



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Proof Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON INDUSTRY, SCIENCE AND
INNOVATION

Reference: Research training and workforce issues in Australian universities

WEDNESDAY, 24 SEPTEMBER 2008

CANBERRA

CONDITIONS OF DISTRIBUTION

This is an uncorrected proof of evidence taken before the committee. It is made available under the condition that it is recognised as such.

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

[PROOF COPY]

INTERNET

Hansard transcripts of public hearings are made available on the internet when authorised by the committee.

The internet address is:

<http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard>

To search the parliamentary database, go to:

<http://parlinfoweb.aph.gov.au>

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON INDUSTRY, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION

Wednesday, 24 September 2008

Members: Ms Vamvakinou (*Chair*), Fran Bailey (*Deputy Chair*), Mr Bidgood, Mr Champion, Mr Cheeseman, Dr Jensen, Mr Johnson, Mr Ramsey, Ms Rishworth and Mr Symon

Members in attendance: Fran Bailey, Mr Bidgood, Mr Ramsey, Mr Symon and Ms Vamvakinou

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

1. The contribution that Australian universities make to research in Australia, including:
 - The contribution of research training programs to Australia's competitiveness in the areas of science, research and innovation;
 - The effectiveness of current Commonwealth research training schemes; and
 - The adequacy of current research training schemes to support Australia's anticipated future requirements for tertiary-qualified professionals in a wide range of disciplines.
2. The challenges Australian universities face in training, recruiting and retaining high quality research graduates and staff, including, but not limited to:
 - Adequacy of training and support (including income support) available to research graduates in Australia;
 - Factors for graduates that determine pursuit of a career in research;
 - Opportunities for career advancement for research graduates and staff;
 - Factors determining pursuit of research opportunities overseas;
 - Australia's ability to compete internationally for high quality researchers; and
 - Whether Australia's academic workforce is ageing, and the impact this may have on Australia's research capacity.

WITNESSES

JONAS, Ms Tammi, Regional Secretary, Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations 2

PALMER, Mr Nigel, National President, Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations 2

Committee met at 10.03 am

CHAIR (Ms Vamvakinou)—I declare open this public hearing for the inquiry into research training in Australia being conducted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation. The inquiry arises from a request to this committee by Senator the Hon. Kim Carr, the federal Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research. Written submissions were called for and 105 have been received to date. The committee is now conducting a program of public hearings and inspections. This hearing is the 14th for the inquiry.

[10.03 am]

JONAS, Ms Tammi, Regional Secretary, Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations

PALMER, Mr Nigel, National President, Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations

CHAIR—Welcome. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are formal proceedings of the parliament and consequently they warrant the same respect as proceedings of the House itself. It is customary to remind witnesses that giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. We thank you for your submission and now welcome you to make a brief opening statement before we proceed to questions.

Mr Palmer—Thank you very much. I have to say it is a pleasure to appear before this committee. We certainly welcome the inquiry and the terms of reference that were referred from the minister. I will refrain from making a lengthy opening statement. I simply refer you to our submission to the inquiry. We do have a number of what we hope will be received as constructive proposals, which hopefully we will get to in the course of questions. I also note that, for this hearing, I am accompanied by our south-eastern regional secretary, Tammi Jonas, who is also the President of the University of Melbourne Postgraduate Association. Tammi has been quite involved on the issue of the situation for casual employees. Between the two of us, I hope we can field all of your questions today.

Mr SYMON—My first question goes to minimum resource standards, and this is something that you have raised in some detail in your submission. It is something I have asked questions on at a few of the hearings around the country and we have got various answers about it, ranging from students that did not have a dedicated workspace or computer to universities that did have properly laid out on paper what should be provided, how when and why. Have you got any experience from your association as to which particular areas are more in need of a minimum resource standard?

Mr Palmer—Thank you very much for the question. It gives me an opportunity to showcase one of the more successful initiatives our organisation has been involved in, and that is the publication of a statement of minimum resources for research higher degree students. We have found that to be a very successful initiative, not so much in demanding that universities offer resources to a certain standard but merely in providing them with a reasonable benchmark for what we believe to be a basic set of resources for research higher degree students. You would imagine that, as a representative organisation, we would be seeking to pursue universities to continually improve resources in a range of areas—and I will get to the specific areas to answer your question—but at this stage we would just be very happy to see a basic statement of compliance on resourcing standards from every institution. That is not something we have at this stage, but I think it is entirely achievable. Perhaps a good vehicle for ensuring that would be these compact negotiations that we look forward to seeing with the universities.

With regard to specific resources, obviously the resources that are needed to support higher standards of research vary by discipline, but in many cases research higher degree students that

are full time and compelled to be on campus to do research do not have access to the basics—a desk space and the opportunity to maintain their research data and records in a secure environment. These sorts of things are basic to doing high-quality research. So it is more than just access to stationery and highlighters. There are important pieces of research infrastructure that every researcher needs, and we would like to see some basic standards adhered to by institutions that agree to take on research higher degree students, as a condition of taking on those students.

CHAIR—We have had some indication of this failure to provide adequate resources, even in terms of appropriate supervision to higher degree students. How widespread is that and is it an issue that becomes an integral part of proposals to fix a system that might be well and truly in trouble?

