



# Letter to the editors

## Receive an ARC Grant, or give up research

With passing years it becomes ever more important to secure an ARC grant. Government funding formulae now dictate that Universities receive research funding on the basis of three indicators: external research grants; research student completions; and refereed publications. The Universities, behaving like rational players in a rational market-place, respond by trying to encourage exactly those outcomes from their staff. My University does this by defining “research active” staff according to these criteria — thus fulfilling another government requirement to make such a definition and specify the benefits given to staff who satisfy it. Workload hours for research are then just one of the benefits allocated to “research active” staff. It’s all perfect common sense.

The problem is that this logic applies a formula intended to measure global output across the University, to the local output of an individual. An indicator used to represent a level of output across an institution is mis-applied to the particular output of individual researchers. Even if it can be argued that the application of this formula globally results in a fair distribution of funds, it is only because the discrepancies between fields may be averaged out to some extent. This does not happen in individuals.

In many fields of mathematics, there are few external grants apart from the ARC Discovery programme. At the same time, research student numbers are limited. This leaves a very simple equation for staff not in

a position to recruit research students: publish a lot, and get ARC grants. Fail to do either of these, and you lose the time allocation to do your research. Of course, publishing a lot is itself a precondition for ARC success.

Thus it is, that in order to be given time to research, many mathematicians are obliged to obtain an ARC Discovery Grant.

The irony is that for many of us, the sort of money involved with an ARC grant is not really essential to a research programme (I find myself in the unfamiliar position of agreeing with Imre Salusinszky [1]). Not every researcher or research programme really needs a post-doctoral researcher to achieve results. For the most part what is actually required is the simple combination of time together with relatively small sources of funds to enable visits to and from colleagues and participation at conferences [2].

The other side of all this is that of course, we are all human beings with lives to live. The pressure to increase research output (to get a grant, to be able to research) has to be balanced with other commitments to family and friends. Despite many of us feeling a quasi-religious calling to mathematics, we are unavoidably part of the great “work–family debate”. I wonder if the price of these funding rules and Universities’ responses to them might be that those who don’t get funded choose “family” and resign themselves to careers heavier in teaching. If it is, then the loss will be the middle class of Australian mathematics researchers.

## References

- [1] Imre Salusinszky, *Grant us time, not cash*, The Weekend Australian, 8th April, 2006.
- [2] Generalizations here are scrupulously based on the casual gathering of anecdotal evidence.

Andrew Francis

School of Computing and Mathematics, University of Western Sydney, Locked Bag 1797, Penrith South DC, NSW 1797

E-mail: [a.francis@uws.edu.au](mailto:a.francis@uws.edu.au)