

**Economics Legislation Committee**  
**ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE**  
Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education Portfolio  
Additional Estimates Hearing 2012-13  
13 February 2013

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**AGENCY/DEPARTMENT:** COMMONWEALTH SCIENTIFIC AND INDUSTRIAL RESEARCH ORGANISATION (CSIRO)

**TOPIC:** Postgraduate Students

**REFERENCE:** Question on Notice (Hansard, 13 February 2013, page 9-10)

**QUESTION No.:** AI-3

**Senator MASON:** Sure, I accept that. Another area that crosses my interest of higher education is that of the postgraduate numbers. The annual report caught my eye. It provides an outline of the number of CSIRO sponsored postgraduates and supervised postgraduates and states that 'the number of students fluctuates with uneven intakes each year and a reduction in student numbers is often seen when a cohort moves through the program'. I understand that. That indeed may be the case, and I appreciate that. But the figures still demonstrate the total postgraduate numbers both for sponsored and supervised postgraduates increased between 2007-08 and 2009-10 before declining in 2010-11 and 2011-12. Again that is in the annual report on page 56. How do you explain the overall trend and does it reflect declining interest in CSIRO's research programs? If you are looking at page 56, you will see, for example, in 2009-10 there were 413 sponsored postgraduates and in 2011-12 there were 328, which is a drop of about 25 per cent. What is happening?

**Dr Clark:** As you point out, we are a significant provider of training for postdocs and they do form a very important part of our research. In terms of the trends and the numbers per year, I will just call on Mr Roy.

**Senator MASON:** It is a pretty big drop. I noticed that it was not just one or two; it was 90-odd.

**Mr Roy:** I can probably provide you with some updated numbers. Let us look at the five-year trend across postdocs, PhD students, master's students and honours students. In each case they have gone up over that five-year period. I agree with your assertion that they have gone down over the last 12 to 24 months. That is accurate. It is not demand limited though. There was an implication in the question that there might be a lack of interest in CSIRO research. We still get many more applications coming in than we have the capacity to fund or people to supervise in some of those student programs. My suggestion is that it is more a reflection of the broader movement in CSIRO staff numbers and our capacity to actually oversee some of the students that we have at the moment. As we do portfolio investments, this is one part of that portfolio investment. As I would reiterate, the five- and even 10-year long-term trends are an upward trajectory notwithstanding the last 12 to 24 months when we have gone backwards.

**Senator MASON:** I have the annual report in front of me and it seemed dramatic. Just to cut to the chase: you are saying that it is not about people losing interest in CSIRO; it is often about the capacity for all sorts of reasons to appropriately supervise postgraduate students.

**Mr Roy:** We would get tens and tens of applications for every—

**Senator MASON:** And you have your own research priorities. I understand that, as much as students are wonderful, supervising postgraduate students also takes time and costs a bit of money. I know that.

**Mr Roy:** I may even have some updated numbers for the annual report for you. It looks like the numbers have stabilised. In terms of PhD students in 2011-12—

**Senator MASON:** Can we just stick to sponsored postgraduates?

**Mr Roy:** I do not have a breakdown in front of me.

**Senator MASON:** That is what I am referring to. I am being quite specific. As I said, there has been quite a dramatic drop. You are sponsoring quite a few less. Why is that? That is not about supervision; it is about sponsoring. You have cut the sponsors. Why is that?

**Mr Roy:** Our intention is to fund and stimulate interest in science and align the science that the individuals are doing with the delivery across our flagship programs plus also the work we are seeking to do in the future aligned with some of the areas we want to develop capability in over the horizon. So it is an important area to us. I do not have the specific answer for you today as to why some of those numbers may have reduced.

**Senator MASON:** Let us be specific: supervised postgraduates, it is quite static. I understand that and I understand there are issues about staff and everything, but this is sponsored postgraduates. There has been a dramatic decline and you have not really answered the question.

**Mr Roy:** The other part that I should marry in, and we will need to take part of this on notice, is the introduction of the reinvigorated scheme around the science industry investment opportunity as well. So SIEF, which was part of the dividend flowing out of the Wylan proceeds, means there have been a number of new scholarship programs awarded under that particular program as well. I would need to take on notice if they are captured in the annual report; I do not have that detail with me at the moment.

**Senator MASON:** I really want to know why there is a reduction of about 25 per cent of sponsored postgraduates. You have not given me an answer, with the greatest respect.

**Mr Roy:** I have indicated that I would need to take that on notice.

**Senator MASON:** You don't know?

**Dr Clark:** Let us put it in context here: our postdocs have risen from 259 in 2004 to where they are currently and, as Mr Roy has outlined, it is an important aspect of what we do.

**Senator MASON:** I accept all that.

**Dr Clark:** We certainly will continue to sponsor postgraduates at all levels. Mr Roy outlined, in terms of masters, that we are a very significant and important part of the innovation system in supporting such a large number.

**Senator MASON:** Sure, I accept all of that, but that has not answered the question. So if you can get back to me, is that all right?

**Mr Roy:** Absolutely.

## **ANSWER**

The number of sponsored students fluctuates from year to year based on science priorities and needs, capacity to supervise, and funds available to sponsor.

While the total number of sponsored students (PhD, Masters and Honours) has reduced from 376 in 2010-11 to 328 in 2011-12, there has been an overall increase of 56 over the five years since 2007-08.