

Research grant mania

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Commonwealth funding formulae have caused Australian universities to become obsessed with maximising external research funding. Considerable pressure is applied to faculties, departments and scholars to apply for funding, and relative success in attracting it is given excessive weight in evaluating research performance. This may be productive in disciplines that require large amounts of research funding. But it can have many negative effects, especially in other disciplines, such as:

- a. it is a grossly inaccurate method of evaluating research performance
- b. the inundation of the ARC with excessive numbers of grant applications
- c. the diversion of funding from applicants who desperately need it to those who have much less need for it
- d. an enormous waste of time and effort on doomed grant applications that would have been better spent writing books and journal articles
- e. the giving of excessive weight to “grantsmanship” at the expense of substantive scholarship in determining appointments and applications for promotion
- f. subtle distorting effects on research agendas, as projects are devised in order to attract income rather than for their inherent interest and importance, and consequent damage to scholarly morale and enthusiasm; and
- g. the distortion of research agendas across entire disciplines.

I have taught law in a leading (Group of 8) Australian law school for twenty-five years. Over those years, various pathologies have come to afflict universities in Australia. One is the current manic obsession with maximising research funding from external sources, especially the competitive research grant schemes administered by the Australian Research Council (ARC). I have no quarrel with the ARC. Its various grant schemes provide invaluable assistance to many researchers in this country, from which I myself have benefited on several occasions and hope to benefit again in the future. My complaint is with the way that research income is misused in evaluating research performance, and setting research objectives within our universities. I am concerned with problems that are systemic to the sector, and from what I hear, are worse in many universities other than in my own.

Until about 15 years ago, legal scholars seldom applied for research grants or other external research

funding. The vast majority, even of the most prolific and eminent, had little need for it. Their research required a good library, a well equipped office, opportunities to meet their peers at conferences and on sabbatical leave, and plenty of time for reading, reflection and writing. Sometimes a modest amount of research assistance was useful. All of this was usually provided by their universities. There were exceptions: a small number of scholars relied much more heavily on research assistants for library research. But most found that assistants were of little use, because their own deep knowledge of the field was essential both to locating relevant material, and to analysing it effectively. Some legal scholars conducted empirical research, and did require expensive assistance in organising and administering questionnaires, tabulating results, and so forth. Those who needed additional funds for research or other assistance were free to apply for it. Others were equally free not to do so. My impression is that this was also true of

the conduct of scholarship in other disciplines within the humanities.

The situation today is very different. Faculties and departments, including law schools, now apply considerable pressure to their scholars to apply for research funding, because university managements apply the same pressure to them. Universities set 'targets' for the amounts of research funding that faculties and departments – and sometimes, individual academics – must attempt to raise. The performance of scholars in attracting research income is given enormous weight in determining appointments and applications for promotion.

This change seems to have had two causes. Both have to do with the colonisation of the humanities by the methodologies for conducting and evaluating empirical research in the 'laboratory disciplines' such as science, engineering and medicine, and also some areas of the social sciences. There, it seems, most research has been carried out by teams of academics working with postdoctoral staff and PhD students, often using expensive equipment. Large amounts of money have been the life-blood of this research, to fund postdoctoral fellowships, doctoral scholarships, salaries for laboratory technicians, and the purchase of equipment. Since most researchers had to compete for that money, which was awarded to those with the best track records and most promising projects, success in attracting it came to be used as one measure of their achievements as researchers, and of their department's or faculty's success in fostering first rate research.

One of the causes of the recent change is that many researchers from these disciplines, when promoted to senior managerial positions within universities, did not sufficiently appreciate that their own familiar research methods were neither followed nor appropriate in some other disciplines. When only a small number of scholars have any need to apply for large amounts of external research funding, and most therefore do not compete for it, it makes no sense whatsoever to use funding as even a relevant – let alone a weighty or mandatory – consideration in evaluating scholarly work in that discipline. In these fields, the quantity and – much more importantly – the quality of a scholar's publications are the only relevant criteria.

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The other and more important cause of the change is that the federal government – partly because of the undue influence of the sciences – began to use relative success in attracting research income, and especially competitive ARC grants, as the predominant criterion for the allocation of large portions of some annual government funding to universities. The actual fruits of research – publications – were given minimal weight, and the funding supposedly needed to produce publications was given inordinate weight. Research 'inputs' counted far more than its 'outputs' – which is like assessing the quality of casseroles not by tasting them, but by adding up the costs of their ingredients.

