

PhD numbers drop

“Australia risks falling well short of a world-class knowledge economy”

The declining number of Australians willing to attempt a PhD is a “national calamity”, according to the university most focused on research.

The Australian National University made the claim in a strongly worded submission to a House of Representatives inquiry into research training, *The Australian* newspaper reported.

“Our national calamity is falling domestic PhD commencements,” the ANU submission said.

“This is in an environment of fierce international competition for the best talent available. Other countries are not just

investing in their own, they are seeking the best of ours.

“Without higher student numbers, innovative thinking and new funding, Australia will risk falling well short of the goal to create a world-class knowledge economy.”

In 2006 the equivalent full-time load for domestic PhDs was 4510, down from 5068 in 2000. However, the 2006 load was almost 500 up on the 1996 figure; enrolments rose from 5961 in 1996 to 6422 in 2006. In some fields, such as forestry and radiography, there were fewer than 10 PhD commencements in 2006.

ANU also urges a significant increase in research training of foreign students, pointing out that



internationals in Australia represented only 17 per cent of those in training compared with 40 per cent in Britain.

To attract more foreign talent, the Government should relax visa restriction so these students can switch to part-time and take a break from study to work; to deny these students local scholarships would be “short-

sighted” ANU says.

The house standing committee on industry, science and innovation, charged with the inquiry into “research training and research workforce issues in Australian universities”, has 50 submissions online, with more coming.

It is expected to report by the end of the year.

Common themes in the submissions include the ageing academic workforce, the lack of sufficient PhD students to replace them and remedy skill shortages, the heavy load on supervisors, the absence of a career path for researchers, and the need to increase the value and term of postgraduate scholarships.

A 2006 government estimate quoted in a submission from the department of Kim Carr, Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, suggested by 2013 there would be a cumulative shortfall of 19,000 scientists and 51,000 engineers and engineering trades workers. Senator Carr set up the inquiry.

His department points out that the number of students taking higher degrees by research (PhDs and masters)

more than doubled between 1989 and 1993 but “has remained at around 11,000 ever since”.

In 2006 more of these students were in the field of society and culture (24 per cent) than in natural and physical sciences (19 per cent), health (13 per cent) or engineering and related technologies (11 per cent).

In its submission the Australian Academy of Science urges the committee to look at the merits of the longer US-style doctorate with its foundation of coursework.

“While the Australian system works well for the brightest, highly motivated students, the US system may be more suitable for the second rung of students, as it imposes discipline through organised courses and provides structured information,” it says. **Q**



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