

**Submission to the House of Representatives Industry, Science and Innovation Committee
Enquiry into the contribution that Australian universities make to Australian research
training and the challenges Australian universities face in recruiting, training and retaining
quality research staff.**

Professor Nigel G Laing

This submission is a personal submission, it reflects my own views, not necessarily the views of the University of Western Australia or the Western Australian Institute for Medical Research.

Summary of my submission:

- 1) The balance of DEEWR funding for PhD students needs to be moved away from completion payments three to five years after the PhD student has completed. The current system is a disincentive for supervisors to take on PhD students.
- 2) Salaries need to be increased for research staff, perhaps especially in states with booming economies.
- 3) The gaps between NH&MRC salary packages and host institution (university) salary scales need to be abolished by the NH&MRC fully funding research staff positions on NH&MRC grants.
- 4) There needs to be real performance appraisal of university staff including the most senior staff.

Submission

I wish to address five of the areas outlined in the announcement of the enquiry:

1) Adequacy of training and support available to research graduate students in Australia.

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR PhD payments are currently heavily weighted towards completion of the PhD. The current PhD payment system results in supervisors receiving funding mostly from 3 to 5 years after the PhD student has completed. During the PhD, the supervisor receives very little funding, perhaps between \$2,000 and \$4,000 per year, or in many cases nothing at all. However, a PhD student in an expensive research field, costs \$20,000 a year in consumables. This means that during the time of the PhD, the supervisor has a \$16,000 to \$18,000 or \$20,000 hole in their budget. This is a disincentive to supervisors taking on PhD students.

The balance of the funding for supervisors of PhD students needs to be moved back more to during the time of the PhD.

2) Factors for graduates that determine pursuit of a career in research.

One of the factors, especially in a boom state like Western Australia, that determines whether a graduate will pursue a career in research, has to be what a bright young person can earn in almost any other career in Western Australia compared to a career in research. In medical research careers, the single biggest impediment to a well-funded career is the collective bargaining

salary gaps between what is received in Fellowship support packages and Personnel Support Packages (PSPs) from the National Health and Medical Research Council (NH&MRC) and host institution salary scales. The gap between NH&MRC PSPs and host institution salary scales can easily now be over 30% of the PSP package. Although some host institutions do cover the gap, many others do not and make the NH&MRC grant winner live within the PSPs received from the NH&MRC. This leads to decreased pay and conditions (for example being offered part-time instead of full-time employment) for Research Staff. NH&MRC-funded research staff are the currently worst-treated staff grouping in the tertiary education sector. This is not attractive to young graduates considering a career in research. The NH&MRC acknowledges that it only provides grants-in-aid, not full funding for successful grant applications – it basically funds four days a week instead of five.

If an NH&MRC grant is looked on as a simple business contract, it must be one of the few in Australia where a contractor is forced to accept a contract that will make him/her bankrupt. A long-term research career is hard enough without this huge impediment being put in the way.

Research positions need to be fully funded.

3) Opportunities for career advancement for research graduates and staff.

The career structure for those pursuing a medical research career in Australia is not good. The pinnacle of a medical research career in Australia is to receive an NH&MRC Fellowship. I have been told that the average age of receiving a first full NH&MRC Fellowship (there are only just over 300 in the whole of Australia) is nearing 50. That is a long time to exist on grants between obtaining a PhD and reaching the pinnacle. In addition, only around two in three Fellows are renewed after their first five year Fellowship. So, at age 55 a Fellow, having reached the pinnacle five years earlier, has a 1:3 chance of being out of the career structure.

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

To compete internationally, Australian researchers need sufficient access to the cutting edge technologies, even technologies beyond the cutting edge, in order to remain competitive. They need to be able, above all, to do the research that they want to do. If they cannot do in Australia the research that they want to do, they will leave.

5) Is Australia's academic workforce ageing and the impact of this on research capacity.

There are multiple aspects to this. I believe that Australia's academic workforce is ageing. We are told that this is what the statistics say. This indicates that young researchers are not entering academia, or cannot enter academia. One of the reasons for this has been a gradual creep towards top-heavy Schools or Departments with too many professors staying on long past retirement age – "there is no retirement age". This has four effects. 1) Positions are occupied which would otherwise be available to younger staff. 2) These older, more senior staff cost considerably more than young staff, especially if these older staff members have clinical professorships or clinical loadings. 3) This means that the older staff are maybe occupying the equivalent of two junior post-doctoral positions. 4) Many of these older professors may well no longer be as productive as they used to be.

The solution has to be that universities and other research institutions have real performance appraisal of even their most senior staff.

Nigel G Laing



30th May 2008