

Australian universities

SIR — Mark Lawson (*Nature* 375, 623; 1995) reports that “four of Australia’s universities account for nearly half of the research effort in the national higher education sector, according to figures released [by the Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee] last week”.

In the text associated with the release of the figures, it was made clear that the Institute of Advanced Studies at the Australian National University (and the Australian Defence Force Academy at the University of New South Wales) were excluded from the data collection because they do not receive research quantum funding from the Department of Employment, Education and Training.

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SIR — If one does not manipulate the numbers, the research output, impact and cost effectiveness in Australian universities continue to be dominated by the Institute of Advanced Studies (IAS) and the faculties of the Australian National University (ANU), not by the “sandstone club”. For example, data in *The Australian* (8 March 1995) show that ANU is responsible for 24 per cent of Australian publications in science that found their way into the top 1 per cent of world citations in all fields in 1988–92. The University of Melbourne accounted for 16 per cent, of Sydney for 12 per cent, of New South Wales, for 6 per cent and of Queensland for 2 per cent. This dominance of research impact by the ANU was achieved through the expenditure of only 12 per cent of all funds available for research for Australian universities over the period (Science and Technology Budget Statement 1995–96).

Recent reviews of the research schools in IAS, by some 70 distinguished researchers, have all commented on the extraordinary impact and effectiveness of the IAS block-funding model for university research. In the case of my own school, reviewers observed “the success of RSBS in this respect provides a model to be followed internationally”. On the eve of its fiftieth anniversary (1946–96) the ANU has proved to be one of the most successful experiments in the support of basic research in the natural and social sciences in universities ever undertaken in Australia or anywhere else.

One wonders why the evidence is so frequently ignored or misrepresented by those responsible for the support of science through the public purse, especially those who should be taking pride in these achievements. There is a clear need to sustain the successful model and repro-

duce it, so far as is possible, in the rest of the diverse university system. Instead, the prevailing wisdom seeks further constraints through outdated concepts of centralized funding, priority management and contestability (Industry Commission Enquiry into R&D 1995). Of course, there is no rush to review the achievements of these alternative models, but evidence of their profligate waste, failed priorities and lost opportunities litters the science policy landscape. Like other litterbugs, the offenders simply move on to offend again in another place, and are rarely called to account. It’s time to question accountability where it really matters, and let basic research find again the paths to our knowledge-based future.

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Striking contrast

SIR — The Commentaries of Benno Müller-Hill on “The shadow of genetic justice” (*Nature* 362, 491; 1993) and Robert J. Pokorski on “Genetic information and life assurance” (*Nature* 376, 13; 1995) are in striking contrast.

Pokorski seems worried about the profits of the insurance business; Müller-Hill is concerned for the welfare of the insured and the uninsurable. But happily Pokorski indicates, perhaps inadvertently, the solution to Müller-Hill’s problem: it is necessary only that private life insurance (based on ‘equity’) should be abolished, and public life insurance (based on ‘equality’) extended to all.

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Useful Usenet

SIR — I was appalled by your statement that “most Usenet postings are of no interest” (*Nature* 376, 200; 1995). There are thousands of serious and useful news groups, including many active scientific groups. Condemning the whole Usenet because it contains frivolous and even offensive sections is the height of indiscriminate. Groups such as alt.lenora.bobbit.chop.chop.chop are the price of free speech.

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Polio eradication

SIR — A recent leading article¹ suggests that “the number of new cases of polio this year is unlikely to exceed some four-digit number”. This refers to reported cases: the World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that reporting efficiency is less than 10 per cent and that 110,000 cases of polio occurred in 1993 (ref. 2). Great progress has been made, and national Sabin days in March, April and May this year will have distributed two doses of oral polio vaccine (OPV) to nearly 70 million children under the age of 5 in the Middle East as far as Pakistan, in Trans-Caucasia and in the Central Asian Republics³. But most cases occur in the Indian subcontinent and we know very little of what occurs there. Why did about 90 per cent of cases not attend hospitals? There has been a 90 per cent drop in the number of cases attending surveillance hospitals, representing an impressive drive to give OPV. We do not know if there has been a similar drop in the number of those who would not have gone to a hospital.

When the Salk vaccine was first manufactured on a large scale in 1955, there were serious problems that led to 193 vaccine associated cases (VAC) with paralysis of which ten died⁴, a very small number compared with those protected that year from paralysis by wild viruses. The Salk vaccine (IPV) has since proved to be safe and effective. The Sabin OPV causes about one VAC per million children immunized: whether this is due to reversion of the virus, genetic susceptibility, other factors such as injections or a combination of all of these is not known. WHO now does not include VAC in its numbers with polio, so that the zero cases of poliomyelitis in the Americas since 1992 excludes VAC. In the United States the no-fault National Childhood Vaccine Injury Act of 1986 (NCVIA; PL 99-660) removes liability from the manufacturer although there are still some causes disputed by the government.

There are four critical indicators of surveillance for polio, yet by 26 November 1994, Haiti had met none, and Uruguay, the Dominican Republic and Costa Rica each met only one⁵. How soon India and other countries will be able to meet these criteria is uncertain.

Eradication of polio may be possible, but we know little of the epidemiology of polio in developing countries.

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1. *Nature* 374, 663 (1995).
2. *Progress towards the Eradication of Poliomyelitis*, Status Report March 1994, WHO/GPV/POLIO/94.1 (WHO, Geneva).
3. *Lancet* 345, 786 (1995).
4. Nathanson, N, Langmuir A.D. *Am. J. Hyg.* 78, 16–81 (1963).
5. *EPI Newsletter* 16 (6), 6, (1994).