

New to science and already disillusioned

Sir—Last year I attended a meeting where several representatives from the NRF told researchers at Stellenbosch University that all rated researchers would automatically receive ‘glue’ funding in 2009. I was very pleased about this because I had applied for my first NRF rating and had by that stage realised that the transition from Focus Area to Blue Skies funding (the other major pool of funding open to most researchers) was not going to be smooth.

In the event of the Blue Skies funding falling through, the guaranteed glue funding was my only alternative funding source and was thus essential for my continued productivity as a young researcher. But the guarantee proved false: by the time I received my NRF rating, the NRF had already run out of glue funding after allocating funds only to A-, P- and some B-rated researchers. My next shock was when I received a generic letter from the NRF to say that my Blue Skies application was not novel enough. Despite having asked for feedback on the application, it was apparent that the NRF had not even sent the proposal out for review and had then

taken five months to relay this piece of information to me.

The inability of the NRF to administer and allocate funds properly has huge consequences for the way researchers plan their future work, and the potential ramifications for South African science are sobering. One personal but probably not unique consequence of its blunder was that I had to turn away several students whom I had promised to support on small projects, retaining only one student whom I am now paying from my personal salary. The fact that the NRF could not do simple arithmetic by tallying up the total number of rated researchers and allocating the correct amount of funding, astounds me. Furthermore, the fact that it allocated the funding first to senior researchers who probably need it least, leaves me wondering how they expect less-established researchers to flourish and continue the legacy of a South African research tradition.

Recent correspondence in this journal (*SAJS* 105, 10; 2009) also clearly demonstrates that the NRF has reneged on its promise to review all applications for Blue Skies funding adequately. I attribute this to a lack of capacity/exceedingly poor management at the NRF, which needs to be overhauled as soon as possible. Furthermore, the NRF has not funded all rated researchers as they said they would. Consequently many

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researchers have no funding this year, and have had to dump students because they cannot afford to keep them and cannot meet their research obligations. I am in agreement with the recent editorial (*SAJS* 105, 1; 2009) predicting a substantial decrease in research outputs and capacity building as measured by the number of enrolled doctoral candidates. The present delusional approach to allocating research funds will surely counter the ambitious objective set by the NRF to increase by five-fold the number of South African Ph.D. candidates in the next 15 years. My final prediction is that promising young scientists, whom the NRF has spent so much capital developing, will not languish on a sinking ship. If the NRF intends protecting its investments, it needs to review its present funding strategy rapidly, before young researchers like myself move to greener pastures.

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