Regrettably, all of these developments point towards greater uncertainty.

USAf will continue to work closely with the DHET, the NRF and with other relevant government departments to monitor and ensure that the core funding for research is not undermined to the extent that irreparable damage is done to the system. This will not only be damaging to our universities but will be damaging to the national projects of nation building, growing the economy, reconstruction and development.

USAf is the representative association and voice of all 26 public universities in South Africa. Its primary purpose is to create an environment in which universities can prosper and thrive in South Africa; thus enabling universities to contribute to the social, cultural and economic development of our country.

NB: This statement was jointly prepared by Professor Cheryl de la Rey, Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of Pretoria in her capacity as Chairperson of USAf's Research and Innovation Strategy Group (RISG) and Professor Ahmed Bawa, USAf's Chief Executive Officer.

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