Understanding the cost of university research

Revised draft guidance paper on the allocation of indirect costs to research funded by Australian Competitive Grants
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Chapter 1

Context and background to data collection

The Commonwealth Government funds university research through block grants, competitive grants programs and contract research.

The major sources of competitive research grants are the Australian Research Council (ARC) and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC). The Government publishes annually a list of Australian Competitive Grants (ACG) – see Appendix A. The amount of ACG grant funding received by a university is used to determine the annual Research Infrastructure Block Grant (RIBG) allocation for that university.

Over the past decade, funding from competitive grants has grown considerably and is now the most significant source of research funding for some Australian universities. However competitive research grants meet only a proportion of the total costs associated with undertaking that research. This is because competitive grants are limited in what they can pay for. Competitive grant funding does not make a contribution to many of the services and facilities which researchers use to undertake their work – i.e. the significant indirect costs associated with research projects.

The Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research commissioned the Allen Consulting Group to undertake preliminary work on the costs associated with university research in 2008. The results of the work indicated a potential gap between the indirect costs of research and funding (both competitive grants and supporting block grants) of between 30 and 40 per cent, which is being met by other university funds. The work also suggested that approximately a $300 million investment in the Research Infrastructure Block Grant (RIBG) would be one way of address this shortfall (link to the online report).

The Department has re-engaged the Allen Consulting Group to undertake further analytical work on the indirect costs of university research in 2009. This work builds on the 2008 study and on the approaches of other countries, including most notably the USA (OMB’s Circular A-21), UK (TRAC Manual) and Canada, in identifying and assessing the indirect costs of university research.

The objectives of the current project include:

- The identification of the scale and nature of the indirect costs associated with university research in Australia and the method by which individual universities are meeting these costs.

- The preparation of a definitive list of the indirect costs associated with university research.

- An extensive literature review on indirect costs categories, accounting practices in international universities and the costs incurred in these countries in determining indirect costs.

- The preparation of indicative costing of a composite model for funding the indirect costs associated with university research.
• Identification of the drivers, benefits and obstacles in implementing a funding regime which fully meets the indirect costs associated with university research.

A particular desired outcome of this work is the collection of a body of qualitative and quantitative information from Australian universities that can support the development of a robust and uniquely Australian-tailored indirect cost framework.

This paper outlines some of the key elements required to support such a framework and outlines an initial set of potential indirect cost categories and drivers that might be utilised to allocate indirect costs in Australian universities. For the immediate purposes of this project, these cost categories and drivers, along with a survey of staff time being undertaken by the Allen Consulting Group, will provide the basis for collecting data on and attributing indirect costs incurred by universities.

*It is important to note that the views expressed in the following chapter represent those of the Allen Consulting Group, and not necessarily those of the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research.*
Chapter 2
The nature of research costs

2.1 Direct vs indirect costs

Research costs can be divided into:

- *direct costs* which are directly attributable to a research project; and
- *indirect costs* which institutions incur in supporting research, but which cannot be directly attributed to individual research projects.

Direct costs of a research project include:

- salaries and on-costs of researchers involved;
- project related consumables (such as specialised equipment, chemicals, project specific-licenses/subscriptions). Some of these costs may be covered by ACGs and others may not;
- access to university equipment and services directly charged to ACGs (such as high performance computers and mass spectrometers); and
- other costs specific to the project such as travel to present a conference paper on the research.

Indirect costs associated with a research project include:

- electricity, water and gas (utilities);
- the use of library facilities by the researchers;
- research management and accounting costs;
- cleaning and maintenance of buildings in which the research is conducted;
- information technology and computing services, systems and infrastructure; and
- any other cost incurred by a university which indirectly supports research.

The previous Allen Consulting Group report noted, indirect costs could be in the order of fifty per cent or more of direct costs (i.e. indirect costs are approximately one third of the total costs of a research project). This suggests that for many universities, indirect costs are a significant component of total university research costs, however the government is looking to confirm these conclusions with robust data from institutions with different levels of research activity and at different geographic locations.