Consequently, comparative success in attracting external research funding also came to be heavily used to rank universities in terms of research performance. Since both funding and prestige are vital to universities, they naturally responded by adopting policies to increase their success in attracting research income. Their internal policies adopted the same science model for evaluating research and distributing funding to faculties and departments, which were all required to attract more research income.

[R]esearch . . . is a means of defining value and manufacturing symbols of excellence. It is a primary source of institutional prestige and income: in its most prosaic form, research is the pre-eminent 'numbers game' in the Enterprise University. Research management's objective is to succeed in that numbers game (Marginson and Considine 2000: 133).

The universities' initial responses to these government funding formulae were often not rational. Research in law schools, for example, was often condemned as second rate simply because legal scholars applied for and attracted tiny amounts of funding compared with physicists and engineers. Universities tended to compare apples with oranges. They later adopted a somewhat more sophisticated approach, using 'benchmarking' in which the performance of faculties and departments is compared with that of their equivalents – their 'comparators' – in other Australian universities. This was an improvement. But while benchmarking compares each discipline with its com-

parators, rather than with unrelated disciplines within the same institution, it does so by applying uniform criteria much more suited to the laboratory disciplines than to others. In other words, while the universities no longer compare apples with oranges, they compare apples with apples according to criteria that only suit oranges. As Professor James Allan argued recently, 'applying a hard-science, money-guzzling model to . . . the humanities and to law [is just] plain dumb' (Allan 2008). When I tell friends at prestigious law schools overseas how our research is evaluated, they react with either horror or hilarity.

Since this kind of benchmarking was introduced, objections that research performance in law cannot reliably be measured and compared by reference to research income are always met with the rejoinder: 'but look at how well Law Faculty X is doing - it is bringing in much more research income than your faculty - and if it can do so, why can't yours?' This simply misses the point. That Law Faculty X has been more successful in repositioning itself to benefit from arbitrary funding formulae, by mimicking the laboratory disciplines - whether by hiring more researchers with a genuine need for grants, or by persuading more staff that they really do want grants, or by coercing or cajoling them to apply anyway - is irrelevant

to the question. The question is whether or not Faculty X produces more and higher quality scholarly publications. It may well be that Faculty X does so - but the research income it attracts provides no relevant information on that score whatsoever. Even if it were of some relevance, the numbers of competitive research grants awarded to the discipline of law nationwide are too small to provide a basis for statistically meaningful comparisons. In comparing two law faculties, which both employ 60-70 academic staff members, the fact that one regularly receives three or four ARC grants per year, and the other one or two, is surely close to meaningless as a measure of the quantity and quality of their research overall. Yet their relative performance is in fact evaluated on that basis.

In any discipline, scholars who could benefit from research funding should be encouraged and assisted in applying for research grants. External funding can obviously assist research greatly in many ways. But encouragement is not coercion, and the object should be to

increase the quantity and quality of published research - not to increase research funding for its own sake. Funding is now often treated not as a mere means to an end, but as the end itself. Marginson and Considine (2000: 135-36) conducted detailed research, including interviews with research managers in Australian Universities, and concluded that:

Our task was to find out how research matters were dealt with at the level of institutional governance. It seems that regardless of their private commitments, the primary task of research managers is not to encourage research and scholarship as ends in themselves. Nor is it particularly to encourage practices based on imagination, criticism, or other scholarly values. The bottom-line is the research prestige of the university and its contribution to the financial balance sheet. . . . Crucially, the means to research (funding) has become both the measure of its value, and the end to be sought.

This is perhaps too harsh: in my experience, some research managers sincerely believe that increasing research grant applications and funding, and enhancing

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research performance, are one and the same thing. But that is a mistake. For many disciplines, the current obsession with research income is objectionable not only because that income is not an accurate measure of research performance (Mar-

ginson and Considine 2000: 167-68). It has many other undesirable consequences.

