



**Primary
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Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation
House of Representatives
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

This is a submission to the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation in relation to their inquiry concerning research training and research workforce issues in Australian universities

This submission is based on my experience and observations as a researcher and manager of the Primary Health Care Research and Information Service (PHC RIS). The focus pertains primarily to research training and research workforce in the primary health care sector. In this sector many researchers are also practitioners which can be both an advantage in getting research into practice as well as a barrier to getting funding (track records are not as extensive as full time researchers) and getting the research done – research waits when patients need care.

An effective current Commonwealth research training scheme – the Primary Health Care Research evaluation and Development Strategy

The Primary Health Care Research Evaluation and Development (PHCRED) Strategy, funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, is an initiative set up in 2000 to build a research culture in primary health care (<http://www.phcris.org.au/phcred/index.php>). One component of this (the Research Capacity Building initiative, RCBI) focuses on training and developing researchers in the primary health care sector. Non-competitive funding has been allocated to University Departments of General Practice and Rural Health to build capacity in research, evaluation and development. As a consequence, training resources have been developed, used and often shared (<http://www.phcris.org.au/phcred/resources.php>), the number of primary health care researchers has increased and the success in obtaining competitive research grants has increased resulting in more research being conducted.

The Primary Health Care Research and Information Service (PHC RIS), another component of this Strategy has been convening the annual national General Practice and Primary Health Care Research Conference (<http://www.phcris.org.au/conference/index.php>), to support this research community through providing an avenue to share research findings as well as to support researchers through networking opportunities that have been used to develop collaborations, mentor, share ideas, brainstorm and plan future projects. The number of abstracts submitted and the number of delegates attending have increased each year indicating the need and significance people have attributed to this event.

PHC RIS has also been proactive in supporting researchers with information about sharing their research findings. Research has no impact unless research users know about it and use it. To that extent PHC RIS has developed a range of fact sheets and electronic information bytes (Infobytes) to assist with this. These range from how to present at conferences, how to write a peer review paper to how to develop collaborative partnerships and more (<http://www.phcris.org.au/infobytes/index.php>)

Limitations and challenges

While much of what has been done through this Strategy has been successful, there have been some challenges. Most researcher development activities in the Strategy have been short term (ranging from workshops to one year part-time fellowships). This has seen people develop research skills, conduct some research and then often leave due to lack of income and research support to further their career. While some have progressed to undertaking a PhD, many researchers coming from a practice background are unable to do this for financial reasons as PhD scholarships offer substantially less income support than their salaries do.

In 2007, 12 mid to senior researchers were awarded 4 year fellowships under the PHC RED Strategy. Unfortunately this was a one off occurrence. Indeed the Strategy is currently under review creating a very unsettling time. Some researchers funded under this Strategy have already moved elsewhere to more secure positions.

The limited funds and extremely competitive nature of securing research funding has meant that many people have left the field due to lack of funding even though their research proposals have been deemed fundable, doable and significant. A significant amount of time and effort goes into writing grant proposals, time that could be spent doing research. It is no wonder that potential researchers look elsewhere – there is so little security in research.

The Future

Suggestions include:

- provide more appropriate income and research support so that researchers have a more secure future in which to conduct and disseminate relevant research so that it has an impact on improving the future
- generate an environment in which researchers are more supportive of each other (rather than compete amongst each other) so that collaborations are easier to develop and maintain to the benefit of research.
- mentoring could be encouraged more among researchers so that tacit knowledge is not lost.
- enhance the skills required to better transfer/disseminate/exchange research findings with research users so that research has a greater impact

I look forward to a time when more superbly trained researchers with secure futures are producing more rigorous and relevant research that is being used to produce a better Australia.

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