Ms Jonas—I have been very involved at Melbourne uni on this question. I can tell you that the areas we have identified are arts and education. I know the number that is used regularly at Melbourne is that approximately 10 per cent of arts and education research higher degree students have access to a workstation, so 90 per cent of them do not. That is only the students who are in full research degrees—master’s or PhD by research—and there are a number of other research students doing minor theses who of course are not even included in that equation and are not given any work space for doing that research. So it is an extreme problem. Part-time students in the arts and education areas cannot even apply for an office usually, because there simply aren’t any. There is the idea that the waiting list is so hopeless that people do not apply and just try to cobble together workspace at home. Lockers, so that they at least have somewhere to put books when they are on campus, are at a high premium.

Mr SYMON—That leads on to the follow-up question I was going to ask. You have presented evidence in your submission about postgraduates having to spend about \$5,000 of their own funds on research related activity within the first 18 months of candidature. I presume that flows on from what you have just put there—that, if there are inadequate resources provided by the facility, and obviously the student wants to do well in their field, one of the ways they would see of doing that is to provide their own resources. It is obviously not easy when you are not earning a real income. Do you have any suggestions on how that should be dealt with?

Ms Jonas—Nigel and I have been talking about this, and we saw in some of the submissions a very welcome recommendation to have an allocated amount of research funding attached to every—in some submissions, it said attached to the APAs, but, of course, at Melbourne we only have about 30 per cent of students on APAs, so there are serious equity issues in attaching it to the scholarship itself. It would be better to attach it to the candidate. If you have been accepted to do the research, we are expecting that you are going to do something good and so we would be expecting to fund that. I suppose that research funding could be allocated towards appropriate workstation needs, including computers. A lot of our students have no access to a computer unless they go to a computer lab, and these are people writing an 80,000-word thesis.

Mr Symon—So that could be an adjunct to the RTS funding in a—

Ms Jonas—Yes.

Mr Symon—Okay.

Ms Jonas—And a welcome one, because that is another thing that could really help address the disparity between different faculties and disciplines. A medical student will always have a work space and a computer; an arts student feels that they have been given a gift from somebody if they do.

FRAN BAILEY—Would you want to see that as a condition of the funding?

Mr Palmer—I think, certainly, minimum standards of resources should be a condition of funding because, in supporting a research program, universities are saying that they have the capacity to support and graduate quality research students. So part of saying that you have got that capacity is saying that you have got the resources to support those students adequately.

CHAIR—Are universities perhaps dressing up their capacity in this respect? It just struck me when I was looking at some of the things you raised in your submission—and you raised an incredible amount of important things—that, on the issue of funding and how it is allocated by the universities, there appears to be some tendency not to allocate funding to the purposes for which it has been provided, and I really want to know how serious that problem is. Government can allocate funding, but universities would like us to give them money and allow them to allocate it as they wish. If they were doing the right thing, that would be fantastic; who are we to tell universities how they should run their academic programs? But I just get a sense that the money goes elsewhere, to things that may not be at all relevant to research.

Mr Palmer—Absolutely, and it is a great question. Here we would definitely be on message with the universities in that a lot of the difficulties, a lot of the problems, that occur in universities are caused by this need to constantly cross-subsidise their activities. At the moment, broadly, university activities are cross-subsidised by fees from international students and by fee-paying coursework postgraduates. So, in a sense, research students are the beneficiaries of cross-subsidy by other areas because the full costs of research are not currently funded. So I think, broadly speaking, there is an umbrella issue here, and that is the funding of the full cost of research. As soon as the Commonwealth funds the full cost of research then you can have a more serious discussion about supporting quality in research programs.

The second part of that, though, is: what is the full cost of research? I think what would certainly help to progress that discussion is greater transparency on how funds are allocated. Currently, RIBGS funds just kind of go in, and our view has been for a long time that all of the parties, all of the stakeholders, in research training and research education are entitled to greater transparency as to how those funds are allocated than they are currently getting. I think, if there were not exhaustive reporting and compliance requirements but perhaps better transparency about where research funds are going, some of the disparities in terms of resources would become clearer. Universities will need to demonstrate that they are spending research funding on research and not on other things.

Ms Jonas—If I can add to that, there is a danger in simply saying that universities are being irresponsible, because I think that, by and large, everyone in the universities would like to be terribly responsible with the funding they receive. But, in disciplines where there are large grants that are attracted from elsewhere or that are attached to a supervisor, they are able to provide better funding. So, in some cases, where the RTS funding might be being used in certain ways to provide a certain level of minimum resources but there is not enough of it to provide the actual

level required, in those faculties where the supervisors have attracted large grants they can also fund their students going to conferences or to do field work overseas; but in faculties where that is not the case, where they just do not attract that kind of funding, they do not have any more to allocate. So I do not think it is so much a matter of irresponsibility; to back up Nigel's point, I think it is matter of there not being enough in the first place and major disparities between disciplines and how much they can attract from elsewhere.

Mr Palmer—Just to fill in and answer the question properly—my apologies if I am wandering—about funding for research infrastructure, there are broad requirements for infrastructure for research students in terms of what they need to conduct research: so, labs, equipment and things like that. There are also the basics, what we call minimum resource standards: access to a desk, computer, library resources, online journals and these sorts of things. There is also another category of research support in what I guess you could describe as the conduct and dissemination of research: funding for students to attend conferences, to make sure they are able to publish while they are candidates—and they bear costs as well. I think a lot of the costs that are accounted for in that survey that we reported in our submission were from students funding things like computer infrastructure and materials for research but also travel for conferences and the costs of disseminating their research while they are students. I think the high dollar value is a sign of the individual and deeply personal commitment of research students to doing the job properly, even if it costs them significantly.

