

Stormy skies for South African research

Sir—We are concerned both by the strategic decision taken by the National Research Foundation (NRF) to replace the Focus Area programmes (which ranged from the applied to the basic sciences) with a single 'Blue Skies' Programme; and by the manner in which this programme is being implemented. One of us (NI) recently took part in a panel evaluating applications to the Blue Skies Programme; and the other (MWG) declined to serve on a different panel for the same programme on these grounds.

The review process that was followed at the panel meeting attended by NI did not meet the published guidelines for the assessment process for the programme, and contradicted the call for applications, which states:

'All proposals will be assessed in a **two-tiered process**:

- a postal peer-review process where proposals will be sent to four to six reviewers with the intention to receive three review reports per proposal. The postal peer reviewers will be specialist within the ambit of the respective proposals;
- an assessment panel process where the specialist reviewers' recommendations will be considered.'

There was no external peer review for any of the proposals that were submitted to the Blue Skies Programme for funding in 2009. To make matters worse, NI received the research grant applications only 24 hours before the meeting took place, giving her insufficient time to independently assess the novelty of the proposals by checking the international literature on the proposed fields of study.

We are particularly concerned about the criteria defined by the NRF for funding in the Blue Skies Programme. These include

'novelty of the research ... i.e. new fresh ideas, not a continuation of former work; fundamental research (i.e. not applied research); sound science in a clear framework.'

In the discussions about the framework of the review process at the start of the meeting attended by NI, panel members were specifically informed by the NRF that the programme was targeted at new projects, and any research proposals that were a continuation of, or based on, past research proposals were to be excluded. The panel reviewed several grants which addressed important 'basic science' questions, and which gave detailed experimental designs addressing clearly-stated, interesting hypotheses. However, many of these grants were rejected as they were a continuation of existing research, and were thus immediately excluded as they fell outside the scope of the programme as defined by the NRF. The panel was specifically told that the NRF had taken a strategic decision to only support novel research in this programme. We believe that the decision not to consider any research proposals that were based on past research funded by the NRF, no matter how good the proposal, or how scientifically innovative the question being asked, was ill-conceived.

Many productive researchers (in terms of publications and students trained) who applied to the Blue Skies Programme for funding (as their grants had come to an end) will not be funded in 2009. We anticipate that replacement of the Focus Area programmes with the Blue Skies Programme in its current formulation will result in the shrinkage of the research base in South Africa, with an associated decline in the number of papers pub-

lished, and in the number of M.Sc. and Ph.D. students trained. The panel was told that the NRF acknowledges that they are aware that they do not have a plan to deal with productive researchers who will no longer be funded, but that this nonetheless formed part of their strategic process.

The NRF has thus taken a strategic decision not to build on the research base in which it has invested, and which has been built up over the last five years in the Focus Area programmes. The Blue Skies Programme will run for three years only, which is a short time frame to set up an entirely new research direction from scratch. The NRF does not appear to appreciate the time it takes to set up a research programme *de novo*.

The panel was told that the Blue Skies Programme—which covers many fields—has a total funding of R7 million out of the R350 million allocated by the NRF to support research. It was told that all proposals would be funded in full, and that the NRF would cut back on the number of proposals funded rather than limit the size of a grant. This could imply that only between 20 and 30 projects from the entire spectrum of fields covered by the NRFs' mandate will be funded.

These recent strategic decisions taken by the NRF, coupled with their poor implementation, will have disastrous consequences for science and research in South Africa.

NI formally tabled these concerns in a letter to Prof. van Jaarsveld in early February, but has not received a reply.

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