Some costs can be classified as direct or indirect costs, and therefore assumptions are necessary to ensure consistent treatment across universities. For example, a cost that can be directly tied or attributed to research activity such as the salary and on-costs of a dedicated research technician will be a direct cost. However in other circumstances, research projects may use small amounts of university technical staff time in undertaking particular aspects of a project. In this case, the salary and on-cost component of technical staff should be classified as indirect costs.
2.2 Estimating indirect costs of ACG-funded research

In this project, the objective is to assess the indirect costs associated with ACGs against an indirect cost framework that comprises robust and Australian-specific indirect cost categories and drivers. Indirect costs of other university research are not under consideration. Figure 2.1 provides an overview of the project’s data collection process.

In order to attribute an appropriate share of indirect costs to ACG-funded research projects, it is necessary to find some basis for allocating costs between the three major functions of universities (research, teaching and other). There are two common approaches used in the UK and USA. The first is based on the relative amounts of time that academic staff spend on each of these activities. The second is based on the actual use of space in buildings. Other approaches use factors which take staff salaries into account.
Staff records of time spent on teaching, research and other university activities inform the method for allocating indirect costs on the basis of staff time. These records are often kept for periods of three weeks each year, where academics are asked to keep an accurate diary of activities. The percentages of this time period involved in research are expressed as fractions of Full Time Equivalents (FTEs) and summed across the university. This sum is then expressed as a fraction of all academic staff FTEs. Thus staff at one university may spend, on average, 52 per cent of their time teaching, 38 percent on research and 10 per cent on other university activities. The percentage of time spent on research is then applied to indirect costs (such as cleaning, maintenance, and electricity) to give cost contributions for each of these services. In this example, the 38 per cent might comprise 28 per cent on ACG-funded research and 10 per cent on other research. This project is focusing on a subset of indirect costs – those associated with ACG-funded research.

The ways that space in university buildings is used may be more appropriate for attributing some indirect costs such as cleaning and maintenance. There are several reasons why this project is not seeking to directly analyse the use of space. Most Australian universities do not have data that would permit the quantitative attribution of space to teaching and research, and obtaining this data would be costly and time consuming. Only a relatively small proportion of indirect costs would be better allocated through space use. USA and UK experience has shown that using FTE fractions (as discussed above) generally produces similar outcomes. This is not to preclude the possibility that, in the future, space could be used as a basis for allocating some costs.

2.3 Principles for identifying indirect costs

Given the considerable level of diversity that currently exists in accounting practices between universities, it is necessary to consider the ‘general principles’ upon which costs can be identified and then allocated to individual cost pools/categories. In the USA these principles have been underpinned by ideas about the US Federal Government bearing the “fair share of total costs ....” (i.e. direct and indirect) (US OMB Circular A-21). US granting agencies interpret this statement to mean that the Federal Government will only pay a fair share of costs, rather than the full costs of federally funded research. This approach recognises that some indirect costs are either too difficult or complex to satisfactorily attribute to research activities.

In seeking to identify and attribute indirect costs in relation to ACGs, this paper adopts an approach which combines relevant features of the US and the UK systems. For a cost to be taken into account in the Australian context, we recommend the following principles should apply:

• Reasonableness – the cost should have a clear identifiable link with ACG research. Its inclusion in indirect costs should be readily able to be defended.

• Materiality – the cost is sufficiently large to be worth including in indirect costs. Attempting to track the cost of very small items is not likely to be efficient.
• Simplicity – less precise methods of determining the contribution of an indirect cost to ACGs may be acceptable when the alternatives are complex and cumbersome.

• Equity of treatment – methods of attributing indirect costs should be equitable between different universities. This means that the allocation of all costs should be transparent and open to public scrutiny.

• Consistency – practices used in estimating indirect costs should be consistent with university cost accounting practices. Comparable transactions should be treated alike.

