The Small Grant Scheme: an ongoing need and opportunity for development.

The Vision statement of the UWA 1999/2000 Operational Priorities Plan (OPP) is as follows:

"In the 21st Century The University of Western Australia will be recognised internationally as an excellent, research-intensive university and a leading intellectual and creative resource to the communities it serves.

It will provide a broad and balanced coverage of disciplines in the arts, sciences, and the professions at internationally-recognised standards. It will be characterised by a strong research and postgraduate emphasis across the full range of its disciplines and it will be noted for concentrations of particular research excellence in selected areas of strength, opportunity and importance....."

The OPP goes on to say that a "world-class university is recognisable by its research-intensive culture, and its ability to engage actively in the international processes of learning and discovery".

"...As part of its strategy for achieving international excellence, the University is committed to enhancing its standing as one of Australia's leading research universities and the premier research institution in Western Australia. There are two dimensions to this goal: first, the University is committed to the achievement of high quality research and scholarship, by international standards, across the whole spectrum of its disciplines; and additionally, to the development of special research concentrations, of the very highest international standards, in selected areas of particular strength, importance and opportunity."

So it can be seen that the intention to improve research performance is one of the central themes of the OPP. To achieve this, the University has an important role in generating and facilitating a vibrant research environment. In recent years, the ARC Small Grants Scheme has had a central role in fostering several crucial aspects of that environment. Grants awarded under this scheme have seeded later successful applications for larger external grants. They have fostered international research links and have provided important research experience for staff early in their career.

The small grants scheme was originally designed by the ARC to complement the Large ARC Scheme, which provides support for longer-term projects and typically for established researchers. However, the success rate is low in the large grant scheme (under 30%) and success in recent years has led to average ARC grant sizes that are only approximately 60% of the requested amounts. An important consequence of this inadequate funding is that this institution must have many established researchers who would be capable of producing more high-quality research given extra support. This
complete. As a consequence of the low success rates of the Large ARC Scheme a viable
long-term project may be unfunded for a period after the initial three years. The Small
Grants Scheme could provide interim support to ensure that benefits already accrued are
not lost for lack of funds.

The Small Grants Scheme has also had a unique role. To be competitive in the Large
Grant Schemes researchers require an established track record and one that shows signs
of recent productivity in the targeted area of research. These requirements are
understandable when the goal is to achieve the best short-term (three-year) return for the
country's research expenditure. However, they selectively disadvantage three groups of
staff. The first are staff who are at the beginning of their research careers and
consequently have had limited opportunity for accumulating research outcomes. The
second are those staff members who have had interruptions to their research careers and
as a result have few recent, research outcomes. The third are those established staff that
wish to embark on a new research direction and thus have few, or no, relevant research
outcomes in the new area.

The long term development of both Australia’s, and this institution’s, research potential
demands that schemes are implemented which support high quality, low-cost projects
from staff in all of these categories. The ARC Small Grants Scheme has served this
purpose and it is essential that the need be addressed on an ongoing basis. However the
statistics presented in Table 1 on the operation of the ARC Small Grants Scheme show
that support for this crucial aspect of university functioning is inadequate. The
committees have seen at first hand the many high quality projects that have gone
unfunded due to the relatively small amount of money awarded under the ARC Small
Grants scheme. Funding has been less than 50% of that required to adequately fund those
projects deemed to be of high quality (note the final column of Table 1).

The university has discretion in the amount awarded to this scheme. It cannot afford to
allow research opportunities to be lost at the current rate if it wishes to maintain its
current high position in the table of Australian research institutions (58 unfunded high
quality grants in the last two years). To maintain our research position the University
must provide adequate support for initiatives that start as small projects. Funding in
recent times has not met this need but in this year an additional 1 million dollars is all that
would have been required to have fully funded all grant applications deemed to be of
high quality. An additional 1.5 million would have been required in 1999. The likely
return for such a small increase in investment is large and should be the subject of urgent
consideration in the context of the Operational Priorities Plan.