

21 May 2010

Ms Maria Vamvakinou MP  
Chair  
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: [isi.reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:isi.reps@aph.gov.au)

Dear Ms Vamvakinou

### **Supplementary submission – Inquiry into Australia’s International Research Collaborations**

On 8 April 2010 at the New South Wales Parliament we gave evidence as a group before the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation inquiry into Australia’s international research collaborations. During the hearing we discussed the many ways by which international research collaborations benefit Australia and proposed some relatively simple steps that we thought the Australian Government could take to improve dramatically the way that Australia engages in such collaborations. In particular, we discussed the value that could be gained if the Australian Government were to:

- (1) play a more strategic and proactive role than it does now in the identification and assessment of international research opportunities where Australian participation depends upon the leadership and involvement of the Australian Government; and
- (2) take a whole of government approach to ensuring that Australia is an attractive destination for international researchers and research students.

At the conclusion of the hearing you invited us individually to provide more detail about how our ideas might work in practice. With this letter we accept that invitation, but do so as a group with a common interest in seeing Australia maximise its capacity for engagement in international research collaborations - not least because we view this as vital to maintaining the strength and relevance of our domestic research effort.

#### **Current challenges**

##### ***Intergovernmental research collaborations***

During the hearing, consensus was reached by the five of us that, compared with its international competitors, Australia is currently disadvantaged in its capacity to take advantage of significant international research opportunities when they arise. We suggested that this is due to Australia’s lack of a forward looking, transparent, well coordinated and publicly understood framework for assessing opportunities for involvement in international research collaborations at the intergovernmental level. Noting the trend towards large scale multilateral research collaborations that are seeking to address major global challenges and scientific questions – which can take many years to plan – we agreed that Australia would benefit from improving the way that it identifies emerging opportunities and assesses the value of Australian involvement.

Recent experiences with the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor, the Square Kilometre Array, Membership of the European Molecular Biology Laboratory and various other smaller bilateral opportunities point to an absence at the Federal Government level of a coherent strategy and responsibility point within Government for determining the value of Australian participation in such opportunities. As a result, our approach to participation in such initiatives appears to have been reactive rather than proactive, with decisions made on an ad hoc basis, sometimes due to diplomatic or political pressure, rather than through an open and considered process. Further, when opportunities for Australian participation emerge, it is often not clear where these should be taken in the Australian Government for consideration; how the Government will make its decision in each case; the timeframe within which such decisions will be made; and the possible sources of funding (if any) that are available to support any potential Australian involvement in a given opportunity.

##### ***Facilitating researcher and student mobility***

We also discussed at some length the impediments posed to international research collaboration by, for example, Australian immigration, superannuation, taxation, education, public transport and health care policies

– in so far as they apply to researchers coming to Australia for short or longer periods. In particular, we discussed the current difficulties being experienced by some visiting researchers as a result of recent changes to visa regulations including the cancellation of the 418 visa. In our view these changes probably resulted from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship making well-intentioned decisions, but without an understanding of the nature of international research and visits by researchers. Successful international research collaboration relies upon the mobility of researchers and research students. It depends upon ensuring that spending time in Australia is an attractive overall proposition for researchers and their families. It also requires making Australia an attractive return destination for our researchers after spending time gaining valuable experience and contacts working overseas. If we are serious about improving Australia's long term engagement in international research collaborations then we must do more than we do currently to address the myriad of practical issues, which might individually appear insignificant, but which when combined together serve to deter many high quality international researchers and research students from spending time in Australia (or indeed returning to Australia).

### **Proposed solution**

To address these two related problem areas we suggested that a unit should be established under the Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, which has clear responsibility for developing, coordinating and communicating Australia's international research collaboration strategy; and for leading a whole of government approach to facilitating Australian and international researcher mobility. In practice, this is likely to mean a strategically enhanced policy development, program coordination and service role for the existing International Science Branch of the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research.

In relation to the proposed intergovernmental research collaboration function of this unit, we envisage that it would have formal links with the following agencies:

- Within the Innovation, Industry, Science and Research Portfolio - the Chief Scientist, the Prime Minister's Science, Innovation, Engineering Council, the Australian Institute of Marine Science, the Australian Research Council, the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation, and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation.
- Within the Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry Portfolio – the various Rural Industry Research and Development Corporations.
- Within the Defence Portfolio – the Defence Science and Technology Organisation.
- Within the Health and Ageing Portfolio - the National Health and Medical Research Council.
- Within the Foreign Affairs and Trade Portfolio, the Department and the Australian Centre for International Agriculture Research.
- The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.
- The Department of Immigration and Citizenship.

The unit would coordinate a cross-department 'council' on international research collaboration, to be chaired by the Chief Scientist and tasked with achieving a whole-of-government approach to the identification and assessment of intergovernmental research collaborations, along with the facilitation of researcher mobility (see below). The unit would also maintain close links with industry peak bodies, universities, other publicly funded research organisations, disciplinary and cross-disciplinary research communities to ensure that expert advice is provided to the Government as early as possible about whether an opportunity is likely to be of strategic value to Australia. It would establish and manage a transparent process for assessing, against agreed criteria, competing international research opportunities as they emerge and would have responsibility for advising the Minister about the strategies the Government should pursue in relation to each opportunity. The criteria for assessment might include, for example:

- (1) the quality and uniqueness of the research underpinning the collaboration;
- (2) its fit with national strategic research priorities;
- (3) its fit with national research strengths and/or weaknesses;
- (4) the opportunities for Australian industry, researchers and students to benefit from the partnership;
- (5) the extent to which Australian participation would enhance Australia's broader relationships with the countries involved; and
- (6) the cost and value for money.

The process of identification, assessment and advice to Government would be ongoing. The approach taken through the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy could be drawn upon as a possible model for developing a framework for assessing competing opportunities in different disciplinary and thematic areas of research. Ideally, a dedicated pool of funding would be made available to support new strategic

partnerships, but if not, the criteria and process by which the Government would make its funding decisions would be available publicly.

In relation to researcher mobility, this would first require an overarching commitment from the Government to prioritise the easy movement of researchers in and out of Australia as part of its productivity and innovation agenda. The unit would then be tasked with responsibility for achieving policy and procedural reform, at the Commonwealth and State levels, to maximise Australia's overall attractiveness to high quality researchers and research students. It would do this through a process of ongoing consultation, policy review and reform, which would take some years given the sharing of relevant responsibilities between different levels of government. In the meantime, the unit would also play an important role as the main point of information, advice and advocacy for research organisations that require assistance in expediting the applications of sponsored and collaborating researchers through the Department of Immigration and Citizenship and other relevant agencies.

We welcomed the opportunity to discuss these important issues with the Committee on 8 April and trust that this supplementary submission will assist the Committee as it considers the content of its report to the Government.

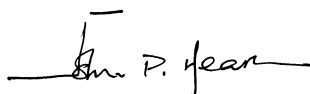
Yours sincerely

Professor Mike Calford




Deputy Vice-Chancellor Research  
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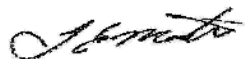
Dean of Science  
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