• No double-dipping – government should not “pay twice” in relation to ACGs and related indirect costs. One of the consequences of this principle relating to estate costs is discussed below.
Chapter 3
Cost drivers and cost categories

3.1 Cost drivers and their application to ACGs

Development of FTE drivers

In this project, we propose to use cost drivers based on the average effort of Full Time Equivalent (FTE) academic staff on ACGs. While cost drivers based on FTEs are used to attribute a number of indirect costs in the UK and USA, they are not ideal in some circumstances. For this reason, space allocations, “foot fall” and other methods are used to allocate some indirect costs in both the UK and the USA. There are several reasons why the current project is using only FTEs. These are discussed below.

It is important to remember that the present project is not expected to result in actual payments relating to indirect costs associated with ACGs – it is simply seeking to develop estimates of the cost to Government revenue of meeting these costs. While we seek to ensure that our estimates are robust, some approximations are necessary in order to complete the project within the required timescale. The eventual payments of indirect costs are likely to be based on more precise data.

Overseas experience indicates that measuring space in university buildings and allocating this space to research, teaching and other activities can be expensive and time consuming. While this may be necessary in the future (as part of activity based costing), such effort is unnecessary for the present project.

Allocation of indirect costs using FTE drivers

The basic assumption being used in this project is that the share of indirect costs attributable to ACGs is based on the proportion of time that academic staff spend on research. This is a reasonable proxy for understanding the level of university resources and services used by ACG researchers.

Staff time keeping surveys provide percentages (or fractions) of academic staff time used for ACG-funded research, other research, teaching and other activities. These fractional FTEs can be used to obtain average proportions of academic staff time used for each of these purposes. Such averages can be calculated for each faculty, but for the purposes of this project, they are calculated for each participating university.

Thus if \( FTE_{ACG} \) = Number of staff engaged in research funded by ACGs (in FTEs),

Total ACG research effort = \( FTE_{ACG} \times \) Average fraction of time on ACG-funded research

The Proportion (P) of indirect costs attributable to ACG funded research, \( P_{ACG} \) can be defined as \( P_{ACG} = \) Total ACG research effort/Total academic staff (in FTEs)
Note that $P_{ACG}$ is salary independent – in other words, all ACG-funded researchers are given equal weight when it comes to their use of university services and resources. In the UK, postgraduate researchers are given a reduced weight in this calculation.

Multiplying the various indirect cost categories by $P_{ACG}$ gives the amount of indirect cost in each category attributable to ACG-funded research. Summing these amounts gives, for each university, a total ACG-related indirect cost. Expressing this as a percentage of total ACG revenue for each university, gives the indirect cost rate (ICR) for that university.

Universities with greater levels of laboratory-based research are likely to have higher indirect costs as a result, and this in turn will generate higher ICRs.

3.2 What indirect costs should be taken into account?

The three main cost categories/pools can be defined as:

- **General overheads.** This category includes those costs which can not be easily attributed to the teaching, research and other activities of universities without considerable complexity or unjustifiable assumptions.

- **Teaching specific overheads.** This category covers administrative functions within universities that are dedicated to the support of teaching. Examples of these include undergraduate teaching learning and support centres, and administrative units that manage the enrolment of non-research higher degree students.

- **Research specific overheads.** This category covers the research only functions within universities that are dedicated to the support of research. Examples, include costs relating to the research office and research ethics committees.

Within these definitions the sub-categories that we are asking universities to attribute costs are outlined below.

**All non-academic salaries and on-costs**

It is important to note that the salary costs associated with the management an provision of services in student residences (which includes catering services for students) should be excluded from this calculation. The main categories are:

- base non-academic salaries
- non-academic on-costs including:
  - non-academic contributions to Superannuation and pension schemes;
  - non-academic payroll tax;
  - non-academic Workers’ Compensation;
  - non-academic long service leave expenses;
  - non-academic annual leave expenses; and
  - other non-academic employee benefits.
These categories should relate to non-academic staff resources that provide corporate services such as payroll, purchasing, research management and in-house financial, legal, marketing, communications and statistical services.