First, the ARC is now so inundated with applications for funding that it has been forced to contemplate methods of reducing the burden on its time and resources. But it does not yet seem to have considered one obvious method. The inundation is thought to be the natural consequence of the inherent desirability of research funds and the prestige of winning competitive grants. No doubt it is, in part. But it is also a consequence of bureaucratic pressures, and of artificially inflated prestige generated by misguided government and university policies. As Marginson and Considine discovered, 'Everywhere we found the same relentless pressure to raise ever more research monies' (Marginson and Considine 2000: 144). If all this pressure were removed, especially in the humanities, the number of applications would undoubtedly fall.

Second, funding that would be better used by those who desperately need it is sometimes diverted to

applicants who have much less need for it, and in an ideal world would never have bothered to apply for it. This wastes precious resources. Some feel obligated to think of ways of spending money they do not really need. ARC Discovery Grants require applications for a minimum amount of \$20,000 per year, and it is often difficult for some scholars in the humanities to think of ways to spend that much money. As one of my most promising younger colleagues once said, 'I don't want money to pay someone else to do my teaching, because I like teaching and believe our students should not be short-changed, and I don't want research assistance because I must do the research myself. So please tell me what I should be spending money on?'

One might have expected that productive scholars would be praised for making no demands on community resources for their research, other than what universities have always routinely provided (libraries, offices, salaries, sabbatical leave, etc). Instead, they are now often treated - for that reason alone - as second rate researchers. As the distinguished biographer Philip Ayres has reported:

There's an animus in the humanities faculties against producing books with minimal cost to the public purse, and most books produced in the humanities do not require the sort of funding appropriate to research projects within the sciences in terms of staff and equipment. A humanities colleague I know very well, in a university I need not name because this could have happened in any of them, was strongly criticised by his head of department for expressing publicly, in an application for a personal chair, his satisfaction in the fact that his books had been produced on only small ARC grants of under \$10,000 (or no ARC grant at all); he had never needed large ARC grants (which run up to well over a quarter of a million dollars each) to research and write his books and had never once applied for one.

He told his departmental head that he preferred to undertake his own research rather than employ a research assistant whose work he would have to check anyway, and he was given to understand by this head of department how deeply the suggestion was resented, on the relevant committee, that there was civic virtue in scholarly frugality. Did he not realise that the government demanded of Australian universities that their performance assessments of individual staff be based not just on the books they produced and the reception of those books, but very considerably on the securing of large ARC grants? Was he casting aspersions on his colleagues who had applied for and secured such large grants?

If he wanted promotion he would have to delete that paragraph in the next round, and it would help no end if he could say he was applying for a large ARC grant. It sounds like something out of Book III of *Gulliver's Travels*:

My close informant said he thought about this for a while, weakened, put in his application a second time - then out of self-respect withdrew it and retired early as he'd always wanted to do. The last thing he needed was a large grant (Ayres 2006: 20).

This is not an isolated complaint. In a stinging critique, Malcolm Saunders (2006: 9) said of research managers:

It does not matter to them that in many disciplines research might require a lot of time but only a little money. In fact, those who are able to do a lot with very little are barely tolerated. The more commercially-minded managers - and they are on the increase - want research which requires and generates money, not that which can be done cheaply... While the ordinary citizen cum taxpayer might think such researchers are giving good value for money, the manager is far more likely to consider that they are letting down their section of the university by not contributing to 'the bottom line', which can only be measured in dollars.

Nor is the problem confined to the humanities. Marjinson and Considine (2000: 150) quote a scientist who complained that:

The University makes much more fuss of Professor [name] getting one million dollars a year from [a pharmaceutical company] than someone else being elected to the Academy of Science. What ought to be prized are the people who travel vast distances on the smell of an oily rag. The people that are prized are those who get large amounts of money and blow it away in expensive programs that may well be quite unproductive.

Third, a huge amount of time that would have been better spent writing books and journal articles is now wasted in writing grant applications that have little chance of success. The success rate for ARC Discovery grants is usually between 20 and 25 per cent. So between three-quarters and four-fifths of applications received are doomed to fail. Each of them may have taken a month of work to prepare, time that could have been spent writing something for publication. No doubt many of these applications would have been submitted anyway, but without the current bureaucratic pressures on scholars, many others would not.

