



SiMERR
The National Centre of Science,
Information and Communication Technology, and Mathematics
Education for Rural and Regional Australia

Address to the Senate inquiry into the Regional Partnership Program

Thank you for the opportunity to talk to you concerning the establishment of the SiMERR National Centre. The Regional Partnership Grant responsible for SiMERR's establishment is a critical investment in nation building at a most fundamental level. I believe that with time and Federal funding this initiative will be a catalyst for improving learning opportunities for all Australian rural and regional students in these three vital areas of education. In addition, I appreciate the opportunity to correct inaccuracies that have been propagated about SiMERR and its personnel.

In my address I provide the Senate Committee with background information on the formation of the SiMERR National Centre. While many people played important roles in the establishment of SiMERR, I was the person who drove the process.

The idea began to evolve in 1996 when the Faculty, under a new Dean, Professor Rod Gerber, decided to establish Research Centres based on established research expertise at UNE. One centre established was the Centre for Cognition Research in Learning and Teaching (CRiLT). I was appointed Director of that Centre. Over the period of a couple of years, CRiLT built up an impressive portfolio of successful research projects with Australian State and Federal Governments as well as numerous overseas grants including the Review of the Examination System in Hong Kong and many UNICEF and World Bank projects.

By 1999, when the NSW Government set up a Review of Teacher Education under the leadership of Dr Gregor Ramsey, CRiLT was seen as an important education research group in Australia and to be "punching well above its weight". I submitted a report to the Review about the need, importance and structure of a National Centre at UNE. In the final report three important mentions were made concerning the ideas about the formation of a National Centre at UNE. (see appendix)

The validation of these ideas concerning a new centre by an independent review of education acted as a catalyst for the Dean and myself to embark on meetings with politicians and sending the proposal to various State and Federal groups during 2001 and 2002. I had meetings with Tony Windsor (Federal) on two occasions and Richard Torbay (State) and the VC forwarded proposals to several other parliamentary members.

Nothing came of these initiatives despite positive receptions to the ideas.

In late 2002 a new Dean, Professor Victor Minichello, was appointed. By this time CRiLT had over 20 staff involved in research projects. CRiLT was facing the dilemma of whether to direct its research efforts into assisting overseas countries or tackling the difficult issues facing rural and regional Australia.

We decided to start again and embark on a new round of meetings. This time we approached Senator Sandy Macdonald with our proposal and had two meetings with him. These occurred late in 2002 and then again in 2003. He was excited by the potential benefits of the initiative for rural and regional Australia. He pursued the idea with his colleagues and with Brendan Nelson. At the same time he advised that if the idea was truly Australia wide it should be able to get through the rigours of the Biennial Nationals Conference to be held late in 2003. This was pursued and in October 2003, the delegates at the Federal conference voted unanimously for the creation of a National Centre in Mathematics, Science and ICT at UNE.

An important outcome of the meetings with Senator Macdonald was an invitation by Brendan Nelson to meet with Dr Thomas Barlow a senior advisor to Dr Nelson. A two-hour meeting in Sydney with Dr Barlow soon took place in mid 2003. He confirmed the significance of the idea, its importance for rural and regional Australia, and that we should pursue the initiative at the highest levels of Government with as much vigour as possible.

He believed the idea was critical for rural and regional areas but he warned that there were no programmes currently within DEST that could fund the initiative even though the thrust was consistent with government policy to improve education provision for all Australians.

Senator Macdonald reacted by organising separate meetings with John Anderson and Peter McGauran (the then Minister for Science) at UNE. Both men were taken by the ideas. John Anderson was particularly receptive as he was receiving a growing list of concerns from people throughout rural Australia and had experienced situations at first hand through his own children. At the meetings I indicated that the Centre could begin operation from January 1, 2004.

In October, 2003 John Anderson announced that he wished to establish a national centre at UNE and placed it on the government's agenda. There was considerable media excitement about the announcement including numerous radio interviews and press reports.

Following this was a series of meetings explaining about the National Centre. People spoken to included Trevor Kahn, Senator Boswell, officers of DEST and DOTARS, and numerous community groups.