**Costs of maintaining physical university infrastructure**

It is important to calculate only calculate operational costs (such as maintenance of physical infrastructure) on physical university infrastructure (namely buildings and equipment), and exclude other forms of funding that relate to capital improvement (such as refurbishment). Capital infrastructure should be captured under ‘depreciation of university buildings and equipment’.

The allowable categories are:

- repairs and maintenance to university buildings, laboratories and research facilities (both scheduled and unscheduled);
- repairs and maintenance to equipment and systems (such as ITC), that exclude salary costs captured in the discussion above (both scheduled and unscheduled);
- security costs;
- cleaning costs;
- health and safety costs (if known); and
- utility costs (such as electricity water and gas), unless gifted by the government or paid directly by grants.

**Depreciation on university buildings and equipment**

While depreciation on physical infrastructure ideally would only be taken into account for those assets built from non-government funding (such as private donations and investment revenue), the funding source of most Australian university buildings is largely unknown. As such, we propose an approach that allocates depreciation on all university buildings and equipment to the indirect cost framework.

Allowable depreciation costs include:

- depreciation on university buildings;
- depreciation on university equipment above material thresholds;
- [other depreciation and amortisation costs?].

**Finance, borrowing and insurance costs**

This category includes any financial expenditure relating to university activities. Allowable costs include:

- borrowings to finance university buildings and equipment;
- leasing and legal costs associated with gaining access to research facilities that are external to the university;

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1 Allowable costs may be identified as the project progresses.
• external audit; and
• all insurances (including personnel, if not captured above).

Other indirect university costs

Other areas of university expenditure that could be included in the calculation include:

• consumables and office supplies;
• advertising, marketing and promotional costs;
• legal fees (including patent attorney fees);
• complying with laws on animals, biotechnology, etc;
• consultants engaged to assist in sorting out indirect cost claims; and
• [others allowable indirect costs?].

3.3 Issues requiring special consideration

Some costs can include both direct and indirect elements, or require complex calculations in order to accurately attribute them to research from ACGs. There are four main areas that need special consideration.

Major university facilities

The first example is a major university facility shared by university research staff. Animal houses are the most cited example. Some researchers may pay directly (in part of in full) for the use of an animal house from their grant, while other researchers using this facility may not have funds for this purpose. That part of the cost of operating the animal house not directly covered by grant funds should be treated an indirect cost attributable to all research users.

However, assuming that there is no teaching component involved in maintaining animal houses, FTEs may not be the most appropriate way of allocating costs. Instead, these costs should be appropriately shared between researchers. Animal house costs can be significant and the number of users relatively small in relation to total numbers of researchers. Hence the allocation of these costs needs to be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Major national research facilities

Major National Research Facilities are often hosted at a university, but accessed by researchers from a number of institutions. The allocation of costs for these facilities may also need to be considered on a case-by-case basis. However the same approach can be applied – any contributions from ACGs should be deducted from total operating costs before the remaining balance is attributed to other research projects as an indirect cost.

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2 Additional allowable costs may be identified as the project progresses.
**Staff who are partly supported by ACGs**

Some technicians and other staff are partly paid from ACGs. The balance of their costs should be indirectly attributed to other research projects.

**Estate costs**

The cost of office and laboratory space used by ACG-funded researchers can potentially be an indirect cost. This space has sometimes been directly and specifically by Commonwealth, State, or Territory Governments. Under the “no double dipping” principle depreciation should not be taken into account (see section 2.3 for an explanation of this), on recent capital expenditure funded by Government. However where the funding source of older buildings cannot be identified or where capital stock has been revalued, it may be appropriate to record depreciation costs on this space.

Where university buildings have been financed fully, or partially through borrowed funds, the appropriate share of depreciation and interest costs should be included as an indirect cost associated with ACGs.

For all university buildings costs such as cleaning, maintenance and security should be included in indirect costs.