Ms Jonas—I have a final thing, a personal example. I self-funded one overseas conference where I gave a presentation and got a publication from it. Fortunately, I had miles—I had points—so I used them for my flights. That was because the university will only give me funding for one overseas trip in my candidature and I am saving that up for another bit of field work that I need to do in Europe. I have also self-funded trips to Canberra and Adelaide to present to conferences. I get \$250 a year as research funding as a part-time student; that is how much I have access to.

FRAN BAILEY—This obviously has emerged as the major theme throughout the inquiry, and you are our last witnesses. This is your big chance! It is a complex issue, with the stipend values attached, the lack of minimum standards across the board. The other thing that has come out of the inquiry is this flexibility enabling researchers to travel overseas but also to have exchanges with overseas universities. Given that this is a humongous area and that there are multiple layers of issues, do you believe that this is the pre-eminent issue in what I would classify as the funding of research?

Mr Palmer—I certainly commend the committee's efforts in coming to terms with what are a broad range of fairly complex issues from a range of groups keen to advocate their own point of view. From our perspective, even though there are a range of difficulties and a range of problems, our view is that they are actually reducible to a relatively small number of simple solutions that are achievable and affordable—and, in our view, something that the new government can act on sooner rather than later.

For example, we have addressed the issue of resources. Yes, a simple statement of compliance for minimum resourcing would make a huge difference and would not cost anything. Some view of how you support students to engage in activities like international travel for attending conferences could be resolved either through encouraging the institutions to fund those activities

from their research block grants or through attaching additional funding to things like the, say, the proposed \$6,000 we have seen in several submissions for those sorts of activities. To answer your question about what the issue is, from our perspective there are three broad priorities for research education: you need to attract the broadest possible range of quality candidates, support them through their course of studies to the successful completion of their degree and I guess the add-on there is to graduate them with opportunities that give them the option of continuing in an academic career if they choose to do so. So there are a range of simple strategies that can be employed.

On the flexibility question, we are keen to propose a review of the Australian Postgraduate Award. That has come up frequently in the inquiry. I note that 51 of the submissions to the inquiry called for an increase to the level of the Australian Postgraduate Award stipend to at least \$25,000. From our point of view there are really two aspects to reforming the fitness for purpose of the APA. One in the basic level of support—a higher rate of stipend so that it is a reasonable living allowance that will take the pressure off students who need to subsidise it through other sources, extending the duration to realistically match the time it takes to do a PhD and exempting all scholarships and awards from taxation and income support assessment. But further, developing an enlightened view about what you might call flexibility for purpose in the APA. A number of submissions noted that it is very difficult to attract research students when the mining industry is hiring people on \$100,000 salaries. It is difficult for us to propose that the APA should be valued at \$100,000—perhaps we do not believe that that would be an appropriate way to go; it would be great, but we cannot afford it. In its place perhaps there should be a view towards greater flexibility in the Australian post-graduate award. There are three simple things that you could do that would support a broad range of positive improvements. You could remove special consideration requirements to go part-time or intermittent, you could untie the Australian post-graduate award from candidature so that you could continue to remain enrolled full time but receive a scholarship part time or intermit entirely. That means that you can then receive the award when you need it. Students normally need it at the end when they are trying to complete, and not at the beginning when they are feeling their way through and may have access to income from other sources. On that point, the current model normally means that students exhaust their scholarship entitlement in the first portion and are left with nothing—

FRAN BAILEY—Just when they get to the pointy end.

Mr Palmer—Exactly right. So they are left with no income support at all at the time when they need it most. So simply untying the award from enrolment and encouraging candidates to use the award as a resource in support of their studies rather than a structured income support—

CHAIR—So the candidate would determine at what point they want to call it. What would be the mechanism for that? Would it be an arrangement with the university? Is it just paid out? What would happen?

Mr Palmer—The infrastructure is already in place for students to be able to do that. There are currently provisions for students to go part time or to intermit their candidature. They simply fill out a form. All that needs to happen is that there is another form—one is for their enrolment and one for their scholarship. The institution administers the payment of the scholarship, so the scholarships office would simply just make a change on their computer and you are away.

FRAN BAILEY—It is quite simple really.

CHAIR—Yes, it is very easy.

Mr Palmer—I think it is very simple. The third and final, and I think the most interesting, aspect of this kind of flexibility-for-purpose proposal, which I suppose is what we could call it, is to remit to the student the unpaid balance of the award at the submission of their thesis.

Mr BIDGOOD—Sorry, say that again?

FRAN BAILEY—So that is an incentive?

Ms Jonas—To complete early, in fact.

Mr Palmer—In effect it is a built-in completion bonus. It also addresses the issue that we find very often where students complete and they have invested everything in getting over the line. They have no income support and they have been out of the workforce, so they have very limited engagement with industry and limited job prospects. They are more likely than not to be laden with debt through supporting themselves through their degree. The prospect of an academic career for those people is incomprehensible because they are broke, they are desperate and they are exhausted. So a completion bonus would in effect solve a whole range of problems and foster opportunities to not only complete on time, because there is a cash bonus at the end for you, but then consider publication and conference travel at that point of commencement rather than going to work at Pizza Hut or Coles to pay off your credit card debt. It would not cost the government an additional cent.

FRAN BAILEY—That is a good idea.

CHAIR—It is. One of the reasons that have been put forward about why students cannot complete on time, in addition to the financial aspect, has been the life experiences of the candidates. I would imagine that, if you have a pretty committed life as well as trying to study, the bonus would not necessarily make any difference to your completion. If you have kids you are not going to do away with them just because there is a possibility that you will get a bonus at the end! It is not going to make it any easier. I am trying to work out to what extent the failure to complete is predominantly a financial one or whether it is very much a life experience one—or whether it is fifty-fifty.

