



DISCOVERY

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CEO'S COLUMN

RESEARCH in the national interest - enabling the future



Professor Peter Hoj
Photograph courtesy of
Mark Newsham

■ The ARC's Executive Directors (EDs) are one of its greatest assets. They are among Australia's most respected researchers in their fields and draw on extensive Australian and international networks. They are crucial to the operation of the ARC, interacting constantly with the government sector and the research community. And they are uniquely placed to assist researchers

and research users to understand the Government's research objectives and to ensure that the ARC's approaches are aligned with the realities of the research environment and can respond flexibly to changes in those conditions.

Five years ago, however, the role of ARC ED did not exist.

The desirability of appointing 'visiting researchers' to manage the ARC's programs was foreshadowed in the December 1999 white paper *Knowledge and Innovation: A policy statement on research and research training*¹ and came into effect with the introduction of the *Australian Research Council Act 2001* (ARC Act).

The *Knowledge and Innovation* statement outlined sweeping changes to the national competitive grants system. In the paper, the Government stated its wish to see the ARC further develop as a prestigious, nationally focused agency working effectively with members of the broad research community. In addition to continuing the ARC's existing functions, the Government indicated its desire to see

the ARC contributing to national innovation by, among other things:

- helping to form and maintain effective linkages between the research sector and the business community, government organisations and the international community;
- developing and improving public understanding and appreciation of the contribution that research makes to the community; and
- reporting on the comparative performance of Australia with other research-active countries and assessments of the national return on investment in research.

To this end the Government established the new ARC as an independent body pursuant to the ARC Act.

The research community largely welcomed the proposed reforms to the structure of the ARC and the administration of its new program. It was also clear from consultations that Australian researchers looked to the ARC for leadership.

A crucial component of that informed leadership was to be provided through the appointment of program managers for up to three years and a part-time expert advisory committee, with responsibility for:

- overseeing the conduct of the peer review process;
- integrating the views of external reviewers with the views of the advisory committee;
- liaising and communicating with the research community and users of research;
- identifying emerging disciplinary and cross-disciplinary developments and innovative approaches to research; and
- conducting forums and reviews of the state of Australian research in an international context.

The white paper further foreshadowed that the program managers would be supported by their own expert readership base, which was to give recognition to, and

The ARC is uniquely able to formulate policy and advice in the best interests of the research community and the community in general

¹ The Hon. D.A. Kemp, MP (Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs), *Knowledge and Innovation: A policy statement on research and research training*, Canberra, December 1999. Available at <http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/highered/whitepaper/default.asp>.

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support for, outstanding researchers individually and in teams. The readers were to be selected from leading researchers in their field, including international experts. This was to ensure that there was a stronger international perspective in the judgments made.

For those familiar with the operation of the ARC in its current form, it is clear that all these intentions have been realised. In particular, the foreshadowed program managers are today's six discipline-based EDs, the part-time advisory committee is our College of Experts and the expert readership base comprises our Australian and international readers (Oz and Int Readers).

I have been at the ARC for only 18 months, but it took me very little time to realise what a privilege it is to work with six discipline-based EDs who have been selected not only for their expertise and standing, but also for their capacity and willingness to operate in an administrative environment. Add to that the administrative and policy experience provided by our career public service colleagues and we have a melting pot that is stimulating and uniquely able to formulate policy and advice in the best interests of the research community and the community in general.

Since the introduction of the ARC Act in 2001, the ARC has employed 13 EDs:

- **Professor Margaret Clayton**—Biological Sciences and Biotechnology (March 2006–present)
- **Professor Lawrence Cram**—Physics, Chemistry and Geoscience (March 2001–February 2004)
 - Now Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research), The Australian National University
- **Professor Alan Johnson**—Biological Sciences and Biotechnology (January 2003–January 2006)
 - Now Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research), The University of Adelaide
- **Professor Doug McEachern**—Social, Behavioural and Economic Sciences (February 2001–October 2003)
 - Now Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research and Innovation), The University of Western Australia
- **Dr Ian Mackinnon**—Engineering and Environmental Science (January 2006–present)
- **Professor Elim Papadakis**—Social, Behavioural and Economic Sciences (November 2003–present)
- **Professor Ian Petersen**—Mathematics, Information and Communication Sciences (February 2002–February 2004)
 - Position on leaving the ARC: Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research), The University of New South Wales
 - Now ARC Professorial Fellow, Information Technology and Electrical Engineering, School of the Australian Defence Force Academy
- **Professor Sue Rowley**—Humanities and Creative Arts (February 2001–June 2004)
 - Now Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President (Research), University of Technology Sydney
- **Professor Bill Sawyer**—Biological Sciences and Biotechnology (February 2001–February 2003)
 - Now Emeritus Professor at the University of Melbourne and an enthusiastic vigneron

- **Dr Mandy Thomas**—Humanities and Creative Arts (June 2004–present)
- **Professor Ah Chung Tsoi**—Mathematics, Information and Communication Sciences (February 2004–December 2005)
 - Now Director, e-Research Centre, Monash University
- **Dr Stephen Walker**—Engineering and Environmental Science (February 2001–February 2006)
 - Now Professor and Executive Dean for Engineering, Physical Sciences and Architecture, The University of Queensland
- **Professor Erich Weigold**—Physics, Chemistry and Geoscience (February 2004–March 2006)
 - Now Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research), La Trobe University

This listing suggests two conclusions.

First, a stint as a discipline-based ED at the ARC is clearly a turbocharger for further career development, as it has almost invariably been followed by appointment to a senior management position in Australia's university sector. Indeed, our EDs are approached by eager recruiters on an ongoing basis. While this presents a significant management issue for the ARC, it is also gratifying. It demonstrates to prospective new EDs that a term at the ARC can be a rewarding step towards further progression in a university management structure.

Working at the ARC gives EDs a unique opportunity to observe in detail the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities in Australian research across all our discipline clusters and offers a rare insight into the multitude of considerations that need to be taken into account before certain crucial decisions can be taken and implemented. It is often a humbling experience.

Second, the ARC currently needs to hire new incumbents for the ED positions in Physics, Chemistry and Geoscience and Mathematics, Information and Communication Sciences. While many traditional academics may see such a career move as daunting and many employers may not want to encourage their best employees to apply for such jobs, the flip side is that the ARC—and therefore Australian research—will benefit from a continuation of this strong model for research funding management.

It follows that I enthusiastically support a continuation of the ARC's ED model. I do this with the benefit of having seen the system from the inside. Those looking in from outside might seek a stronger evidence base before drawing the same conclusion. I applaud the value of repeated observations and replication.

I therefore ask that our readers spread the word and allow us to continue this successful 'experiment' by encouraging suitable candidates to seek a term as a discipline-based ED at the ARC. My gut feeling is that my enthusiasm for the model will be shared by everyone who is able to see it in action.

Yours sincerely



Professor Peter Hoj