In May 2004, a meeting was held in Canberra with John Anderson, senior members of DOTARS and DEST, the VC at UNE Professor Ingrid Moses, Professor Victor Minichello, Dr Debra Panizzon (who was to become the Deputy Director of SiMERR and who had also be present at most of the meetings mentioned above) and myself. After this meeting the proposal that had been the basis of the talks for the past few years was reconfigured to meet with the DOTARS application process. This work took over a month to complete and went through numerous modifications.

On Saturday 26th June 2004, John Anderson announced the establishment of the National Centre at UNE and the associated budget. This required a reworking of the draft budget that was much less than requested. The Centre contract was signed by Professor Moses on the 28th June to commence on July 1 and this was accompanied by a simple ceremony at UNE.

On July 1 the SiMERR National centre commenced operation with all projects (totally in excess of \$2 million) currently under the CRILT name being transferred under SiMERR.

The official opening of the Centre occurred on July 22nd at a morning tea held at UNE. Politicians in attendance were John Anderson and Sandy Macdonald. Contrary to accounts in the press by Tony Windsor he was invited (twice, once as the local federal member and once as a member of Council) and an apology was received and noted.

The SiMERR National Centre has met the milestones set so far. These have included an extensive business plan, establishing hubs in each State and Territory, and commencing a focused research program. SiMERR is currently overseeing 15 State, Territory and National research projects. It is meeting its mission by identifying and addressing issues concerning rural and regional education in Australia

Professor John Pegg
Director
SiMERR National Centre

28/06/05

Extracts taken from 'Quality Matters'
Report of the Review of Teacher Education, NSW
Gregor Ramsay, November 2000

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A number of university submissions raised the desirability of increased specialisation in teacher education. The most advanced of these was that proposed in a detailed submission from the University of New England's School of Curriculum Studies. The University proposes to establish a national centre of excellence in the teaching areas of mathematics, science and information technology. The proposal seeks to increase provision for teachers of these subjects, especially for those who teach in rural, outer metropolitan and isolated areas.

The model seeks to build on the University's national and international research reputation in this area. It incorporates use of technology and brings together experts from academic staff from the education and science faculties, as well as from professional teaching and industry organisations and classroom teachers.

The focus of the model is on addressing those factors which limit country students from achieving their potential in these important subject areas by breaking down the professional isolation of teachers in rural New South Wales. Too little of this activity has been done in the past and the proposed initiative is one which would be highly relevant to the needs of rural and regional New South Wales.

More specific strategies are required to meet the preparation and career-long professional development needs of teachers in outer metropolitan, rural and isolated communities, an area which State and Commonwealth governments, despite worthwhile attempts, have found difficult to target. In mathematics, science and technology this is becoming a matter of urgency, given the difficulty of attracting teachers in these subject areas.

A model such as that proposed in the University of New England submission is strongly endorsed; it offers an innovative approach to the critical need to address issues related to the shortage of teachers in these subjects in rural and regional communities. Good science, mathematics and technology backgrounds in young people are critical to improving opportunities for them in rural and regional Australia.

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The agenda for change laid out in this Report is ambitious. If teaching matters, as is clearly the case, then it needs to be valued in tangible ways. Australian business and industry need to do more than talk about the importance of excellence in education. They need to demonstrate their commitment to it, and teachers need to respond in ways that emphasise quality and professionalism. As noted previously, Australian business and industry can provide assistance with start up funds for the *Institute of Teachers*, with proposals such as that advanced for a centre of teaching excellence by New England University, assistance with professional development, the provision of teaching fellowships and public support of awards for teaching excellence. There are many ways in which business and industry could demonstrate to teachers how they are valued. This seems an excellent place for mutual obligations to be exercised.

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Clearly, on the basis of these best estimate projections, the supply of mathematics teachers overall is falling rapidly. In particular, there is an approaching crisis in supply to inland and isolated schools. These issues impact more on government schools, given that in the main the source of teachers for non-government schools are government schools.

The situation makes serious consideration of the proposal from the University of New England to better support the teaching of mathematics, science and technology in rural areas all the more pressing.