Ms Jonas—I think the life experience one is probably a slightly dangerous path to go down simply because of the real diversity of our HD students. I do not think we can really say, ‘This is what they look like and this is what their experiences are.’ I think that one is a little bit tricky. On the other hand, the income support is really significant. For the University of Melbourne, the figure we have is that the 3½-year completion rate is 29 per cent, and that is how long the scholarship lasts. So the 70 per cent who have not completed by 3½ years now have to do it with no funding at all. Keep in mind that a number of them will have been doing it with no funding all along, which is why they are cobbling it all together as best they can.

I am a classic case of this. I have children and I study part time and work part time. Because I cannot get a scholarship while I am part time, I end up working far more than is good for my

study but also I have to work extra to pay for the extra child care that I would not be paying for if I were studying at home and able to be there for drop-offs and pick-ups for school. So I am one of those cases where the difficulty is compounded by not having proper income support. On the other hand, as I like to say to my university, I am actually a really good candidate for timely completion because I am also very, very driven. I am probably not one of those who will fall by the wayside—

FRAN BAILEY—You are a woman, so you know how to multitask.

Ms Jonas—I certainly do. Thanks for reminding me! I think, though, that a lot of people get caught in a bind. Somebody else I know who is an extremely able, high-achieving PhD student had her children in the course of her PhD and took 10 years to complete it. By hook or by crook she was going to, but it was through the most complicated childcare arrangements and little bits of working here and there. She and her partner shared the child care with their parents. It is extraordinary. It is not an easy way to do a PhD and it is not an easy way to raise children.

Another thing we would like to see is the government partnering with universities on the childcare issue. I think that it is very easy for universities to say, ‘Child care is not our core business and we have limited funding. We’re not going fund to child care because in these straitened times that falls by the wayside.’ I know that that is what my university is saying. We have a waiting list of 400 families for child care at our university. I think it is a problem in that universities need extra funding. Again, it is that idea of whether you allocate it directly to those problems—whether you give money and say what to do with it. In some cases, where it is something that is in danger of being non-core business, it is actually really helpful if the government says, ‘This one is for child care. You can’t give that to anything else.’

So I do think that it is actually about income support. I think the vast majority of noncompletions are because people are just scrambling to work. So many of the people I know have come to the 3½-year mark—those who were lucky enough to have a stipend in the first place, that is—and started picking up casual employment at our university and others, and they spend half their time commuting between Deakin and Melbourne and La Trobe doing different tutoring or RA positions and it is a huge workload for not enough return. They have the best intentions to finish the thesis but they go on leave and they lapse.

Mr BIDGOOD—Thanks, Tammy. I found that really interesting, and I admire your determination. And thank you, Nigel, for your suggestions. I have got a few things I want to go through here. I want to follow on from what you have just said, but originally I was going to ask about the 10-year generational gap mentioned in chapter 3, particularly 3.1, about the ‘lost generation’, which does tie into what you are saying. I suppose we have to look at where we are right now and say, ‘It doesn’t matter what’s happened in the past; it’s about where we are now and where we go in the future,’ and have a vision and a determination to get there. I totally agree with you: we need to get serious. As a single father with three children who is as driven and determined to do things as you are—which is why I am here—I congratulate you, Tammy. I think you are doing fantastic. We should be encouraging people like you in this nation, because we are going to lose 50 per cent of our workforce if we do not support single women or single men with families. We have got all that intellectual talent tied up at home, but we can help facilitate you, even if you are at home, to learn at home through the decentralisation of information by internet and all these other resources that we have got. Then perhaps we could

have—I don't know—one-week special training sessions at university or somehow facilitate that. So I take on board your suggestion that the government should say to universities: 'Here is specifically allocated money for facilitating families, whether they are single-parent families or dual-income families or whatever, to mobilise their intellect in research and PhDs.' That is the first thing.

Nigel, I really liked what you said about completion bonuses—people must have an incentive to finish. I see what both of you said as equal. You need the facility of child care. Also, even if people do not have children—that is an incredible stress—there is just the stress of your own wellbeing. Where is the food going to come from? How are you going to pay the rent? You have not got a mortgage, because you cannot afford a mortgage on these sorts of things. We need to take stress out of the learning system. We need to take stress off the minds of the intellectuals. The one thing the government can do to give a real helping hand is say, 'Let's give decent remuneration, decent funding.' Even if it is specific to helping people study from home, helping people with child care, that is important. But then, on the other side, Nigel, as you said—and I agree with you and I take it on board and I think it is an excellent thing—you must have a completion bonus. I think we should seriously take on board your three simple points on flexibility. I really do.

That takes me to what I originally wanted to ask, which was about where we are right now. I take note of the quote you include on page 17:

Australian universities over the next decade will be faced by their largest recruitment task for three decades.

If Australia is going to be serious about competing intellectually in the international arena, we have either got to do this or not do it. We have got to take the bull by the horns and say, 'Yes, we're going to have a political determination and we are going to back the intellectuals in our nation and we are going to back research.' You have got my full support and I just encourage you to keep on going and never, never, ever, ever give up.

Mr Palmer—Thank you so much for your comments. It is humbling that you and the committee are so committed to these issues, and we certainly welcome that. Thank you.

Mr BIDGOOD—I just wish there was more I could do to help.

