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A strong national university benefits the nation

The Australian National University was founded in 1946 to be different. It was designed to engage in research at the highest international levels for the benefit of Australia. It had special funding arrangements and recruited an impressive array of faculty. And the ANU delivered - rapidly rising to become Australia's leading research university, a university that produced 3 of the 6 Nobel Prizes won by Australians, and its alumni and faculty forming the nucleus of many departments across Australia.

ANU, however, was not the only place that undertook quality research. And while its special funding arrangements engendered tall-poppy syndrome grumbles in some quarters, ANU arguably did a very poor job at engaging and working with the rest of the research community in Australia.

ANU still continues to enjoy the highest overall level of research excellence in the Australia (89% of our disciplines were rated 4 or 5 in the ERA ratings). But as a much smaller institution than, say, the University of Melbourne, it can no longer claim to be the university that has the most research excellence overall.

The winds are blowing the wrong way for the ANU at the moment. Government funding does not cover the full cost of research, so universities need to cross-subsidise research through large student enrolments. ANU, which has a very small student base, is forced to subsidise via our block grant.

There is no direct mechanism that financially rewards universities for excellence in teaching or research. One could argue that excellence can be measured by grant success, but since grants fall short of covering the cost of research, every successful grant has to be subsidized from somewhere else. Grants do not encourage a strategic or long term approach to research. Instead, someone else decides what you get to do. These winds affect not just ANU, but are driving the entire Australian sector towards being big, and mediocre.

For the past 15 years, there has been a major shift by Government toward NHMRC funding over the ARC. ANU has concentrated strongly on fundamental research and social science, so that even its work in medical areas is not well aligned to the new funding in the NHMRC. So while universities like UQ, Melbourne and Monash have been able to soak up this rapidly increasing part of the research spend, ANU has been left behind.

ANU faces the real threat of losing its status as Australia's premier research university as we move towards sameness in the sector. And if that happens, the argument for the very existence of a national university is undermined. And that would be a great tragedy for this nation.

But it is not all gloom and doom – ANU is the smallest and most lithe of Australia’s research universities. It is in our national interest to have a strong ANU. An ANU that is different, that is excellent, and that is judged not just on how it performs nationally and internationally, but how it helps the entire Australian higher education sector perform.

The great universities of the world share three traits: the quality of their education, and consequently their alumni; their research capacity; and their interaction with industry.

ANU has the highest median ATAR (neck and neck with Melbourne) in the country, with more than 50% of our undergraduates from outside our local region. This is an obvious differentiation, and ANU should be attracting nation's best students by providing an education with a difference. ANU should not follow the others by growing student number, but decrease our student numbers select a diverse and excellent student population based on a combination of interviews and ATARs. Students should be encouraged to live on campus in a residential hall where their academic activities are supported. ANU should have small tutorials and the research-led teaching reminiscent of what I see at Harvard, Princeton, Oxford and Cambridge.

ANU remains excellent by Australian standards at research, but we need to strive to be absolutely excellent by international standards. There is no point ANU do anything that is not excellent. We need to continue to review what we are doing at each department, and ask ourselves, "Is this a top-20 department in the world?" If it is not, we need to ask the tough questions: "What do we need to do to get it there?" and if it is not possible to do that, we should be spending our effort in areas we can reach the top 20. If Government continues its emphasis on NHMRC funding, ANU needs to consider how to become part of that research stream, or pay a high financial penalty.

Industry engagement is a long-held conundrum for ANU. I want us to experiment - this is a space where we should be willing to be brave. There is an obvious discussion. The CSIRO Black Mountain facility is on our back-door step. Combining our campuses, making joint appointments, having joint scientific projects would make both groups stronger, and would instantly help bring a culture of innovation to the ANU, and bring our vast expertise to CSIRO.

If we are going to focus on excellence and differentiation, then we are going to need support from the Federal government. This means policies that encourage excellence in teaching, excellence in research, and encourage industry engagement. These changes will benefit the entire sector, What the country wants is a rich and vibrant sector which grows in international stature together.

Professor Brian Schmidt AC