

Gambling research and the search for a sustainable funding infrastructure

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The debate surrounding the funding of gambling research raised by Morrison's (2009) paper is timely and made some salient observations. Furthermore, the situation outlined is not unique to Australia and is a debate needed in the gambling studies field more widely. Although funding is inadequate almost worldwide, gambling researchers in most other countries would probably regard the situation in Australia as one of the more better resourced.

This paper provides a somewhat personal account of the funding of gambling research in the UK with the aim of highlighting salient observations and further lessons to be learned. I doubt that anyone reading this paper will disagree that the funding of research programs in the gambling field is (a) often politically motivated, and (b) needs to be viable, sustained, and long-term. However, the annual budgeting model is an economic and political reality in most countries and jurisdictions. Furthermore, this is not unique to the gambling research field. For there to be any chance of this progressing, gambling (and people's view of it) has to change and move higher up both the political and public health agenda.

Funding Dilemmas and Conflicts: Some Personal Observations

In this section I outline some of my own general observations about the funding of gambling research. Reading Morrison's paper, it struck me that I am indeed one of those individuals who has for most of my career operated on intellectual passion rather than actual research funding. At my previous university institutions, there was indeed a passive tolerance of my research rather than any active support. I survived for almost 15 years without major grant income. However, when the money started to flow in to my institution, there was a noticeable change in thinking about the value of my research! The informal network model is the model I know only too well and is no doubt reflected in academic departments all over the world.

One of the most fundamental problems that academic researchers face in the UK is that there is a conflict between what their peers and university hierarchy view as beneficial for academic advancement, and what stakeholders outside of the university see as desirable and/or worthy. To progress academically, great emphasis is placed on the publication outlet and the source of funding. Was the work published in a high quality journal? Has the journal got a high impact factor? How often has the work been cited? Who funded the research? In short, most academics are more concerned about their own career progression than whether their research has any applied use and/or impact in the real world. One ageing professor I used to work with was promoted to the very top of the academic career ladder, but his research papers had only been cited nine times in the whole of his academic lifetime! As Morrison points out, academically published papers have much less importance to the gambling industry, whereas research that directly impacts on policy rather than theory is typically preferred by governments.

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For such a situation to change, there is an urgent need to change the academic promotion criteria if academics are to fall in line with what the outside world (including stakeholders in the gambling field) wants.

The biggest hurdle to overcome is the increasing conflict of interest, particularly by those who carry out research that is directly funded by the gambling industry. Almost all “big names” in the gambling studies field have (at some point) carried out research funded by the gambling industry and this often calls into question their academic independence. This appears to be an increasing economic reality particularly in countries like the UK that live by the governmental philosophy of “polluter pays”. One researcher I have worked with (now nearing the end of his academic career) refuses to carry out research if it is sponsored or funded by the gambling industry (even indirectly via our independent funding body because the money is accrued from voluntary donations by the gambling industry). Furthermore, he will not attend conferences that have gaming industry sponsorship and declines invitations to speak if they are held on gaming premises. Although laudable and highly principled, young researchers who now want to pursue a research career in the gambling studies field will almost certainly find that taking such principled actions will become a barrier to career enhancement.

Another major problem that arises from being funded (directly or indirectly) by the gambling industry is that the industry tends to have a large say in what should be researched in the first place. In my view, far too much research is done on individual risk factors such as biological and/or genetic predispositions, personality factors, and cognitive determinants. While this is clearly important research, it sends out the message that problem gambling is solely located within the individual rather than being the result of an interaction between the vulnerable individual, the gambling products, and the gambling environment (Griffiths, 2009a).

Funding gambling research: The UK experience

In the UK, the main funding pot for gambling research is channeled through the Responsibility in Gambling Trust (RiGT). The RiGT is an independent charitable trust funded by voluntary donations from the gambling industry. This primarily stems from the aforementioned polluter pays philosophy. The aim of the Trust is to reduce the likelihood of people becoming problem gamblers, and to increase the likelihood that problem gamblers will seek and have access to effective help. The RiGT was created to commission treatment, education, and research into problem gambling. It was set up in response to recommendations made by the independent Gambling Review Body (aka the Budd Report²) that was commissioned by the UK government in 2001. The Budd Report recommended that an independent charitable trust be set up and provided with voluntary funding by the gaming industry, to research and limit problem gambling. The Trust decided to make progress in advance of the proposed new legislation, and by January 2005 it had paid annual grants in excess of £1 million to organisations providing support for problem gamblers, and public education about the risks of gambling. The Budd Report recommended that the RiGT should be given voluntary donations of around £3m per annum in funding, and that if the industry did not fund the charitable trust, a statutory levy would be introduced.

The current level of gaming industry donations in the UK is clearly insufficient. Even if the industry donated £3 million a year, this equates to only £10 per adult problem gambler—based

² The *Gambling Review Body Report* (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2001) is commonly referred to as the Budd Report, as it was authored by the Gambling Review Body, the Chairman of which was Sir Alan Budd.

on there being approximately 300,000 adult problem gamblers in the UK (Wardle, Sproston, Orford, Erens, Griffiths, Constantine & Pigott, 2007)—and that does not include help for adolescent problem gamblers (Griffiths, 2009b). Three million pounds a year for all research, prevention, intervention, and treatment is inadequate and is small change to a billion-pound gaming industry. Arrangements in which funding for “problem gambling services comes largely through voluntary or mandatory levies on revenues derived from legalised gambling operations and generally flows through major academic institutions and/or quasi-governmental bodies” is accepted practice internationally (Abbott et al., 2004, p. 15). The decentralised node model outlined by Morrison is similar to the RiGT approach in the UK but the UK resource base is inadequate. Furthermore, the vast majority of the money goes on treatment rather than education, prevention and/or research.