Mr Palmer—I think that the tone of the rhetoric from the new government—certainly from the minister, Kim Carr—is about Australia participating competitively and internationally as a source of innovation. I think it is a daunting prospect to be faced with this generational change in our capacity to be innovative and internationally competitive, but I think, again, that there are some simple solutions that the government could come up with that are entirely affordable. It will be easy for the government to reflect the priorities that they talk about in the programs that they choose to fund. We do not pretend to offer an exhaustive list of those, but another proposal would be, perhaps, a fellowships program for recent PhD graduates. In our experience, this is a real area of risk where we lose future academics. They get to the point of completing their PhD, they are financially exhausted, as I have said, and they often have to go to work for Coles, Pizza Hut or somewhere just to survive. By the time they gather themselves up again, they have probably drifted towards a career in industry or a job outside higher education, and those people are lost at that point. They become disillusioned with the prospect of an academic career.

I note that the government has, in the federal budget this year, funded the Future Fellowships program, which has eligibility requirements for mid-career researchers, who are defined as being five to 15 years out from completion of a PhD. We would like to identify the gap for those people in the nought-to-five-year range. We would suggest that one positive initiative that the government could bring to bear on the problem would be a fellowships program for recent PhD graduates which supports those people to stay in a higher education environment, capitalise on the research that they have just completed and gain that mix of teaching and research experience that is necessary for an academic career. Right now there are very limited opportunities for people at the point of completion, so I think a fellowships program targeted at PhD graduates would make a significant difference.

FRAN BAILEY—You mention the targeted fellowship program. Would you think that that could be targeted even more specifically—for example, to mathematical sciences? It has come through that we are in a pretty poor state as far as mathematical sciences are concerned. Obviously governments do not have bottomless pits of funds. Given the range of recommendations that we are looking at, would you see a fellowship program as, rather than being open-ended, being targeted at critical areas of need, for example?

Mr Palmer—Thank you for the question. In our submission we note the difficulty in pre-empting the next area of need through policy measures. Currently we have a crisis in the area of education and teacher training. Even though, perhaps, people in that sector could have foreseen the crisis, it is only now that it is a crisis that measures are being brought to bear on supporting numbers in that area; in many respects it is too late. So, on the one hand, we support targeted support for areas of identified need—at the moment it is mathematical and science education and teacher education—but, on the other, I think that those programs should be in addition to initiatives that support innovation broadly and that do not seek to second-guess what the next area of need is going to be, because you do not know what that is.

FRAN BAILEY—I suggest to you that, in an area like mathematical sciences, it is not second guessing when you have evidence presented to you of the parlous position. You have only to look at Terry Cutler's statistics, too; I caught up with them recently. This is not second-guessing; these are critical shortages in key areas that affect the national economy.

Mr Palmer—You are quite right. We certainly endorse Dr Cutler's report. It has some excellent recommendations in it. We agree that there are areas of critical need, including mathematical and science training. We support targeted initiatives and things like stipends with a top-up to encourage candidates to enrol and fellowship programs to support those candidates after completion. That is important. But they should exist in parallel with broader based measures to support a range of areas. That is all we are saying.

Ms Jonas—In the conversation that we had about it last night, the problem of the lag was raised. You can target it now, but there is already a lag. That is the concern. If you get locked into targeting an area, in the longer term there might be other areas being neglected.

FRAN BAILEY—But there are some areas that are needed right across—

Ms Jonas—Of course. You do have to have some things.

Mr RAMSEY—Can you tell me a little bit about your organisation? How is it funded?

Mr Palmer—A great question. Our organisation is the national representative body for postgraduate students. We rely on affiliation fees from our member organisations on each campus. Those member organisations, like Tami's, were historically funded by a compulsory student services fee. I have to say that it was a very small allocation of that compulsory student services fee. As you are probably aware, the former federal government passed legislation to effectively ban the compulsory student services fee. As our report in 2007 clearly showed, postgraduate students were the biggest casualties of that legislation because we rely on dedicated services and support specific to postgraduate students. What was seen of the wake of VSU is a move towards a generic view of student services where postgraduates as a specific constituency lose out. In answer to your question, we are funded from affiliation fees from member organisations. Many of those member organisations have been merged, wound up, taken over or are defunct because they now no longer have any source of funding. Therefore, in turn, our funding is in jeopardy. If there is not a change soon, we will cease to exist as an organisation.

Mr RAMSEY—Do you seek any input from people who have completed their doctorates and their higher degrees of learning?

Mr Palmer—Obviously, when you are in a hostile environment, you need to be innovative. There are a range of proposals that we as an organisation are looking at to support our activities. We look to be able to continue, at least for the next year or so, with a mix of looking for alternative revenue streams and trading on reserves. It is entirely possible that we could look at some kind of alumni program, and I am keen to get your thoughts on that perhaps outside of the hearing today. But the reason why we have the model that we have is that it is premised on the notion of what postgraduates are entitled to. We had in the past considered a direct membership model, where we recruit individual members on campus and get fees from them. We could run an effective national body that way, but it would be at the expense of campus level services and representation. We are committed to the notion that individual postgraduates are entitled to local level services and support. That is why we have stuck with the model that we have, for better or for worse.

Mr RAMSEY—If I can have another bit of a bite at this, I have a criticism, in a way, of the 100 submissions that we have had. These submissions have been written and driven by who have doctorates. These are the thinking brains in Australia, we are told; the people with the ability to think outside the square. And no-one has put up a funding model to us that is any different to what we have, except with more money. I find it absolutely amazing that no-one has come along and said, 'Look, this whole thing's a heap of junk and we want you to that.' Basically, people have said, 'A bit more money everywhere will fix it.' We have got to the system that we have by progression. To think that that is world's best practice is quite amazing. No-one has been able to come up with a better idea. To come back to your recommendations, I am a little bit critical. Forty recommendations is too many. We have had 100 submissions. Give me your top three.

