

Applications 'are going the wrong way'

By BRIAN MARTIN

IT'S research grant application time — yet again. As harried academics aim at yet another deadline for grant applications, some begin to wonder whether it's worth all the effort.

Sometimes it seems as if more time is spent applying for money than actually doing research. Surely there must be a better way!

And perhaps there is a better way; perhaps research applications should be made to academics rather than by them.

Here is the basic idea of a quota system. Each university would be funded, as part of its normal budget, to carry out a certain quota of contract research. Any individual or organisation that wanted a particular project done would make an application to the university of its choice.

The applications would be assessed in terms of their social and intellectual value and the capabilities of university staff and facilities. The best applications would be chosen and the research carried out.

This is not as unorthodox as it may sound. Consider students, for example. They apply to universities. Universities select which ones to accept in which faculties. Universities are funded on the condition that they accept and teach a certain number of students.

Imagine the alternative of each university applying to students and get-

ting paid on an individual basis (by the students or by voucher money).

So why shouldn't the same type of process apply to research? Let those who want research done apply to the universities they most want to do it. Heavy industry could apply to engineering faculties, banks to accountancy departments, hospitals to medical faculties, and so forth.

Of course, the best research universities and researchers would be

highly sought after, so the successful applications would have to be very good.

This doesn't mean that all research would be client driven. There would still be the usual opportunities for research following academic intellectual agendas. The difference is that additional funding would be available for client-oriented research.

In the present system, money speaks. Those corporations and gov-

ernment departments with lots of money are able to call the tune for academics in search of a research dollar. In the alternative system, research projects would be judged by their social value, not by the wealth and power of the funding organisation.

In a research quota system any individual or group could apply. This means that the local women's centre, Rotary Club or community group could apply for research to be done. Who would choose the successful applications? It shouldn't be left solely to academics, since they could give undue emphasis to their own career agendas. More suitable would be a series of committees for different subject areas, each having representation from academics and from relevant corporations, government bodies and community groups.

The quota system is not a magical solution to the problem of orienting research to social needs. Monied groups would still have a large advantage in being able to prepare persuasive applications. Furthermore, they could continue to fund their own in-house research. But the quota system would open up the research system, to some extent, to groups that are excluded from bidding for large-scale research.

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