

EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TRAINING

SENATE LEGISLATION COMMITTEE – QUESTIONS ON NOTICE 2003-2004 ADDITIONAL ESTIMATES HEARING

Outcome: 1

Output Group: ARC

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Senator Carr asked on 18 February 2004, EWRE Hansard p. 26.

Question:

Prof. SARA – It must have been a misprint. It is a college of experts. In the media release from the minister, it is also referred to as a college of experts. We have not referred to it as a council.

Senator CARR – The minister's media release was on 21 November. Was that the only form of advice issued to universities on this matter?

Prof. SARA – I do not believe so. I will have to check this, but I do believe that I have had discussions with the DVCs and PVCs about this. Certainly the executive directors of the ARC have also had discussions with most of the individual universities. We then called for nominations in late November for members of the college.

Senator CARR – I will come back to the nominations in a moment. Can you tell me the date on which you briefed the universities?

Prof. SARA – No, I cannot, because there was not a formal occasion when it was done. Rather, it was a large number of informal discussions between me and the executive directors of the ARC and the various universities. I have to again stress that the term 'college of experts' simply refers to changes that have been occurring in the organisation of peer review within the ARC over some time as a method of addressing interdisciplinary issues.

Senator CARR – The article of Saturday, 29 November quotes the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Research at Monash University. There is another quote here from Frank Larkins, from Melbourne University. Both of these men are not insignificant figures in the research community. They both seem to be indicating that they were not briefed and furthermore, that the ARC had not briefed the deputy vice-chancellors at the research meeting prior to this article. So, with regard to these statements, there clearly is a discrepancy between the information you are providing to the committee and the information that has been provided to the public.

Prof. SARA – I repeat: I believe that any discussion with the universities that the ARC had had has been on an informal basis during our interaction with individual universities. At that stage, which I think you said was 24 November, it may well have been so that there had been no discussion with the universities of Melbourne or Monash. But I repeat that the peer review system remains as it has been. It simply reflects the flexibility that we use to put together the most appropriate committee to look at, for example, infrastructure or biotechnology or interaction with the NHMRC – and the list is endless – where we look at interdisciplinary issues.

Senator CARR – Professor Sara, Melbourne and Monash universities are probably two of our leading research universities in the country. I am sure this claim will be disputed by others. If you were to look at the top eight research universities in the country you would have to say, using the percentage of grants gathered as one indicator, that Melbourne and

Monash are very significant players indeed. Professor Frank Larkins, who is from Melbourne University, said:

“We need a lot more information on what this means...The critical issue is the Australian research community being assured that there is transparent process for determining the excellent research to be funded.”

It is a fairly substantial criticism. That university appears not to have been consulted, certainly up until 29 November, and I am interested to hear from you today as to whether you are able to assure me that that has occurred since this article appeared.

Prof. SARA – I believe it has, but I will come back to you to assure you.

Answer:

College of experts briefing to universities

The ARC has provided the following response:

The ARC has provided information about the establishment of its College of Experts to institutions and the broader research community, including through its ‘Discovery’ newsletter (an extract from the December 2003 edition is attached). It also provides opportunities for ARC-related issues to be discussed directly with institutions during visits by ARC representatives. A visit to The University of Melbourne by representatives of the ARC took place prior to the announcement of the formation of the College of Experts, and there has been no approach by the University to the ARC specifically for information on this issue.

Extract from ARC 'Discovery' Newsletter (December 2003) (page 5)

College of Experts to Replace Expert Advisory Committees

The ARC has updated its committees structure to reflect a more flexible, multi-disciplinary approach to research.

The traditional discipline-based Expert Advisory Committees that previously evaluated grant applications will be replaced by a multi-disciplinary College of (72) Experts. Individual experts from within the College will be called upon by the ARC to sit on different assessment committees at different times, based on project proposals submitted to the ARC.

All applications to the ARC are subject to rigorous peer assessment and this will continue under the new structure, with 1,300 expert readers in Australia and overseas. The College of Experts, which may include community representatives such as research users, will then make its recommendations to the ARC Board which, in turn, will make recommendations to the Minister.

With the introduction of the new model, applicants can be assured that successful research proposals will have been judged by peers to be of the highest quality and of national benefit. In addition, it will enable the ARC to identify emerging research opportunities and cross-cutting innovations.

It is important that the ARC continues to build on the national research capacity by responding flexibly and strategically to emerging priorities across all disciplines, in an environment in which it is difficult to predict where the major research breakthroughs will occur.

The new College of Experts is a demonstration of the ARC's ongoing commitment to research excellence and will ensure that research benefits will continue to flow to the Australian community. For example, ARC-funded successes include:

- ▶ *Radiata Communications, which commercialised development work funded in part by the ARC to enable very high-speed communications over wireless local area networks and was purchased by Cisco Systems in November 2000 for \$US295 million.*
- ▶ *The Jameson Cell, an induced air flotation device allowing dramatic improvements in the separation of minerals in mineral processing plants and in treating effluent and wastewater, and which has an estimated commercial value in excess of \$500 million in export coal alone each year. Professor Jameson's research received ARC funding from 1979 to 1998.*
- ▶ *AusLit: The Australian Literature Gateway, the leading resource discovery service in Australian literary research. Auslit, which indexes and describes Australian literature, is interoperable with Australian manuscript discovery services such as the Register of Australian Archives and Manuscripts and the Guide to Australian Literary Manuscripts. It can answer complex research queries and customise sorting of result sets and citation formats. The ARC contributed \$1 million to the development of this valuable tool.*