Mr Palmer—Certainly. First, reform of the Australian Postgraduate Award; second, funding for the full cost of research; and I guess the third would be greater flexibility for students to pursue international standards of research, and that would be the kind of flexibility that is supported by adequate resources and infrastructure for research. Our focus is very much on the students and the demands that are placed on them to sustain higher standards of research.

Obviously they are committed to doing those themselves, and they need the support to be able to do their best.

Ms Jonas—Could I add a fourth?

Mr RAMSEY—Why not? The point is that you are looking at 40 recommendations. I know they are in groups. A lot of others had 10 or 15, so we end up with about 1,500—maybe a few more.

Ms Jonas—I would add—it is sort of embedded in there anyway and I think it is really important—the actualisation of the research workforce. I think that that needs serious revision. The research student's part in that casual workforce is, first of all, often quite detrimental to their own studying capacity in order to complete their degrees. There are serious equity issues for casuals. When you are on a casual contract time and again, including new ones, you are redeveloping courses every time because you get a new casual contact every time. It is an enormous burden for very little return. We had a soup kitchen for the tutors at Melbourne university recently in recognition of the hard work that they do for very little return and the quality of teaching scores that remain high due to the commitment of people who do unpaid work. One woman who spoke was six months pregnant with her first child. She had done six semesters of tutoring in a row and was about to leave with no maternity leave, no income support—nothing. When she went on leave to have the baby—

Mr RAMSEY—She would have got the baby bonus!

Ms Jonas—Yes. That is right. So, quite separate to the research experience, she was going to have that. But it is true: she was leaving with no recognition of the years of work that she had been putting in.

Mr RAMSEY—I understand.

Ms Jonas—I think the casuals issue is really enormous and affects postgrads in particular, because it is such a significant part of that workforce.

CHAIR—It has probably led to the concept of the 'lost generation of academics' and possibly the fact that a lot of undergraduates may be viewing higher degree research as a dead end—

Ms Jonas—Absolutely.

CHAIR—and, therefore, there being no prospect. You could introduce future fellowships and all sorts of things, but ultimately you are always talking about the best, because there is always a finite number of what is available. But in addition to that there is the pool of people who may not be deemed to be the best but are actually the best as well, and they seem to be getting lost in a system that is—

Ms Jonas—That is right, and they are carrying enormous teaching loads. I know—I signed a number of the submissions. There is the idea that teaching loads do not allow you to pursue a research profile. You cannot get the publications. The senior academics are buying their way out

of the teaching with their grants. Junior academics do not have that option. How do they ever become senior academics if they are the ones—

CHAIR—How do you address the ageing of the academic workforce if you do not have anybody to—

Ms Jonas—To take over?

CHAIR—Yes.

Ms Jonas—I think fellowships are one thing. I think addressing the casual workforce is another way of dealing with it, because with sessional lectureships, even for those who have recently graduated and are taking those on, you get a one- or two-semester position and then you are just thrown back out.

CHAIR—How do we fix the casualisation? I think I asked this question in Queensland and used the word ‘tenure’, and one of the academics said, ‘It’s never to be spoken.’ I think it was in Queensland—a term not used. How do you address it?

Ms Jonas—I think with at least fixed term contracts, so you are literally not on an hourly wage. That is one thing that starts to help. People start to actually have a stable enough basis on which to think about their career pathways, work forward and develop a profile, because they are part of the staff. The tutors in arts do not even get an office in most schools. If you have to consult with a student, you do that at a cafe. It is absurd. They are hired as staff and yet there is nowhere for them to be. So I think one way is by giving proper contracts. Also: limiting how many fixed term contracts you can be on. Those sorts of industrial solutions I think are very helpful for people, so they can go into something that appears to have a future because it actually does have a future.

FRAN BAILEY—I have one other question, and it is a bit of a hobbyhorse of mine. It is in regard to the absolute higher levels of research. While we have really important regional universities that provide access to undergraduate degrees for kids, especially in the rural areas, it is simply not possible for every university to be all things to all people. I would like to get your views on what I refer to as the centres of excellence in areas of research. I often use JCU and marine biology as an example, but there could be some other university that is the centre of anthropology or mathematical sciences or whatever. What are your views on that?

Mr Palmer—We are now in the middle of a review environment and there are lots of ideas going around about how to support research specialisation et cetera. I suppose the views in our submission look fairly abstract. We may be seen to advocate against driving research specialisation. Our point is that you cannot second guess innovation; it is up to the innovators to decide where the cutting edge of innovation is. I note the high standard of submission from institutions like James Cook University, which I consider to be regional and which is in some people’s minds a second order institution. Our view is very clearly not in line with those who propose that we have one or two world class universities with the rest feeding up to them. Our view is—

FRAN BAILEY—I am not suggesting one or two specific universities. What I am suggesting is that Melbourne university, JCU or somewhere else might be renowned and hopefully become world leaders.

CHAIR—There is a division in the House of Representatives, so we will have to break.

Proceedings suspended from 10.52 am to 11.08 am

CHAIR—Let's resume. Where did we leave off? I think we were looking at—

FRAN BAILEY—Centres of excellence.

CHAIR—Okay.