Fourth, the proven ability of scholars to attract research income is given excessive weight in determining appointments and applications for promotion. To quote Allan (2008) again, 'any Australian legal academic looking for a job overseas would be judged on his or her publications and teaching, full stop. It would be irrelevant that the Australian Research Council had given that person a few grants'. This is not the case – any more – in Australia. Advertisements for professorial chairs now sometimes state that past success in that regard is an essential prerequisite for appointment. A majority of the most distinguished legal scholars of the past would not, in those circumstances, be appointable. Lesser scholars who have proven adept at 'grantsmanship' would be preferred. (I should note that in my own university, to the credit of our senior research management, it is still possible in some disciplines to be promoted to a chair without having attracted significant amounts of research income).

It will no doubt be said in response that those distinguished past scholars would, were they working today, have no difficulty adjusting to the current requirements for research funding, and their scholarship would still flourish. That response is flawed. It assumes that there is some good reason why productive scholars should have to adjust to these requirements, but none is given. Moreover, eminent retired scholars with whom I have spoken express contempt for the current requirements, doubt that they could have abided them, and relief that retirement has spared them from having to do so. One of Australia's finest historians, recently retired (not from my university), sent me this message:

A person appointed now to a tenured post is expected to make an ARC application almost immediately. I found the subjects of my books by having a few years to teach, read and reflect. I grew into my topics instead of having to announce them to a timetable and to always have a grant being applied for or spent. To write them I needed small sums for travel and some research assistance.

Fifth, the current system can affect the morale and motivation of fine scholars negatively – and consequently their achievements. I do not refer only to those unsuccessful in applying for funding wrongly being made to feel they are second rate. The pressure to apply for grants can also have a subtle distorting effect on their research agendas – on the projects they undertake. This is because many scholars know that the kind of research they prefer to do, and what they need to do it, has less chance of being funded

than other kinds. Everyone knows that funding is not based purely on scholarly excellence. It also depends partly on what fields of research are officially deemed 'national priorities', and also on whether or not the subject-matter of proposed research is topical and 'sexy'. Funding decisions are often made by ARC panel members who may be distinguished in their own fields, but have little knowledge or appreciation of some work in different, albeit related, fields. They are understandably more attracted to subjects that strike them as interesting or important, such as those that have been recent subjects of public controversy. Projects about terrorism, Aboriginal treaties, climate change, and so on, are more likely to receive funding than other projects that may seem comparatively dry or arcane. This is not a criticism of government funding or of the way the ARC allocates it. National priorities are perfectly justifiable, as are subjective assessments of relative practical utility. The point is simply that not all areas of research have an equal capacity to attract funding.

Marginson and Considine (2000: 134) were told by a number of researchers that 'they were under pressure to apply for grants outside their main areas of interest and expertise'. The opposite problem can also arise, when scholars are reluctant to move outside their past areas of research, into interesting new areas, because they lack the strong track record of publications that are required to attract grants. And some others prefer not to be locked into long-term projects, because they cherish the freedom at any time to drop the research they have been doing, change course, and pursue tangential or completely new interests. Marginson and Considine (2000: 165) quote a scientist who said:

People like myself who are working in areas which, by and large, don't need funding are being told that it's our duty to the University to seek ARC large grants. I'm applying for ARC large grants, but I won't be displeased if I don't get them because an ARC grant will hurl me into one line of research rather than others that might be more interesting.

All these pressures can have a debilitating effect on motivation and performance. Outstanding scholarship depends above all on scholars having a genuine passion for their subject-matter. The need to design a research project in order to maximise the chances of attracting funding can diminish that passion. The quality of research might then be damaged rather than enhanced. Scholarly morale and enthusiasm can be fragile.

Given the relatively poor remuneration of academia compared with legal practice, the only hope of attract-

ing the best young legal minds to universities is to give them unfettered intellectual freedom to explore whatever problems they find most interesting and important. Their sense of being pressured to redirect their research endeavours in order to enhance their chances of obtaining research funding restricts their enjoyment of that freedom. If they are to be brains for hire, prepared to tackle whatever projects external bodies (whether government or 'industry') are prepared to fund, they might as well go into legal practice, and earn several times an academic salary working on whatever problems are served up by clients. We have not reached that point yet, but who knows what the future holds? Some outstanding young legal scholars have in fact resigned and gone into practice partly due to mounting pressures to apply for unwanted research grants.