### 3.4 Other issues

There are a number of other issues (outside the scope of this project) that would need to be taken into account when developing an indirect cost framework for Australia. Examples of these issues include:

- the cost differential between laboratory and non-laboratory university activities (such as high, medium and low cost space); and
- the indirect costs associated with chief investigator salaries.
Appendix A
Australian Competitive Grant Register

COMMONWEALTH SCHEMES

Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
Australian Egg Corporation Limited
— Basic and Applied Research Open Call NEW
— Egg Quality Program NEW
Australian Pork Limited — Research and Development Open Tenders NEW
Australian Wool Innovation Limited — Research and Development Open Call NEW
Cotton Research and Development Corporation — Open Call Research and Development Projects NEW
Dairy Australia
— Manufacturing Research Grants NEW
— Research and Development Grants NEW
Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
— Australian Centre of Excellence for Risk Analysis
— Climate Change Research Program Research Projects NEW
Fisheries Research and Development Corporation
— Annual Open Call Round NEW
— Tactical Research Fund NEW
Forest and Wood Products Australia Ltd
— Denis Cullity Research Fellow NEW
— Research and Development Research Grants NEW
Grains Research and Development Corporation
— Grains Industry In-service Training Awards NEW
— Grains Industry Senior Fellowships NEW
— Grains Industry Visiting Fellowships NEW
R&D Open Tender
New Products
— New Farm Products and Services NEW
Practices
— Agronomy, Soils and Environment NEW
— Crop Protection NEW
— Validation and Integration NEW
Varieties
— Gene Discovery NEW
— Germplasm Enhancement NEW
— Pulse, Oilseed and Summer Coarse Grains NEW
— Wheat and Barley Breeding NEW
Grape and Wine Research and Development Corporation — R&D Projects NEW
Horticulture Australia Limited
— R&D General Call
— R&D Industry Call NEW
Land and Water Australia
— Defeating the Weed Menace NEW
— Environmental Water Allocation Open Call NEW
— Innovation Call NEW
— National Program for Sustainable Irrigation NEW
Native Vegetation and Biodiversity Research and Development Program
— Open Call NEW
Social and Institutional Research Program
— Water Planning Processes: Lessons, Gaps and Adoption Call NEW
Meat and Livestock Australia
— Human Nutrition Research Program NEW
MLA Livestock Production Research and Development Program — Strategic and Applied Research Funding NEW

Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation — Research Priorities Program NEW

Sugar Research and Development Corporation — Research Projects NEW

Attorney General

Criminology Research Council — Criminology Research Fund

Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy

Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy — Telecommunications Research Grants

Defence

Department of Defence — Army History Research Grants Scheme

Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

National Centre for Vocational Education Research
— Adult Literacy Research Program
— Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) Research Innovation and Expansion Fund Analysis Grants Program NEW
— National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation Program (NVETRE)

Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts

Australian Antarctic Division
— Australian Antarctic Science Grants
— Australian Marine Mammal Centre (AMMC) Grant Scheme

Australian Biological Resources Study — National Taxonomy Research Grants Program

Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts
— Commonwealth Environment Research Facilities (CERF)
— Marine and Tropical Sciences Research Facility (MTSRF)

Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority — Science for Management Awards

Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs — Social Policy Research Services Agreements

Foreign Affairs and Trade

AusAID — Australian Development Research Awards

Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) — R&D Programs

Health and Ageing

Cancer Australia
— New National Co-operative Oncology Groups
— Priority-driven Collaborative Cancer Research Scheme
Support for Cancer Clinical Trials
— Existing National Cooperative Oncology Groups

Department of Health and Ageing
— Anti-Doping Research Program
— Australian Centre for Hepatitis and HIV Virology Research
— National Drug Law Enforcement Research Fund (NDLERF)

National Health and Medical Research Council
— A Healthy Start to Life for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Children
— Ageing Well, Ageing Productively
— Australia Fellowship Scheme NEW
— Australian Health Ministers’ Advisory Council Priority Driven Research Program
— Australian-European Union Health Research Collaboration
— Capacity Building Grants for Population Health and Health Services NEW
— Capacity Building in Population Health Research
— Career Development Awards
— Centres for Clinical Research Excellence
— Dementia Research Grants
— Development Grants
— Electromagnetic Energy Research
— General Practice Clinical Research Program
— Health Services Research Program
— International Collaborative Indigenous Health Research Partnerships