Mr Palmer—I think the idea of centres of excellence is a good thing. I guess we are always cautious about—

FRAN BAILEY—If I could just remind you, I was not referring to specific universities. What I am more interested in are the actual areas, the various disciplines, of research.

Mr Palmer—Yes. Our view may seem somewhat simplistic, but it is very much from the perspective of individual postgraduates. We believe that, ideally, students should have the broadest range of opportunities to pursue their research interests that they possibly can. The solution, how you do that, is complicated, perhaps beyond our capacity to propose a model. I note that the new government are proposing what they refer to as a hub and spoke model. I think it is good to support areas of strength, but our concerns are that too much emphasis on supporting areas of research strength alone comes at the expense of new and emerging areas of research. So it is certainly about a balance. In terms of proposing a model, we do not have one.

CHAIR—I would just like to intervene there because I was going to ask you about that. The reason that I am asking is because I am interested in your view on how you think a hubs and spokes model would impact on delivering innovation. Obviously the idea is that somehow it will do that by concentrating strengths but you have a different view and I would like you to comment on that. That is probably consistent with what Fran asked as well.

Mr Palmer—Thanks for the question. Our own experience of efforts to drive research specialisation and a move towards a hubs and spokes style model has been the closure of academic departments and the redundancy of academics who have been deemed by the institutions to be not in line with that institutions research strength. I guess those personal experiences are negative ones, because in almost every case there is an aspiring researcher, an aspiring postgraduate, who could pursue a research program—

FRAN BAILEY—Could you give us actual examples of what you are talking about?

Mr Palmer—I will hand over to Tammi because she has probably got more direct—

CHAIR—I think that we should talk at the empirical level. I think we would benefit from that.

Ms Jonas—I guess the most obvious one that comes to mind for me is the loss of creative arts at Melbourne. In closing the creative arts department they did not just make all of the creative arts staff redundant; they did not just make them disappear—some stayed and some went. There was a significant loss in expertise in creative arts in Melbourne because it was not seen as a strategic priority.

CHAIR—Where did it go?

Ms Jonas—Mostly it went away. It is gone.

CHAIR—Sorry, I just meant whether it had been transferred somewhere—to another institution.

Ms Jonas—We know that MIT has some real strengths in the creative arts and so some students have actually made that transfer. I think that VU is also an emerging player in the creative arts. Some of it that was deemed suitable stayed at Melbourne so it went into the School of Culture and Communication in the arts faculty, which is actually my school. They are creative writing students. Other practical forms of those arts have gone to the VCA, which of course is a faculty at Melbourne.

FRAN BAILEY—The VCA would be regarded as a centre of excellence.

Ms Jonas—Absolutely. And yet the creative arts students who were in the old department up at Parkville have expressed to us—and I am not a creative arts student so that I cannot speak from that experience—that they are not the VCA students. They are different. The particular balance of theory and practice that they had at Parkville is different to what was being offered at the VCA. They felt that they have been sort of left out in the cold. In fact, I saw in the paper—and I had not heard that this was going to happen—that they were taking a sort of class action. They are taking a serious grievance from 82 students against the university. So it is pretty major. It is primarily undergraduates that were involved in that because they think that the teaching of the creative arts degree has not been sufficient to meet their needs and was not what they thought they signed up to do—especially international students. They get really disadvantaged when those things happen, obviously. When you have come that far and you are paying that much for a degree that looked like this on the website and now it looks like this—

CHAIR—Because you could be into the creative arts and have no capacity whatsoever to perform in terms of its practical expression. I can see the difference between the two disciplines.

Ms Jonas—That is right.

CHAIR—I am just wondering whether it is happening anywhere else.

Mr Palmer—Further to the question of centres of excellence and hubs and spokes, I suppose that in theory models along those lines work where you have a diversity of hubs broadly across all the discipline areas then you are going to need to have the support and innovation broadly and the spokes, in effect, in the research linkages and research students that are mobile. I guess there are two concerns there. One is that the data tells us that research students are not as mobile as people like to think. So if you have a hub in Perth or Adelaide and a talented student who

wants to pursue research in that hub, it is more difficult than people imagine for students to relocate, particularly if they are coming to study later in life with families, as the data shows that they are. The second thing is that with the question of centres of excellence, our experience is that most universities want to pick more or less the same areas of strength, because that is what is in fashion and that is where people think all the action is. So that is, I think, the reality of people's approach to this. If universities were able to really build a diverse range of strength across the sector, models like that would have a better chance of working. But currently we have reservations about their capacity to do that. Those sorts of structural changes take time and probably require some cultural change as well.

FRAN BAILEY—Can I just further explore this, because obviously other views have been expressed. You will know from my questions that I am actually a supporter of centres of excellence, certainly in key areas like medical scientific research. But even with the most magnanimous government the bucket of money is still going to be X. You might have, for example, 30 different institutions engaged in areas of medical science research, each one jealously guarding what they are doing. But you are going to get a much better outcome for the nation and a higher level of research that is more internationally recognised if there is a greater concentration of research. Let us say, for example, that one was in cardiology and another was in kidney disease or whatever. This is the sort of centre of excellence that I am referring to.

Mr Palmer—I suppose in theory there is a role for an organisation like us to play in supporting the development of areas of excellence where—

FRAN BAILEY—How would you do that?

