

Falling between the funding cracks

Three years ago, the South African Department of Science and Technology set an ambitious task for the tertiary education sector: a fivefold increase in the approximately 1 200 doctoral graduates being produced by the country (across all disciplines) by 2020. This figure was on an upwards trajectory between 2001 and 2005, and increasing the number of doctoral graduates is something that most of the country's researchers would support, at least in principle, although many doubted that a fivefold increase over fifteen years was a realistic target.

It now seems more likely than not that doctoral production is set to decline rather than increase in the next decade. On page 10 of this issue, Nicola Illing and Mark Gibbons draw attention to fundamental flaws in the funding strategy of the National Research Foundation (NRF), the agency charged with responsibility for financing graduate training in South Africa. In phasing out its Focus Area programmes (for which no new grants will be awarded from 2009 onwards), it is removing the vehicle through which the majority of studentships are currently funded, in addition to the running expenses required to support their research. These programmes are being replaced by 'glue funding', a supposedly automatic annual allocation to researchers, based on their NRF rating, for the duration of their rating cycle; and a 'Blue Skies' programme to fund novel research. Unfortunately, both of these options have attendant problems.

The glue funding model does not inherently provide incentives to researchers to train graduate students (as did the Focus Area programmes). This was pointed out on several different occasions to Albert van Jaarsveld—acting President of the NRF—when he visited universities last year to explain it. But to make matters worse, the model has been implemented in a piecemeal fashion. Last year, the NRF committed itself to glue funding for rated researchers who were not receiving other grants from the agency, including some who really didn't need additional funding: for example, to HIV researchers with huge grants from other agencies; and to humanities and some social science scholars who incur very little in the way of research running expenses. This year, the NRF has awarded glue funding only to A, P and a few B category researchers, as it cannot afford to fund the remainder. The problem is that this remainder

happens to include the foot-soldiers supervising most of the country's postgraduate students—and without funding, they can take on no more. The dogmatic obsession that the current NRF leadership has with its rating system, in the face of all evidence concerning its inadequacies (see www.nrf.ac.za/publications/reviews/NRFInstitutionalReviewReport2005; http://evaluation.nrf.ac.za/Content/Documents/synthesis_report.pdf), sadly will not promote graduate training in South Africa.

New researchers, rated for the first time, and more established ones—whose cycles are beginning, but who do not fall into the rating categories above—are left high and dry, unless they are successful in being allocated funds from the Blues Skies programme, which has only R7 million to disburse this year. Illing and Gibbons draw attention to the fact that grant applications have not been peer-reviewed, despite specific assurances from the NRF in the call for applications that they would be; and there being a turn-around time of six months between applications closing in October last year and awards being announced at the end of April. The problem here is that consequently, decisions are made solely by panels comprising local researchers, who often have obvious conflicts of interest with applicants. It is a lot more difficult to denigrate the application of a competitor if it has been positively-reviewed by a disinterested party than if nothing is on the table.

Is it surprising that government appears to be denying the NRF additional funding, as it has shown that it is incapable of administering the funds it already has in a judicious manner? The problem is that South Africa's research enterprise will be diminished, not just in terms of graduate students not trained, but as researchers who are denied funding opportunities—particularly young researchers, who are worst affected by the NRF's ill-conceived strategy—join the exodus to greener pastures abroad.

The NRF board, now chaired by Belinda Bozzoli of the University of the Witwatersand, should waste no more time in appointing a new president, as the organisation appears to have been in limbo since the departure of its former president Khotso Mokhele in 2006. The incumbent needs to appoint a management team creative enough to look beyond the tired practices of the past in seeking a new *modus operandi* for funding research in South Africa. □