



## **Submission – House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation Inquiry into Research Training and Research Workforce Issues in Australian Universities**

29 May 2008

### **Terms of Reference**

The contribution that Australian universities make to research training in Australia

- a) *Contribution of research training programs to Australia's competitiveness in the areas of science, research and innovation*

Australian universities are clearly the primary research training platform in regards to science, research and innovation. Commonwealth research training scheme funding is accessed by The University of Notre Dame Australia (UNDA) to provide, primarily, relief from tuition fees for higher degree by research students. Only a very minimal amount of RTS funding is used to fund skills acquisition and professional development for research active staff and students at UNDA. Other programs within UNDA that are linked to RTS include a limited injection of funding into student research project costs and general research capacity building.

UNDA has undergone a sustained growth in its research student population; our enrolled research students have increased seven-fold between 2002 and 2008. RTS funding has significantly supported this growth and, as a result, the capacity to support research in other ways has remained limited. One example of where the University has achieved success on a limited budget has been in the implementation of a "Research Incentive Scheme" that rewards research output and acts as a catalyst for future research initiatives.

In the context of seeking to achieve excellence in niche research UNDA has expanded its research program in the areas of the Health and Allied Sciences. The University is not in a position to compete on the same scale as the larger Universities in research in these disciplines but is undertaking innovative research across a range of Health disciplines. The objectives for research identified by the newly established Institute for Health and Rehabilitation Research fit with Commonwealth priorities for research in the health sciences and also with the Objects and Mission of the University, however research in these areas is widely recognised as being high cost. The University continues to have need in terms of developing research capacity in these fields, especially if research in Health and Medicine is to progress cutting edge teaching.

The University's Institute for Health and Rehabilitation Research is a good example of Commonwealth funding distinct from the traditional block funding grants like RTS and IGS made available to UNDA with a specific research intent – however without this sort of support, it is very difficult to initiate and sustain significant research collaboration and output.

The capacity of the University for scientific research at the higher degree level remains limited by its focus in the Sciences on undergraduate teaching and support for disciplines in other areas of the University.

*b) Effectiveness of current Commonwealth research training schemes*

Current Commonwealth research funding is used at UNDA to primarily support fee remission for higher degree research students and very little funding remains to support activities such as supervision training, grant application support, professional development of staff and broader capacity building. It is therefore very hard for UNDA to build overall capacity in research training and support. Building capacity for research is a long-term objective and when a relatively young University, such as UNDA, is essentially developing its research capabilities and programs from 'scratch' without injections of public money, such as those inputs which supported other public institutions in their start-up and development phases, the opportunity to support research that is competitive and innovative is understandably limited.

*c) Adequacy of current research training schemes to support Australia's anticipated future requirements for tertiary-qualified professionals in a wide range of disciplines*

As a result of the issues raised in 1a) and 1b), UNDA's capacity to support Australia's future research and development needs in tertiary education as well as in science innovation is currently limited. By comparison other research institutions have had the funding and time to develop CRCs and industry-linked research institutes to their and Australia's benefit, but this type of development, and in addition to industry input, has been the subject of significant public investment in the development stages and over significant periods of time.

UNDA is, in reality, a small education provider and has an even smaller voice in terms of research output, but the University is focused on research areas in high demand. Although financial input from Commonwealth supported student places in Health (Nursing) and Medicine is received by the University, the majority of this funding is used to mount a high quality teaching program and a more balanced investment in research in the areas of health and medicine will be required in future.

Challenges Australian universities face in training, recruiting and retaining high quality research graduates and staff

*a) Adequacy of training and support (including income support) available to research graduate students in Australia*

It would be argued that research graduate students often rely on income from non-research related activities such as part-time teaching and find themselves with limited opportunity to pursue research beyond graduation unless they become quickly associated with an active research group/organisation or secure a full-time academic position.

UNDA places priority on the development of research skills for both staff and students, supervisor training and the capacity to progress career opportunities for students and staff in research, however for the University to move beyond its current situation where current block grant funding is used primarily for fee remission, a significant injection of funding would be required and UNDA remains at a disadvantage in comparison to larger research institutions.

*b) Factors for graduates that determine pursuit of a career in research*

Access to funding to continue a research career beyond higher degree work is critical in encouraging research graduates to continue their innovative work. UNDA's relatively small cohort of research active staff and students means that opportunities for research graduates to link to existing research programs and initiatives at the University are limited. Research-only career opportunities are also limited at UNDA as most academics are engaged in all of teaching, research and administration, a key characteristic and strength of the academic population of the University.

*c) Opportunities for career advancement for research graduates and staff*

At UNDA, significant career advancement opportunities exist for graduate students and staff, however our relative youth, rate of growth and value placed on academic scholarship more broadly, not just research output is fundamental to the nature of the career opportunities. Adjunct appointments are made by the University, however contracted academic staff are all involved in the delivery of the University's high quality teaching programs.

*d) Factors determining pursuit of research opportunities overseas*

UNDA trains research graduates who are well prepared for overseas employment, however the University does not currently have institutional-level research related links to international research initiatives or centres.

*e) Australia's ability to compete internationally for high quality researchers*

Universities the size of UNDA face particular challenges that relate to 'economies of scale' when it comes to establishing and maintaining research training and support capacity for academic staff and research degree students. In this regard, the capacity to offer research skills training, supervisor training, research grant application workshops, to progress overseas academic career opportunities and provide university support for publication of research is critical.

Perhaps the most significant challenge for UNDA, in the context of developing a strong culture of research within a research-teaching nexus, is to reconfigure the challenges themselves as opportunities. In other words the trick is in understanding that size does not necessarily equate with quality and that excellence is possible by pursuing niche areas of research innovation that target Australia's special needs into the future. So, not research for the sake of research but with clearly defined objectives that will meet the challenges that look set to face Australia in the coming decades.

*f) Whether Australia's academic workforce is aging and the impact this may have on Australia's research capacity*

UNDA does not have the experience of a significantly aging academic workforce. In this sense, UNDA's youth as an institution is arguably also advantageous for early career researchers as the University enjoys significant rates of growth on all indicators.