Mr Palmer—In theory, if we had the resources, we would play much more of a consumer advocate role for research students. One of our concerns with the way universities operate is that they often skirt close to the limit of false and misleading advertising. Every university says, 'You can study this incredible range of research topics.' The student gets there, they find that the supervisor they were supposed to work with is either on leave or has been made redundant and there is nowhere near the infrastructure they were led to believe was in place when they were being courted by the university. I think there is a real gap for a consumer advocate for research students. That is certainly a role we should be playing if we had the resources. In effect, we would then be supporting areas of excellence in a positive way because we would be highlighting those areas which really were world-class, and students would get a nuts-and-bolts assessment of their likely destination more easily than by relying on university marketing material, which, if you read it, makes students believe that everything is possible at every institution, when often it is not. So again I guess we do not really have a simple solution, but we would love to play a supportive role in driving excellence and—

FRAN BAILEY—I was just interested in your views.

Mr Palmer—connecting students with supervisors. That is what it is all about. The research shows that the best way to support good completions and good research outcomes is by connecting the right student with the right supervisor. Right now, it is very difficult for students to find their niche. Ideally we could be supporting that better, but we do not have the resources.

Ms Jonas—I would probably add to that that one of the real difficulties in Australia—in my experience in 15 years here—is that it is not a culture where people move easily between cities. They tend to stay in the city they are from. I think there is a cultural difficulty because people stay where they are from. There are some very real reasons why that might need to continue. For people with families, for example, it is very hard to just say, ‘Because I’m doing a PhD and they’re going to give me \$20,000 a year for that, we should all move to Adelaide.’ It is not very viable. The average age of postgraduates generally is 35, so most of the people we are talking about do have at least a partner and quite possibly children. Needing to move to the area of research excellence is going to be really tricky for a lot of the postgraduates that we are talking about. Having said that, if they have all the most brilliant people there who you want to work with, of course you would try to go. But under the current conditions I do not know that it would be very feasible.

FRAN BAILEY—Certainly people move to JCU from other states.

Ms Jonas—They do. We know people do—absolutely. But with all the constraints we have talked about it is not very—

FRAN BAILEY—If that is the area of expertise that they want to excel in and that is where they see their future development, they are prepared to move.

Ms Jonas—And if they are offered support. A lot of those get stipend top-ups and things too.

FRAN BAILEY—When we were there, there were more international research students than domestic ones.

CHAIR—But those are the different trends. Our domestic population are not mobile, whereas international students are.

Ms Jonas—That is right.

FRAN BAILEY—Maybe we are going to have to think about that.

CHAIR—This is it.

Ms Jonas—I think that when you offer proper incentives—when there are better stipends and the possibility of top-ups or relocation costs and those kinds of things that can help support that—obviously that makes all of those more viable. I think the current housing crisis also makes any movement really difficult. I would be loath to even give up my rental, because I would be terrified of not getting anywhere to live that I could possibly afford.

CHAIR—In this country we have also really had a tradition of having everything that we need at the best possible standard right where we live. We have never had to go out looking for these standards or alternatives, because they have always been close to home. I think that that is probably a wonderful way to live your life; I am just wondering whether it is a thing of the past.

FRAN BAILEY—In regional areas that is not so.

CHAIR—No, okay. That is true. It is not true for regional people.

FRAN BAILEY—It is only true for the capital cities.

CHAIR—We are talking about them, I guess.

FRAN BAILEY—I represent a very large regional electorate where kids travel all the time—

CHAIR—So you know.

FRAN BAILEY—and their parents foot the bill.

Ms Jonas—But wasn't it about five years ago that we passed Belgium is the most urbanised country in the world? We know that we are all in the city centres, so to speak. The vast majority of people are in those urban centres.

CHAIR—And therefore the vast majority—

Ms Jonas—Of resources and infrastructure—

CHAIR—of the thinking and the practices is determined by those living in the cities.

Ms Jonas—That is right. I think those are big challenges for regional centres.

Mr Palmer—Yes. Again, we do not have a model for that. I suppose hubs and spokes could work. I guess our view would be that institutions would certainly want to compete on quality and attract researchers to build a vibrant research culture. I think JCU is a good example of doing that.

FRAN BAILEY—The problem with Australia is that we have all these different gauges of track. We could debate that analogy for several hours, couldn't we?

Mr Palmer—It could work, but I think that if you compete on quality then you avoid some of the shortcomings of just picking specific areas and saying, 'Well, we're only going to support these areas of specialisation, and it will be at the expense of others.'

CHAIR—Nigel, I am having the time drawn to my attention. I would like to give you an opportunity to wrap up if there is anything that you want to say, in the final moments before we conclude, that could be useful to us and that you have a burning desire to say because we have not covered it.

Mr Palmer—Thank you. No, we are confident that we invested in a detailed submission and made a broad range of points. We are optimistic that there are a small number of very practical, manageable and affordable measures that would make a significant improvement. Obviously the Australian Postgraduate Award is central. I think an innovative approach to how we use the resources we can get from government to support quality research would make a big difference. Also, I think it is significant that there is a gap, I suppose, in evidence before the inquiry on how to deal with generational change in the higher education workforce, because as far as we can see

planning has not been happening among universities, although people have been warning about it for many years. I guess that, for our small part, we can suggest some basic industrial reforms to pay and conditions for casual staff and also programs to catch PhD graduates at the point where they would be considering an academic career. That would at least stem the flow of people out of higher education and support them to consider becoming a teacher or researcher in higher education. I have nothing else to add.

Ms Jonas—I think that sums it up. It has been a great discussion.

CHAIR—Thank you very much indeed for the effort that you put into this submission.

Resolved (on motion by **Mr Symon**, seconded by **Mr Ramsey**):

That this committee authorises publication of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 11.24 am