

## Extramural research funding

Gowrishankar<sup>1</sup> has raised an issue on extramural research funding and statutory approval/certifications of drugs and pharmaceuticals, vaccines, technical standards, pollution, etc. While the second part of the issue may be debated by relevant stakeholders, the issue regarding extramural research funding by public institutions drew our attention.

The timing of the proposed discussion is interesting though it appears a bit delayed, as the Science and Engineering Research Board (SERB), another central funding body, has already been approved by the Parliament and may be operational very soon. SERB is expected to undertake the mandate so far entirely entrusted to the Science and Engineering Research Council (SERC) in the Department of Science and Technology (DST) – one of the leading S&T agencies of the Government of India, promoting R&D across disciplines. It is presumed that various issues were discussed threadbare and that the proposed discussion on extramural research funding by research institutions could also have been taken up at the conception level of SERB itself.

The suggestion that extramural research funding should be decentralized and that research institutes should be delegated the job of funding extramural research, needs to be discussed in light of the following:

1. Over the years, with a view to strengthening the university set up, a number of steps were taken, which among others, included decentralization of faculty appointments. Voices are now being raised that appointments should be centralized at the national level because decentralization has neither served its stated purpose nor contributed to strengthen the university departments in a way that one could be proud of. Decentralization may, therefore, not be the panacea for many ills that plague our academic and research activities.

2. It is needless to reiterate that knowledge generating, curiosity-driven research to unravel the mystery of nature is best done in the excellent academic atmosphere of a university rather than in a research institute. The curious, energetic and inquisitive undergraduate and postgraduate students of the science stream get an opportunity to develop lateral thinking while interacting with students of social science, language, law, agriculture, literature, medicine, etc., under one umbrella – the university. As the writer points out, the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER) is a step towards this direction although not all of them may have disciplines other than the sciences.

The research institutes, on the other hand, have their own, centrally administered mandate which makes their character highly specialized, specific and much focused in a narrow area. If such institutions administer extramural grants, the apprehension is that the whole exercise may end up as a self-serving one. Research institutions with similar research interest may end up funding or avoiding each other and may create a cartel of vested interest groups impregnable to others. In contrast, a centralized agency has a broader national vision and huge financial resources to realize this vision. A sizable section of scientists may, therefore, still prefer to approach central and comparatively neutral agencies seeking funds for their research ideas rather than institutes which may not be as unbiased discipline-wise as a body like DST or SERB.

3. To draw parallels with the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in the US may not be justified if we consider extramural research funding across disciplines. NIH is a part of the US Department of Health and Human Services responsible for conducting and supporting medical research. It has 27 different institutes and centres, each having its own specific research agenda. Each insti-

tute/centre receives its funding directly from the Congress and administers their own budget ([www.hhs.gov](http://www.hhs.gov)). The nodal responsibility for planning, policy, managing and coordinating the programmes and activities of all the institutes and centres lies with the central office of the Director. We presently lack any similar set up in India. Medical research is supported and managed by more than one organization. Who will have the nodal responsibility for research across various disciplines?

4. Deputing grant officers from DST, DBT, etc. will be tantamount to setting up of mini DST/DBT/SERB secretariats in each research institute and may not be practical. DST's system of extramural research funding, contributing to about 40% of extramural research grant in India, has been appreciated as being very rigorous and robust. The proposed SERB is expected to further improve upon the delivery system.

However, the proposed extramural research funding by research institutes could score over the central funding bodies in: (a) availability of in-house experts to review proposals, (b) assessment of a realistic research budget and requirement of equipment, (c) expanding the research base by reaching the far flung areas of the country, and (d) hastening the process of providing grants by curtailing bureaucratic hurdles.

Notwithstanding any of the points mentioned above, a discussion and debate on the issue is laudable and should be encouraged.

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1. Gowrishankar, J., *Curr. Sci.*, 2010, **98**, 478.

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