Finally, the pressure to apply for research funding can distort research agendas across entire disciplines. As Emeritus Professor Sev Sternhell (2006: 44) (a chemist) observed:

The inevitable prevalence of the Sciences within the ARC imposes an unwanted distorting influence on the Humanities by making, say, historians behave like pretend-physicists: it imposes an inappropriate science culture on the Humanities.

Marginson and Considine (2000: 168-69) have discussed the case of law:

A striking example of the conflict between [generic] research norms and discipline specificity is law. The main manner in which academics in law create legal knowledge is through the preparation of legal case books... They require scholarship more than fieldwork and depend largely on researcher time. Academics in law are under pressure to raise ARC money and thereby boost departmental income... It is easier for a law academic to gain an ARC grant for a sociological or historical project about law – that is, a project outside academic legal knowledge itself – than to gain an ARC grant for preparing a major case book. Thus orthodox research management might actually reduce legal knowledge.

This over-emphasises the 'case book', which includes extracts from judicial decisions that are subjected to analysis. The best legal scholarship generally takes the form of learned monographs and treatises, and articles

in scholarly journals. These include works of a sociological or historical, as well as of a doctrinal or theoretical, nature. But the basic point is sound: the research agendas of legal scholars are no longer determined solely by their own judgments of interest and importance (and who is better placed to make such judgments?), but partly by extraneous pressures to attract research funding.

Some might argue that this is a good thing. They might say that doctrinal and theoretical scholarship, the traditional staple of legal scholars, is too narrow and fusty, and that the new emphasis on research funding has had a healthy influence by encouraging

sociological and empirical research, preferably carried out by research 'teams'. But it would be foolish to presume that sociological or empirical research is necessarily or even generally superior to other kinds of scholarship that have conferred in the past, and continue to confer today, national and international distinction on many of our finest legal scholars. It is the quality of scholarship that counts, not its genre.

'Team' or 'group' research is now strongly promoted, partly because it is more likely to attract funding, and partly because of the undue influence of the model of research that is dominant in the laboratory disciplines. Even there, I am told by friends, this model is now promoted to excess. For example, in some science departments (in universities other than my own), even if people are awarded a three-year ARC grant, they are immediately subjected to considerable pressure to apply for another one, regardless of their protests that they would not have time to properly conduct two large projects simultaneously. They are told that they should assume a more managerial role, and delegate more of the actual research to postdoctoral fellows and doctoral students. The model promoted is one in which the most senior researchers are 'rain-makers', who attract research funding, assemble teams of junior collaborators, oversee (if there is time) their conduct of the research, but have little time for direct, hands-on involvement. This may be a recipe for maximising the scale of research projects, and the quantity of publications. And no doubt in many cases it also results in publications of high quality. But it is absurd to insist that it is the ideal model to which every researcher

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should aspire, even in the sciences. Major, path-breaking discoveries are sometimes less likely to be made if the most knowledgeable and experienced researcher is removed from the front line of research, and confined to a largely managerial role. But I must leave my friends in the sciences to fight their own battles. In the humanities, collaboration within teams can be very fruitful, but bigger is not always better. The 'lone wolf' scholar remains hard to beat, and should not be discouraged or demoralised. The eminent historian quoted earlier also observed that '[i]n the Humanities the larger the budget and the more people involved the more predictable the outcome.' Moreover, in law, first rate postdoctoral fellows (and doctoral students, for that matter) can be very hard to find. The allure of legal practice, offering much higher remuneration and social status, reduces the number of aspirants to academic careers so severely that first rate young scholars can secure a tenured teaching position upon, and often before, completing their doctorates. In this, and in other respects, law differs markedly from other disciplines even within the humanities.

Any decision by a particular faculty to increase the proportion of empirical or any other kind of research undertaken by its staff should follow from a carefully considered review of its research and teaching profiles, instead of being an accidental by-product of a desire to maximise research income for its own sake. By setting 'targets' for the number of ARC grants that members of any discipline should apply for, or the total amount of funding they should secure, university management implicitly claims to know more about what they need to enhance their research than the researchers themselves. That claim is not plausible.

