

29 May 2003

For immediate release

## Minister and critic go head-to-head on science funding

Science Minister Peter McGauran has responded to criticism levelled in *Australasian Science* magazine of the government's "continuing neglect of our knowledge infrastructure". In a *conScience* column published in April, Dr Alex Reisner had taken the Coalition government to task for the "appalling consequences" of its R&D policies and compared Australia's record unfavourably with Canada.

Writing in the June issue of *Australasian Science*, Mr McGauran says: "Any objective interpretation comprehensively negates the alarmist views presented" by Dr Alex Reisner in the column. McGauran interprets OECD figures differently, claiming: "The research intensity of the OECD as a whole has barely changed in the past 15 years". In comparison, "Australia's research intensity has increased from 0.95% of GDP in 1981-82 to 1.53% in 2000-01. It is reasonable to expect that Australia will further converge on the OECD average in the years ahead"

Mr McGauran also says Dr Reisner wrongly used US National Science Board figures in showing "a worrisome decline in the importance, relative to population size, of our scientific literature over the past decade". He points out the index is "not relative to population size but a ratio of a country's average citations per publication to the world average".

Mr McGauran disputes Dr Reisner's claim of "an alarming decline in the staffing of the enabling sciences (mathematics, physics and chemistry) during the tenure of the Coalition government", citing contrary Australian Bureau of Statistics figures on academic researchers.

But Dr Reisner, who is publisher of *The Funneled Web* (Australia's sole web site devoted to science policy), counters Mr McGauran's view on OECD comparisons. In a "Write of Reply" he cites figures from the Group of Eight universities, which incorporate the \$2.9 billion commitment from 2001 through "Backing Australia's Ability" and Treasury's projected GDP growth in the 2002-03 budget. These show Australia's "research intensity" has been falling as the OECD average has grown, and that the gap will widen.

Dr Reisner dismisses Mr McGauran's claim that there has been no decline in academic staffing with a chart and statement from Associate Professor John O'Connor, immediate Past President of the Australian Institute of Physics, who states: "Their numbers are declining with funding to universities".

While acknowledging that US Science Board figures are ratios of a country's average citations per publication with the world average, Dr Reisner asserts this "does not negate" his original conclusion. He cites a 2001 analysis by Ms Linda Butler of the Australian National University as being "in line with" the US assessment. In her submission to the 2002 "Crossroads" review, Ms Butler concluded: "Australia's R&D performance continues to fall well below the OECD average". According to Butler: "Mr McGauran's interpretation of the data in my report is not accurate".

**More:** The June issue also includes commentary on the May Budget in the Editorial and in *Pockley's Razor*, where Dr Peter Pockley dissects the Budget for its minor effect on R&D.

**Please cite AUSTRALASIAN SCIENCE MAGAZINE as the source of this story.**

*Mr McGauran can be contacted on (02) 6277 7440.*

*Dr Reisner can be contacted on (0413) 300 788.*

*Call Editor, **Guy Nolch** on (03) 9500 0015 for full texts and for permission to reproduce. Colour photos of Mr McGauran and Dr Reisner are available.*