A recent review on the funding of gambling research, education and treatment in the UK (Gambling Commission, 2008) concluded that the current arrangements of funding via the RiGT were not working effectively. The report made the case for improved voluntary arrangements to ensure that (a) industry funding is firmly committed, sufficient and sustainable; (b) the Gambling Commission, Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), and other stakeholders have access to expert, independent and authoritative strategic advice on research education and treatment; and (c) the distribution of funds to projects and providers is based on clear priorities with outcomes that are properly evaluated. The Gambling Commission’s most preferred option in the report was for a tripartite structure involving stakeholders working together to put in place voluntary arrangements for fundraising. This they said should comprise a

Strategy Board to advise on a national responsible gambling strategy and set priorities for research, education and treatment, a *fundraising body* (for which the industry would be responsible), and a *new distributor* to ensure the money raised is spent on the priorities determined by the Strategy Board.

However, within the period of the review, the Gambling Commission was not able to secure agreement on their proposals or to obtain satisfactory funding commitments from the industry for the next three years. They therefore recommended to the government that they (a) commence preparations for a statutory levy, (b) endorse the improved voluntary arrangements that the Gambling Commission have recommended and that these should remain on the table for industry and RiGT to take up, and (c) commence setting up a Strategy Board immediately in collaboration with DCMS and the industry. These recommendations are at the time of writing ongoing although the members of the Strategy Board have now been appointed and have had their inaugural meeting.

It is also my perception that in the UK, it has not been uncommon for those working outside the gambling studies field to get the minimal research funding at the expense of more established researchers. The argument used by funders to justify this is one of “increased research capacity”. For instance, in 2007, the RiGT introduced a joint initiative with one of the UK’s leading Research Councils, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Although my own research unit submitted two “alpha rated” research bids (i.e., externally rated as being of the highest quality), both were unsuccessful in gaining funding. In feedback from the (then) CEO of RiGT, I was informed that: “the funding program was not really designed for established researchers like [me]”. Such initiatives have seen UK researchers “following the money” and most of the funding in that cycle of the RiGT/ESRC research program went to research teams with little direct track record in the gambling studies field. Furthermore, after securing the RiGT/ESRC funding, two of the successful teams approached me asking for my help and input as they had put in bids in my areas of particular expertise! It is debatable whether such an

initiative will lead to an increased research capacity as past evidence suggests these teams that “follow the money” tend to leave the field if the funding pots dry up.

Another by-product of the significant increase in funding for gambling research that occurred in the UK is my perception that the relatively small gambling research community went from being strategically collaborative to being far more competitive with each other. Obviously, competitive tendering increases the chances of higher quality research bids but the process does not necessarily enhance collegiality and partnerships within the gambling studies field.

Finally, I agree with Morrison that data access from the gambling industry has to be one of the key ways forward. Remote gambling has brought about the biggest cultural shift in gambling practice and the data from these new ways of gambling needs to be harnessed to help develop good social policy. I have said for many years that gambling companies (with the help of researchers in the gambling studies field) should start using their behavioural tracking data (from player cards, loyalty cards, online gambling transactions, etc.) to help identify problem gamblers rather than exploit them (Griffiths & Parke, 2002; Griffiths, 2003; Griffiths, Parke, Wood & Parke, 2006). Unlike the conventional purpose of customer databases (i.e., to increase sales), the objective here would be to develop social responsibility tools that can detect and help problem gamblers and/or those at risk from developing a gambling problem (Griffiths, Wood, Parke & Parke, 2007).

Concluding remarks

There is very little in Morrison’s paper that I would take issue with, and the arguments relating to each of the advantages and disadvantages of each of the four funding models are well made. My guess is that the future of gambling research funding will be an eclectic mix as it is quite clear there are advantages to be found in each model.

There are of course many reasons why a well thought out funding strategy is needed. These include (a) the high health burden and social/economic cost of problem gambling, (b) that the pathways into problem gambling and gambling addiction and its natural history are not well understood, (c) that new interventions are needed to treat problem gambling, (d) there is a lack of knowledge on the harms of problem gambling, and (e) there are opportunities for translation and partnership. Whichever model prevails, the funding model should look at (a) making better use of existing resources (both expertise and infrastructure), (b) building research capacity by importing new expertise from other countries and jurisdictions, (c) increasing coordination and connectivity between researchers, (d) carrying out innovative, cross-disciplinary studies that will lead to improved public health, and (e) consulting stakeholders in a way that enables them to influence the research themes.

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Gambling funding in the UK: A correction

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Following the publication of my article in a recent issue of *Gambling Research* (Griffiths, 2009), it has been brought to my attention that the joint *Economic and Social Research Council/Responsibility in Gambling Trust* initiative that I mentioned was actually initiated in the 2005/2006 academic year and not 2007 as I had stated. Therefore, the quote from “the (then) CEO of RiGT” was not from Mr Malcolm Bruce (who was the RiGT CEO in 2007) but his predecessor. I wish to offer my unreserved apologies to Mr Bruce for any undue and/or undeserved attention that he may have received as a direct result of my mistake relating to the ESRC/RiGT funding initiative starting date.

Reference

Griffiths, M.D. (2009). Gambling research and the search for a sustainable funding infrastructure. *Gambling Research*, 21(1), 28–32.