

Academic research eroded

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Universities SA, the body that represents the country's 26 public universities, has decried state funding cuts for research enterprises at universities.



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The cuts would undermine the research system and compound the strain faced by universities as a result of the uncertainty surrounding funding policy, warned Universities SA.

SA's research and higher education system is underfunded by the government, with the country spending less than 1% of its GDP on research, placing it behind most of its peers.

The National Research Foundation, which falls under the Department of Science and Technology, announced it would slash funding for rated researchers, citing underfunding by the government.

The foundation is part of a number of funding agencies. The Department of Higher Education and Training remains the single, largest state research investment arm through its higher education subsidy system.

There is also a considerable amount of research funding derived from industry and international sources.

Universities SA says the funding pressure on universities' research functions adds to those flowing from diminishing state subsidies. This would add to pressure on tuition fees.

"While we understand the arguments and motivation of the National Research Foundation to move resources away from what it calls the Incentive Funding for Rated Researchers, we are concerned that this will undermine our small but effective research system.

"Most of the productive research groups, units, centres and institutes are built around strong individual researchers with substantial track records.

"It is these individuals who will be most affected by this change. The myriad research activities undertaken by the universities are a direct contribution to the public good," Universities SA said.

As of 2018, funding for newly A-rated researchers will drop from about R100,000 a year to a one-off payment of R50,000 in the first year of their rating.

Department of Higher Education deputy director-general Diane Parker said at the weekend the department had not yet cut any funding for research.

"The department will continue to work to better support universities to effectively fund their core functions including providing quality higher education programmes, and strengthening teaching, research and engagement," said Parker.

The department had consolidated the old research development and the teaching development grants into a single new grant: the university capacity development grant, she said.

Source: Business Day

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