

Public funding for research projects: roles of experts and finance officials in decision-making

By describing a real-life example, this letter seeks to initiate a debate within the academic scientific community on the role expected of, and played by, the Finance Divisions of the Indian Government with regard to decisions on research project funding.

An academic investigator (referred to below as AI) submitted a proposal to the Department of Biotechnology (DBT), New Delhi, seeking Rs 78.2 lakhs over three years in extramural funding. The proposal included a request for HPLC equipment at Rs 28 lakhs, and it also mentioned that other HPLC equipment was available in the AI's institution. The DBT Expert Committee that had been assigned the task to take a decision on the proposal invited AI for a presentation and discussions, and subsequently recommended that the project be 'funded by the Department at a total cost of Rs 50 lakhs for a period of three years'.

Accordingly, AI submitted a revised budget of Rs 49.9 lakhs in which AI chose to retain the request for the HPLC equipment (a less expensive version at Rs 19 lakhs) and to accommodate the remainder of funding cuts under other budget heads. To AI's shock and dismay, DBT then conveyed its approval for funding of the project at Rs 25.4 lakhs without the HPLC equipment and with other additional reductions, and the AI's plaintive plea for reconsideration of the decision was politely declined.

The complete details on the process of decision-making in this case were then obtained by me, by taking recourse to the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005. Although my initial request under the Act was rejected on the ground that 'the information asked for pertains to a third party', my appeal against this decision was allowed and the information was then released.

In the file notings on the case, an official of the DBT Finance Division had written 'HPLC is available with [the

institution]. No justification for duplicating the equipments. Consumables grant may be Rs 18 lakhs [reduced from Rs 21 lakhs requested by AI in revision]'. The concerned Science Officer of DBT had then gamely defended AI's HPLC request by presenting AI's justification for this equipment (that the two existing HPLC equipment in the institution were being heavily used for other work, and that a dedicated HPLC facility was required for carrying out the proposed work) on the file to the finance official who, however, was unmoved: 'As mentioned above [the institution] has already got two HPLC. P.I. has requested another HPLC as justified by (her/him) on pre-page. In this connection peers review comments on page 53/C may please be seen where it was mentioned that the study proposed in this project is commercially available, hence HPLC may not be required' (*sic*). The DBT Financial Adviser then concurred with the finance official's opinion on the file, leading to the final reduced budget of Rs 25.4 lakhs for the project.

Several questions are likely to arise from this description, the most important one being that pertaining to the relative roles of finance officials and Expert Committee members in taking decisions on whether particular items of expenditure in a research project are, or are not, justified. In this case, for example, the Expert Committee was aware both that the AI's institution already had HPLC equipment, and of the comments of the anonymous peer reviewer that the HPLC may not be required. Furthermore, the Committee did interact with AI at the time of proposal presentation (the details of which are not recorded on the file), before making its recommendation to reduce the budget, but without specifying that the HPLC was not required, thereby ostensibly leaving it to AI to determine the priorities of proposed spending within the reduced budget.

A second question is whether due process procedures ought to have been followed after the Financial Adviser's opinion was obtained, to determine both whether the Expert Committee was in agreement with that opinion, and whether the AI would consent to another budget revision within the overall ceiling recommendations by the Expert Committee of Rs 50 lakhs, but with the HPLC being omitted. It may be mentioned here that DBT did obtain AI's agreement for the final reduced budget of Rs 25.4 lakhs, but most readers would sympathize with AI that it was akin to obtaining consent at gunpoint.

A third question would relate to the additional reduction of Rs 3 lakhs in the budget for consumables that was effected by the DBT finance official. No justification or explanation was recorded on the file in support of this recommendation/decision.

In the absence of a satisfactory resolution of these issues, one cannot but help feel in this instance (i) that the time and efforts of members of the Expert Committee may not have been adequately recognized or valued, since their recommendations after consideration of scientific merits were overruled by the Finance Division without seeking additional clarifications; and (ii) more poignantly, that injustice has perhaps been done to AI by way of a double whammy inflicted through the consecutive decisions of downsizing by the Expert Committee and the Finance Division. Finally, a matter of concern is that examples such as these apparently are less the exception than the norm in the science departments of our Government.

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