

Session 4

DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF QUALITY AND CO-OPERATION: STRATEGIES FOR COMPETITIVE GRANTS DEVELOPMENT

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This strategy initiative seeks to improve results for applications to Australian competitive grant schemes, especially ARC and NHMRC against several performance criteria (eg. number of grants, value of grants, and success rate of applications). Grant application activity and competition has increased significantly across the sector in the past few years while available funds have not; no change in this environment seems likely in the near future. As a consequence, universities need to assess the opportunity cost and implications for their reputation of developing and submitting applications. The strategy entails specific measures to assist to develop Faculty research cultures that foster quality and co-operation in grants development rather than quantity and individual competition. Academic leadership and peer support as well as administrative efficiency and effectiveness were seen as significant enablers of the strategy.

All the key activities which are part of developing grant applications were identified through consultation with a range of University stakeholders. The activities included planning and communication, peer support, prioritization of projects, mentoring and peer review, grant writing assistance and budget advice and compliance checking. Primary responsibility for each activity was discussed and then allocated to one of four major stakeholders; applicants, research centres, Faculties or the central Research & Innovation Office. A preliminary 'survey' was conducted of academic leadership and support capability in each Faculty prior to implementation of the strategy followed by face to face meetings with Associate Deans (Research) and research managers to obtain their views. The distribution of primary responsibility for certain activities was adjusted and available expertise and resources were supplemented where appropriate.

While the full results of the strategy will not be known until several grant round cycles have passed, there has been considerable acknowledgement that the strategy is necessary. The extent of the implementation of the strategy varied markedly between Faculties. The willingness of some Faculty leaders to firmly counsel applicants with track records well below known benchmarks for certain disciplines to consider options such as partnering with more experienced applicants or deferring their application while building their track record in other ways was clearly lacking. The difficulty some Faculties experienced in securing the services of external peer reviewers was also evident.

Implementation of a major initiative to shift a University research grant development culture from one which by default rewards quantity and individual competition to one where quality and co-operation are the paramount is far from straightforward. Not only does it take grant round cycle time, but it requires recognition from the outset that significant variations and lags in take-up of such a strategy across a University can be expected. The reasons for the variations between Faculties need to be further investigated but factors such as the nature and strength of the existing research culture and leadership style appeared to have been significant, as did the nature of competition in certain disciplines.

Presenters Biography

Mark Berlage holds postgraduate qualifications in adult education and management and has over twelve years experience in University management roles covering all facets of research business development and administration. He is currently Executive Manager, Research Development, University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) and is responsible for preparing, implementing and

monitoring research development strategy and for leadership of Research Development Team, with particular accountability for leading development of new large, multi-institutional Centres and Networks and international collaborations. He has a further ten year's experience in the finance sector as an organizational development, change management and education and training project manager.