The root of the problem is the government's methods of allocating funds to universities. The response of university managers is unsurprising. They strive conscientiously to maximise the income and prestige of their institutions, and are usually under pressure to meet 'targets' themselves. They expect others to make sacrifices to achieve institutional objectives, even if these include sacrifices to the autonomy, job satisfaction, and productivity (measured qualitatively) of the scholars whose work constitutes the universities' very reason for existing. What is surprising is how many senior scholars even within the humanities have accepted the new research model. There are many reasons for this. Some are apathetic or feel that it is futile to resist; others have retired or been sidelined. Those who genuinely do want large amounts of research funding are

sometimes unable to understand colleagues who do not. Some scholars and departments that have done well in attracting research funding assume that this confirms the superiority of their research, and thereby validates the use of research income as a measure of excellence. They presume that other scholars or departments are making feeble excuses for laziness or poor performance if they question that assumption.

The dynamics of the system are such that probably only a change at government level can undo the damage. But this would be very difficult to achieve. The government reasonably believes that it needs some method for evaluating and comparing research performance. Moreover, it is probably true that at the macro, university-wide level, research income does provide one useful measure of comparative research performance. Problems arise when it is applied at the micro level in relation to every discipline. The Howard Government planned to establish a Research Quality Framework (RQF), involving the qualitative evaluation of the best recent publications of nominated researchers within particular fields of study (although even that exercise was to have been corrupted by reliance on research income). This was admirable in principle, but in practice, was going to be extremely convoluted, time-consuming and expensive. Many universities wasted huge amounts of money, time and energy, preparing the necessary documentation and conducting 'mock' RQF evaluations - before the real exercise had even started. The RQF was abandoned as impracticable. It has been widely taken to follow that there is no alternative but to rely on so-called 'metrics', such as journal rankings and research income. The new government has handed the task of developing new methods for evaluating research performance to the ARC. The ARC, to its credit, is sensitive to differences between the research cultures of different disciplines. But as the main provider of research grants, it is unlikely to reduce the current emphasis placed on success in attracting them. (Its recent Consultation Paper (ARC, 2008) bears this out).

It is surely possible to establish a tolerably accurate method for the qualitative evaluation of research performance without either relying on simplistic and misleading 'metrics', or being suffocated by the burdens of the RQF. One possibility is simply to ask a large number of eminent professors to assess short lists of the best publications of nominated researchers working within their fields (excluding their own colleagues), and to combine and average their assess-

ments. This would be easier and more accurate than asking a small number of supposed 'experts' to read a massive number of publications for the first time, many of which would not fall within their fields of expertise, because professors are already familiar with many of the publications in their fields. (If university professors are not considered honest enough to do this without strategic game-playing, they could be required to sign a statutory declaration that their assessments will be made bona fide on the merits, and that they will not enter into any collusive agreement with any other assessor or institution). I suspect that the result would be as accurate as any alternative method for evaluating research, and more accurate than relying on 'metrics'. A study along these lines found that 'survey results and the overall performance measures are broadly consistent' (Williams and Van Dyke, 2006: 2). But whatever method is adopted, it is imperative that fundamental differences between the disciplines be taken into account.

I conclude by issuing a challenge to those who would defend the current system: put aside complacent assumptions and disciplinary prejudices, and set out an argument for public scrutiny. To do so, you must choose between three alternatives.

First, you could argue that the pressure now applied to reluctant scholars to seek more external research funding is justified by the universities' legitimate concern to increase their income and prestige, because all their staff have a duty to contribute by putting their shoulders to the wheel (or because it is not administratively feasible to exempt individual departments or staff from the general effort that is needed). That argument is not an unreasonable one, and at least has the benefit of candour. If it is really a matter of maximising income and status, then let us acknowledge this, and not pretend that it's all about enhancing research quality.

Second, you could attempt to argue that research income really is a very important and reliable meas-

ure of research quality – not just at the macro, university-wide level, and not just in some disciplines, but in all of them. That, I believe, will be a difficult argument to sustain.

Third, you could try to argue that all research is likely to be enhanced by the injection of additional research funding – that bigger is always better – and that reluctant scholars either do not know what is best for the successful pursuit of their own research agendas, or are lazy in pursuing them. That argument is likely to be even more difficult to sustain. But it would, at least, be refreshing to encounter a genuine attempt at a principled justification for the current obsession with research income.

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