

**Research School of Biological Sciences
Annual Report to Council for 1996
September 12, 1997**

Thank you Chancellor for this opportunity to report on research and other activities in RSBS during 1996. I'd like to deal first with research and then with other matters, principally to do with restructuring. Recently the School restated its goal, simply, to research biology as a discipline without boundaries. This sentiment is well illustrated on the cover of the School's Annual Report, golden for the 50th Anniversary of IAS.

The cover is decorated with the eyes of fruitflies that signal unequal exchange of DNA during cell division, processes known to underlie two severe diseases in humans. This research project is driven by Dr. Alan Lohe, one of several promising non-tenured staff appointed in 1996. The design of the Annual Report has been improved to convey research themes to our peers in a more direct and familiar format. I discovered an inverse correlation developing between the number of pages generated for the annual Report, and the numbers of research papers published, a trend that has been arrested by the new format.

The School plays hard and achieves well in an international arena. **Transparency 1** shows that half of about 200 collaborative projects are overseas and about a quarter are with other Australian universities. About a fifth of overseas projects are in our sector of the globe and about two fifths each are located in Europe and the US. **Transparency 2** shows that this international context is well reflected in authorship of over 200 papers appearing in 1996, and in our strong presence on the editorial boards of international journals.

For the second year in a row, RSBS was honoured by an election to the Fellowship of the Royal Society of London. Adjunct Professor Jan Anderson from CSIRO, who had collaborated extensively with RSBS in photosynthesis research for twenty-five years, joined the School full-time in 1996 and immediately bathed us in the reflected glory of her FRS. Professor Gibbs' research in virus classification was recognised by life membership of the International Committee on Virus Taxonomy, and coincidentally his work in bioinformatics is the focus of the newest issue of *Biologic* our high school science magazine, tabled today with the Annual Report.

Dr. Ian Noble was appointed to a professorship to lead aspects of global change research. He also leads the world body responsible for coordinating terrestrial ecological research in this area, but continues to be frustrated by Australia's 'head in the sand' position on these issues.

Dr. Jon Lloyd, a yet to be confirmed member of the tenured staff and the most published researcher in RSBS over the past two years was awarded the Darwin Prize in the University of Edinburgh for his work on global change. This win has turned into a loss however, because the School is unable to match resources available to exceptionally able researchers elsewhere, Dr. Lloyd will leave us next month to join a new laboratory for global change research being built by the Max Planck Gesellschaft in Jena. It is small compensation that this Director was awarded a Forschungspreis by the Alexander von

Humboldt Foundation to help recover his spirits in research in the last year of the directorship.

Our bid in 1996 to sustain the School's largest single source of external earnings, the Plant Sciences CRC, was not successful. The bureaucratic, and now the industrial, capture of this large sector of public research funding, a trend evident as goalposts were repeatedly shifted over the last few years, is now all but complete. We await the outcome of Mortimer and sundry other reports as government scratches about to discover a science policy.

The "at risk" status of basic research funding in Australia generally, and steps needed to rectify it, are dealt with in my lecture "It has been ever thus", read to ANZAAS in September 1996 and published in the Annual Report. Statements attributed to the new Chair of ARC in yesterday's HES seem to confirm that even this source of funding basic research is set to crumble. "Unless we fund research that is going to lead to commercialisation.....we won't be making an immediate benefit to the economy of the country," Chairperson Sara is supposed to have said.

In such an environment, the vital role of the Research Schools in Australia's basic research effort is returning to a context not unlike that of 1946. But whereas the IAS then had the resources to sustain its leadership, to nurture those skilled in curiosity motivated research and to populate a growing university sector, today it does not. Despite the apparent modest growth shown in the RSBS budget papers, we can no longer retain our most promising people, nor can we rely on our abilities to access significant external funding in the fickle, shortsighted arena of Australia's so-called "science policy".

Let me turn to restructuring. Well before the events of the last twelve months, I had set the School on a path that moved about 10% of our budget from administration and services to research projects. The Annual Report for 1996 describes the first round of involuntary redundancies that have subsequently become necessary. Resources saved by restructuring School security and cleaning were used to fund an internal research grant competition in 1996. This controversial move nevertheless lifted morale and boosted collaborative research while we and the IAS waited in limbo for the outcome of the 1995 review. Dr. Lohe's project, headlined on the Annual Report cover, was one of the winners.

The screws are turning much tighter now, to the extent that our brightest and best are leaving for greener pastures. During my directorship RSBS recovered its tenured academic staff base of 30, only to see it drop to 27 and set to fall to 24 by this year's end, a decline of 20% in two years. The enterprise bargaining concessions of 1996, if repeated in 1998, will bring the IAS to its knees.

The School is grateful for the way the Vice Chancellor has responded to the 1995 review and has taken steps to mitigate the effects on the IAS of some of the fiscal slamming subsequently directed to the university. It takes heart that restructuring in central areas as in RSBS, will free up resources for research and teaching. You will understand why I and other directors continue to seek greater transparency in university-wide budgets. We are grateful that the Prof-Vice Chancellor, Finance and Development, continues to

Continue proper costing of central areas, steps that will clarify whether a significant slice of the DEETYA-identified Institute budget is expended on services the IAS does not get or does not need. I am optimistic that, once identified and rectified, a greater proportion of the Institute budget will flow to the Research Schools., and that we may be able to lure Professor Lloyd back to the fold.

This is one university, of two very distinct parts and is the place of distinction that it is because of this. I am pleased that the 1995 review, and a recent review of senior management, noted that the Research Schools of IAS are generally well run. A critical factor in the good running of the Institute has been the leadership of a succession of Deputy Vice Chancellors and Directors of the IAS, without which it is arguable that we would not have had a new Research School in the early 1990's or have pulled together so well in the review of 1995. Had it not been for the alert, street-wise attention of DIAS over a few days between last Christmas and New Year, the IAS would have lost the \$4.2 million awarded by the Review.

I have watched the IAS come together in a remarkable way over the last six years. RSBS has come to believe in the Vice Chancellor's trinity. A recent report, principally addressing organisational and management problems elsewhere in the university, has recommended structural changes to the executive responsibilities for the IAS which would be most detrimental to the future of the Institute and the School.

There is a widespread perception that, in addressing problems outside the IAS, three residents of the ACT have overlooked the pre-eminence of the ANU as a research university and the role of the IAS in establishing and maintaining its international reputation. Their report seems diametrically opposed to those of two elite, international review teams that, during my period as Director of RSBS have respectively established, and recommended strengthening the role of the Director of the Institute of Advanced Studies. I hope Council will balance the weight of this advice, and think again about dispensing with position of DVC/DIAS

You must understand that, having done all I can to strengthen the reputation of RSBS, IAS and the University in the face of external adversity, I now feel most acutely the threat from within. I sincerely hope that, by the time I present my last Annual Report on behalf of RSBS in 1998, this fear will have proved groundless. By then, I hope the last several years of painful restructuring, the frustration of trying to penetrate smoke screens arising from the burning of so many strategic plans, rendered useless by events beyond our control, and the threat that, having once got the IAS right, everything has to be overturned, will have been just a bad dream.