

Grant preparation blowout despite simplified NHMRC process

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A new study shows the time Australian researchers spent applying for National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) project grants last year blew out by a collective 67 years, despite the funding body streamlining its application process.

Published in the *BMJ Open*, the study marks the first time researchers have examined whether simplifying a research [funding](#) application process actually saves times for applicants.

Lead author Associate Professor Adrian Barnett, from Queensland University of Technology (QUT), said applicants spent a collective 614 working years on their applications in 2014 compared to 574 years in 2012.

This was despite the NHMRC cutting the number of data fields in its online form from 180 to 68, which reduced the length of applications from about 100 pages down to about 50 pages.

"While 75 per cent of applicants preferred the streamlined process, the changes obviously didn't have the desired effect - the average time an applicant spent on a publication went from 34 days in 2012 to 38 days in 2014," said Professor Barnett, a health statistician with QUT's Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation (IHBI).

"Those applicants may be spending a set amount of time on their applications based on their expected return on investment, or it could be

driven by increased competition for funding.

"Just like elite athletes whose relative effort in training determines success, increased competition for research funds means that success depends on even more carefully crafted applications requiring more time.

"What's clear is that the streamlined system is still taking up centuries of researchers' time every year on failed applications - as PM Tony Abbott himself told parliament last year, that's time not spent finding cures for disease."

The paper's authors said reducing competition was achievable by either increasing the funding pool - unlikely in the current economic climate - or decreasing the number of applications, which was possible using methods like cooling off periods for unsuccessful applicants or levying a submission fee, both of which are unpopular with researchers.

They believe a better solution would be to use a lottery to select applications that attain a certain standard.

"A lottery significantly changes the incentive on the researcher, as applications could be judged solely on the grounds that they are considered fundable," Professor Barnett said.

"Randomly allocating funds among these 'fundable' [applications](#) reduces the incentive to spend more time preparing.

"The New Zealand Health Research Council is using exactly this approach for its Explorer grants, so there are opportunities to study how applicant behaviour changes with this approach."

Professor Barnett's team has separately created a video outlining the case

for funding NHMRC grants, in part, from a lottery.

He said the video voiced some of the concerns of Australian health and medical researchers who were keen to see the system overhauled.

"There's no magic answer for funding research. Authorities are always going to fund grants that shouldn't be funded and miss grants that should be funded. It's a somewhat arbitrary process," said Professor Nicholas Graves, a health economics expert with IHBI and academic director of the Australian Centre for Health Services Innovation.

"So rather than using a high-cost, work-intensive process to achieve uncertain outcomes, why not use a low-cost, low-effort process to achieve uncertain outcomes?"

The team is calling on the NHMRC to fund additional research that will resolve remaining questions about the best alternative funding processes.

"Spending a tiny proportion of the national research budget on improving the funding process will make the system more efficient, and free up the researchers to make those health and medical breakthroughs that will improve all our lives," Professor Barnett said.

"If we trust that research has the power to improve health, then we should trust that it also has the power to improve [health](#) funding.

The paper, The impact of a streamlined funding application process on application time: two cross-sectional surveys of Australian researchers, was produced by researchers from QUT and The University of Melbourne.

More information: *BMJ Open*, bmjopen.bmj.com/content/5/1/e0AO74VsKK&keytype=ref

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