Research funding: Challenges and contentions

Years ago acquiring funding in order to support research used to be a much easier and uncomplicated process as individuals obtained money from people they knew. When Alexander Graham Bell in the 1870s needed money to develop the first telephone he acquired funding from a wealthy father of one of his students, 16-year-old Mabel Hubbard. Today the pressure to win money for research particularly from the funding bodies with a high-status is incredibly tedious and time consuming. The process of tendering for research bids is a tough road for applicants who have to go through extraordinary lengths to apply for grants, often relinquishing personal relationships and family time. As a result it is not surprising when rejected that academics find themselves extremely disheartened and disillusioned. Funding schemes notoriously generate a great deal of informal complaint and frustration, not unexpectedly with criticisms about bias and wasted effort.

Top researchers may find it hard to flourish in the current system of competition and suspected elitism. While competition can be effective in market terms, it can reduce intrinsic motivation and what is contentious is the fact that when giving feedback funding bodies reserve the right to give very little information or none at all as to why bids were unsuccessful. Anecdotal evidence points to the fact that in some instances because of the overwhelming amount of applications, theoretically of similar quality and potential, the task of choosing proposals amongst the numbers can be so impossible that decisions are made for frivolous reasons, such as choosing those without spelling errors or the age or reputation of the researcher is thought to be more customary. Academic researchers who rely on achieving grants as a career and indicator of research prowess may find themselves to be disproportionately struggling to achieve success.

The problem is increased when it is understood that a large proportion of central funding for some universities is related to research grants. As a result, it may be thought that researchers who achieve significant results with little backing can be esteemed less than those who receive enormous grants but fail to do anything relevant with them. It is a sad reflection on research that academics are unable to thrive because their research is not expensive enough. Research councils should be concerned by the fact that this situation encourages researchers to devise expensive grants rather than economical ones.

In the end, there are important discussions to be made as the problem is not necessarily about increasing the monies for research but how funding is managed and distributed and how funding bodies make their decisions. The criterion for funding grants between the different councils needs to be more responsive to novel research and to develop researchers. Work urgently needs to be done by research funding bodies in assuring accountability and in rectifying the apparent lack of transparency that is so evident when prioritizing grants.