The Allen Consulting Group
— National Asbestos Centre
— NICS Fellowships
— Oral Health
— Palliative Care Research Grants
— Postdoctoral Fellowships for Palliative Care Research
— Postdoctoral Training Fellowships
— Practitioner Fellowships Scheme
— Preventative Healthcare and Strengthening Australia's Social and Economic Fabric
Primary Healthcare Research, Evaluation and Development (PHCREd) Strategy
— Research Fellowships
— Program Grants
— Project Grants
— Research Fellowships Scheme
— Special Program Grants in Type 1 Diabetes
Urgent Research
— Pandemic Influenza

**Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government**
*Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government* — Road Safety Research Grants Program

**Innovation, Industry, Science and Research**
*Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS)* — Research Grants
*Australian Research Council* — ARC Centres of Excellence
Discovery
— Federation Fellowships
— Indigenous Researchers' Development
— Projects
Linkage
— International
— Projects
— Special Research Centres
Special Research Initiatives
— Thinking Systems

**Commonwealth Scientific & Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO)**
Flagship Collaborative Research Program
— Clusters

**Prime Minister and Cabinet**
*Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet* — Research Support for Counter Terrorism Program

**NON-COMMONWEALTH SCHEMES**

**Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation Ltd** — Research Grants
*ANZ Trustees*
— Judith Jane Mason & Harold Stannett Williams Memorial Foundation
— The JO & JR Wicking Trust
**Arthritis Australia**
Research Grants Program
— Grants in Aid/Project Grants *NEW*

**Australian Coal Research Ltd** — Australian Coal Association Research Program
**Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute** — Research Funding Scheme
**Australian Institute of Nuclear Science and Engineering Ltd**
— AINSE Awards
— AINSE Research Fellows *NEW*
**Australian Primary Health Care Research Institute (APHCRI)**
— Stream 3
— Stream 5
— Stream 6
— Stream 13: Drivers of Successful Primary Health Care NEW
Australian Rotary Health — Mental Health Research Grants NEW
Australian Stem Cell Centre — Australian Stem Cell Centre Grants Scheme
Brain Foundation — Annual Research Awards
Dairy Innovation Australia Limited
Dairy Health and Nutrition Consortium
— Substantiation Stream NEW
Dairy Innovation
— Processes and Products
Diabetes Australia Research Trust — Awards and Research Grants
Geoffrey Gardiner Dairy Foundation — Innovation
Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation
— Islet Transplantation Program in Australia
— Research Grants
Kidney Health Australia — Medical Research Program
Leukaemia Foundation — National Research Program
Motor Neurone Disease Research Institute of Australia
— Grants in Aid NEW
— Postdoctoral Fellowships NEW
Multiple Sclerosis Research Australia
— MSRA Investigator Project Grants
— MSRA Postdoctoral Fellowships NEW
National Breast Cancer Foundation
— National Collaborative Breast Cancer Research Grant Program (Phase 2) NEW
— Novel Concept Awards
— Pilot Study Grants
— Project Grant (formerly known as Kathleen Cunningham Research Grants)
National Heart Foundation of Australia
— Fellowships (Biomedical, Clinical, Public Health, Overseas, Career Development)
— Grants In Aid (Biomedical, Clinical and Public Health) Strategic Research Program
— Cardiovascular Disease and Depression NEW
Pfizer Australia Pty Ltd
— Cancer Research Grants NEW
— Cardiovascular and Lipid Research Grants
— Neuroscience Research Grants
— Research Fellowship
Sea World Research & Rescue Foundation Inc — Research Projects
Sylvia and Charles Viertel Charitable Foundation — Medical Program
The Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists — ANZCA Research Grants
The Australian and Pacific Science Foundation — Research Project Grants NEW
The Australian Cystic Fibrosis Research Trust — Annual Grants for Cystic Fibrosis Research
The Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists (RANZCO) Eye Foundation — National Collaborative Projects
Workers Compensation Dust Diseases Board of NSW — Research Grants Scheme NEW
Appendix B

References


