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\$160m in export grants allocated within hours

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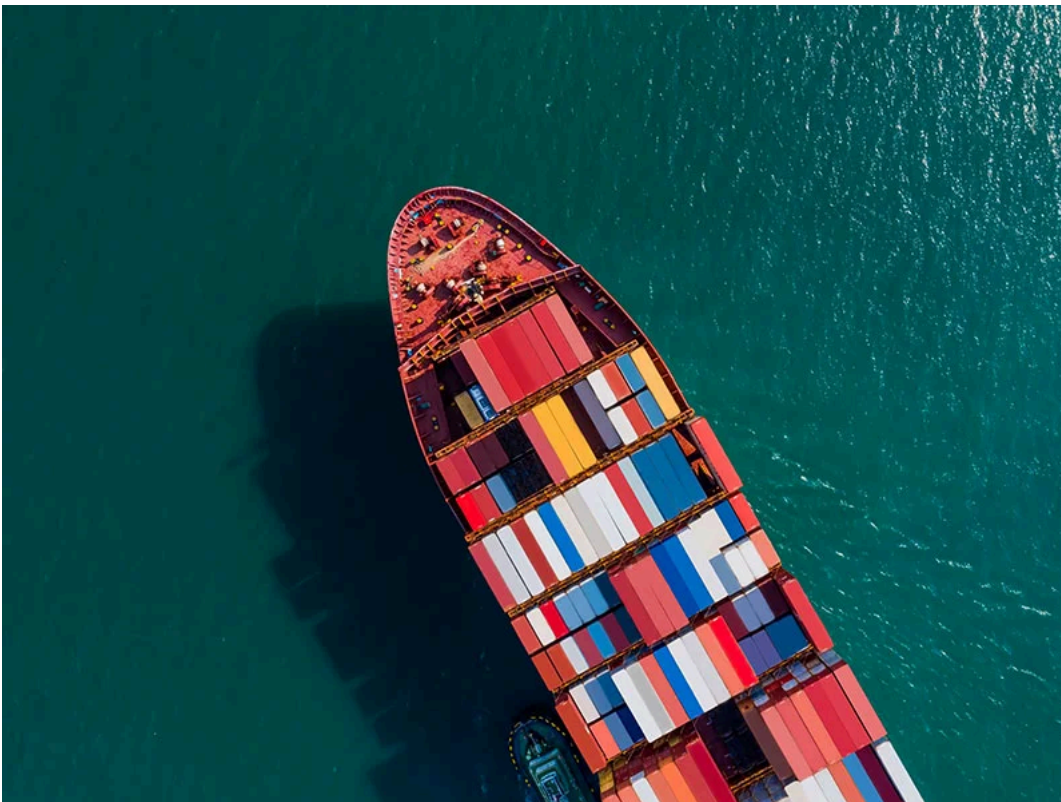
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A new digital portal built for Austrade's reformed 'first-come, first-served' export grants program processed hundreds of submissions for funding within hours of applications opening, frustrating some users.

The speed at which the grants were snapped up prompted complaints from some companies looking to access the funding designed to boost marketing activities in existing or prospective export markets.

Australia's trade promotion agency opened the multi-tier Export Market Development Grant (EMDG) program on Wednesday last week, providing the first critical test for the refreshed grants program.



Earlier this year, the Albanese government capped the total number of grants that can be awarded and adopted a 'first-come, first-served' model (https://www.innovationaus.com/first-in-first-served-proposed-for-troubled-emd-g-austrade/), requiring the development of a new customer relationship management system by Canberra-based IT consultancy, The Factor.

Stress testing performed by Indigitise in the month leading up to the grants opening to applications appears to have worked, with the digital portal surviving the torrent of applications on the first day last week.

Of the \$196 million in grants that opened to applications on Wednesday (https://emd-g.austrade.gov.au/login?returnUrl=%2F), more than \$160 million was allocated by the end of the first day. The 'Tier 2' tranche for businesses wanting to export within existing markets was fully subscribed in less than four hours.

While application assessments are still being worked out, unsuccessful companies will need to wait two years for another chance at EMDG support. An Austrade spokesperson said grant agreement offers will be issued from the end of January.

Export Consultants Association (ECAI) chair and grant consultancy Avant Group managing director Kate Whitehead, who was “ready for a day of refreshing” said she was surprised at how well the platform performed.

“I personally, had some real fears that it was going to crash based on traffic volumes, but as far as traffic volumes and the portal being able to handle the upload process, it performed. It exceeded my expectations,” she told InnovationAus.com.

A few bugs were experienced, including a “heart-stopping” freeze that lasted around five minutes after the portal first went live, which Ms Whitehead said could have disadvantaged those with less familiarity with the platform.

ECAI members had “mixed feedback”, with one grant consultant complaining that a bug battle meant upwards of 20 clients were unable to complete grant applications before Tier 2 filled up.

Another challenge brought by the shift to a ‘first come, first served’ model was many companies would have to submit applications themselves, rather than have consultants do so on their behalf.

Some smaller consultancies had to refer prospective clients to more well-resourced firms like Ms Whitehead’s Avant Group, which temporarily more than doubled its staffing so they could continue to submit applications on their behalf.

Ultimately, Ms Whitehead argued that there wouldn’t have been the need for a ‘first-come, first-served’ model, let alone the development of a new application portal, if the popular scheme had a larger funding pool altogether.

“I think Austrade has done a really good job with as very limited amount of funding, and it really is at this stage where it’s up to the minister to make a decision to actually fund the program to the level that it needs,” she said.

John Taylor, a EMDG grant consultant of more than 21 years, described the new application process as very confusing and frustrating for his clients, although he managed to “get everyone across the line”.

“My phone rang hot whilst I was working with clients, ringing and asking for help with the online application form,” Mr Taylor said, adding that Austrade’s communications on how to prepare for applications was inadequate.

Austrade defended their communications, saying “a number of activities designed to raised awareness of changes and prepare potential applicants” since the updated EMDG guidelines were released in August.

With Justin Hendry

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