Research Focus and the Strategic Use of Research Resources

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Focussing Research

• Increasingly, universities aspiring to be world-class are focussing their investment in research:
  – directing more support for research to a restricted set of areas of identified research focus
  – providing less support to other areas
• Principal motivating factors:
  – many areas of research are becoming very expensive – difficult to establish and maintain relevant infrastructure in numerous areas
  – getting external funding for research is becoming progressively more competitive, especially for large-scale funding from governments and other sources
    ⇒ universities need to promote their research capabilities in ways that distinguish them from other competing universities

  – some governments have encouraged the universities within their respective higher education systems to differentiate themselves from other universities within the system, in terms of the areas of research on which they are focussed
• However, the process of focusing research can be quite controversial within the university:
  – universities rely heavily on the drive and enthusiasm that researchers have for their research activities, and so any process of focus needs to engage the researchers

Focussing Resources

• Different kinds of resources being used to support research:
  – externally-derived funding for research, often referred to as research income
  – a central university fund specifically set aside for research – a research budget
  – resources which are distributed across the institution – both discretionary funding and the staff time for research
• Any process of focussing resources is, of course, as much about what is not being supported as it is about the areas that do receive support – and may well cause some tensions within the institution
  – important to engage the academic areas of the university in decisions about resource concentration

Flinders University: Strategic analysis in 2002

• Flinders University’s positioning within Australia in 2002:
  – ranked 24th for size out of 38 universities, on the basis of number of academic staff
  – a little over 2% of the staff within the Australian higher education system and a decreasing proportion of this system over time
• Flinders University’s investment in research in 2002:
  – wide range of disciplines across the University
  – attempting to support a wide range of areas of research
  • most of these were under-resourced, compared to what would have been required to establish them as nationally and internationally significant research concentrations
  ⇒ investment in research spread too widely (and hence too thinly)

• Flinders University’s research performance in 2002:
  – decreasing proportion of available external funding for research
  – relatively infrequently playing a leading role in national centres of excellence
• Australian context in 2002:
  – the Australian Government expectation that universities would identify their areas of research focus and invest accordingly
  – government policy shifts away from an emphasis on traditional grant sources towards a broader view of research success
  – increased pressure on traditional funding sources
  – increasing importance of non-traditional sources of research funding

Flinders University: Areas of Strategic Research Investment

• In 2002, Flinders University began a process of identifying a collection of targeted areas in which to differentially invest its research resources
  – the Areas of Strategic Research Investment (ASRIs)
• The process ultimately used to identify the ASRIs at Flinders University:
  – competitive process
  – clear criteria throughout five rounds of consideration of proposals
  – proposals considered by a panel involving heads of the Faculties and external members
  – seed funding (of up to $100,000 per annum for three years) available
  • most ASRIs requested funding for research facilitators

Selection criteria

– the impact on the research activity of the University;
– how it draws on the University’s research capability to define an area which is distinctive for the University;
– how it will benefit postgraduate research students;
– the extent of national or international recognition for our leadership in the area;
– how investment will return benefit to the University;
– the existing research strengths on which it builds;
– synergy between it and areas of education which are distinctive for the University;
– whether the University is likely to be a major contributor in this area for the next several years.
• Initial core funding for the ASRIs was taken from the central research budget
  – reduction in the amount available for Faculties to allocate to research at their own discretion
    ⇒ some Faculty-based schemes for allocating small amounts of research funding were abandoned
    ⇒ significantly more focussed use of internal research funds
    ⇒ much greater alignment of research strategy and strategic allocation of resources

• As the initial, centrally-funded investment in the ASRIs came to an end
  – moved to a model of equal *co-investment* between the central research budget and the Faculties concerned
    ⇒ those ASRIs which continued to be funded were those that the Faculties really supported and at a level which they were prepared to support
    ⇒ even more strategic use of Faculty research funding over time
Impact of the ASRIs

- Successful in lifting the research performance of Flinders University, especially in contract research with government and industry
  - 67% increase in research income over three years
  - 83% increase in contract research income over three years

Summary

- Focussing research is a key strategy for universities to improve research performance
- Issues to be considered when focussing a university’s research activities include:
  - identify the sources of research support which may be concentrated
  - engage the university research community in the process of selecting the areas of focus
• Creation of the ASRIs at Flinders University was successful at three levels:
  – engagement of the researchers in the process
  – extent to which the University’s research resources have been concentrated
  – impact on the University’s research performance