

Report of the 2009 Follow-up Review of the ARC Centre for Vision Science

The Australian National University

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Panel Participants

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Panel Chair

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Panel Member

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ARC Executive Support

Summary

The review panel considered the ARC Centre of Excellence for Vision Science (Centre) has made good progress toward addressing the recommendations raised by the review panel in 2008 and commended the continued high standard of research being undertaken by the Centre. Significant improvements were evident in some key areas, in particular, the Centre has substantially expanded its outreach and promotional activities and consequently it has increased the profile of the Centre in the community and has improved the sense of unity between the nodes. In addition, the reorganisation into three research programs supported by organisational change and clear consensus from all researchers and students in the Centre further supports this improved unity. However, it was noted that there is still work to be done by the Centre in some areas, particularly in relation to increasing the number of research students, ensuring robust mentoring and career development programs for students and for the Centre to continue to improve its unity so that it is clearly operating as a whole rather than as individual research groups

Background

The ARC Centre of Excellence for Vision Science (Centre) was established in 2005, the primary node for the Centre is located at the Australian National University. The Director of the Centre is Professor Trevor Lamb.

The Centre was reviewed in 2008 as part of the extension process for the 2005 cohort of ARC Centres of Excellence. The 2008 review panel, while praising the quality of the Centre's research, expressed concern about the Centre's performance and made recommendations including enhancing professional and career development for students; expanding its outreach and promotion activities; developing more open and visible collaboration between nodes to enhance the cohesiveness of its operation as a Centre; promoting Centre affiliations; recruiting the target number of PhD students and strengthening the engagement with the Advisory Board. A full list of recommendations from the 2008 review is provided at Appendix 1.

Extension funding for the Centre was recommended by the 2008 review panel, but this was conditional upon a satisfactory review in 2009. This second review was to focus specifically on the Centre's response to the 2008 recommendations and, if the response was satisfactory, confirm funding for the second half of 2010 and through to the end of 2013.

Prior to the 2009 follow-up review, panel members were provided with a submission from the Centre Director. The review panel held informal, wide-ranging discussions with the management team, researchers and students directly involved with the Centre and senior management of the Australian National University.

Review findings

Professional and Career Development for Students and Early Career Researchers (ECRs)

In consultation with its grouping of students and postdoctoral staff called the Young Visionaries, the Centre has developed a Career and Development Plan for Students and ECRs. The plan, expected to be confirmed at the 2009 Centre retreat, involves training through a combination of generic and specific courses designed to address student and ECR individual need; a coordinated program of mentoring, exposure to practical experience and inter-node travel; promoting employment and outreach opportunities, funded through a centralised dedicated budget administered by Centre management and providing accountability for meeting the provision of this Plan through annual reporting procedures. The review panel supported this program but noted the Centre appeared to be some way from fully implementing these plans, in particular it was not evident that the Centre had increased the opportunities for students to develop career paths in industry and other professional areas and there was a general concern that due to their workloads, some students may have limited opportunities to focus on career development. The review panel considered that the roles of Centre Associate Directors could be restructured to undertake the separate roles of Research Director and Graduate Program Director.

Outreach and Promotional Activities

The Centre has engaged the services of the media consultant Julian Cribb and together they have developed a communications strategy which has greatly increased the Centre's media coverage, web stories, and improved the promotional material which should increase community awareness of the Centre. One of the big successes in this area has been the Young Visionaries 'Vision Days' to selected ACT Primary Schools. The Centre hopes to expand this program to more schools in the ACT, NSW South Coast and beyond. The review panel noted it was still not clear how the Centre was being promoted to industry and suggested the Advisory Board members could use their connections to promote the Centre to a wider audience.

Cohesiveness of Operations

The review panel considered the Centre executive has made a clear effort to promote more open and visible collaboration between nodes to enhance the cohesiveness of the Centre. In particular, the Centre reassessed its strengths and re-organised its research program into two overarching program areas with both a basic research component and an application component in each. The review panel felt these changes will be beneficial and will provide researchers and students with a better understanding of how they contribute to Centre activities. Both staff and students appear strongly supportive of these changes.

Centre Affiliations and Signage

The Centre has advised that future funding for Chief Investigators will be conditional on public acknowledgment of Centre affiliation, and will make these requirements clear in an

information pack provided to all new staff and students. The review panel are satisfied that this issue has been addressed satisfactorily.

The Centre has taken steps to ensure that signage identifying the Centre as the ARC Centre of Excellence in Vision Science is now displayed prominently on all laboratories and offices in the ANU's RSBS building. Centre management has also commenced discussions with other nodes about the installation of additional signage. The review panel was satisfied this was in progress however it seeks assurance it will be addressed in all nodes as a matter of priority.

Recruitment of Students

The Centre recruited its target number of graduate students over the first three years of operation; however the review panel noted that the Centre was still not performing well in this area in comparison with other ARC Centres of Excellence. The review panel also acknowledged the disproportionately large ANU node and apparent isolation of the University of Western Australia node. Scope for the Centre to increase the number of students lies with the University of Sydney node which is expanding and should provide increased opportunities for collaboration across nodes. The Centre Director accepts the need to increase recruitment of research students and will endeavour to ensure that the Centre provides facilities and research supervisors that will make the Centre attractive to potential students. The Centre Director advised that CIs at the ANU are heavily involved with the neuroscience/vision teaching initiative and this should attract additional high quality students to the Centre. He also advised that the Centre can provide top-up scholarships and negotiate fee waivers with nodes as incentives for international students. The review panel noted that the University of Queensland node has held intensive summer schools, hosted by a CI from the ANU node; this activity supports the co-supervision of students across nodes and it is anticipated further workshops will encourage worthwhile practical interactions between students and nodes. To provide a better information portal for prospective students, the review panel recommended the Centre complete the updates to the website as a matter of priority.

Support of Travel for Students

The Centre has worked to provide more opportunities for students to travel between Centre nodes to provide a better sense of unity among students and has now provided central funding for student travel. The Centre advised the review panel that this funding allocation will be made before other budget allocations are made to Centre nodes and that the amount will be increased from previous years. Most students seemed relatively satisfied with the opportunities for travel. The review panel were satisfied with the changes but encouraged Centre management to develop a welcome pack for new students to ensure information is available equally to all students.

Engagement with the Advisory Board

The 2008 review encouraged a stronger engagement with the Advisory Board and to more effectively draw upon the skills base of the Board. The review panel noted that interaction with the Advisory Board still appears to be somewhat 'hands off' and that the Advisory Board was only meeting once per year, although discussions have been held suggesting moving to twice yearly meetings. Members of the Advisory Board were keen to reinforce to the review panel that the evolution of the Centre is now quite tangible, and that whilst the Centre appears to have taken some time to find its feet the Centre is now operating as one

entity with a clear idea of its future direction. The review panel noted that whilst the Advisory Board members have increased their engagement with the Centre further opportunities for engagement should be explored – in particular to increase the awareness amongst staff and students of the expertise available within the Advisory Board.

The review panel acknowledged that Centre administrative structure was now better resourced following the appointment of a new Chief Operating Officer and a part-time Administrative Assistant.

In Summary the Centre has made good progress toward implementing changes to meet the recommendations of the 2008 review and that this good work should continue to ensure all recommendations are fully addressed.

Recommendations

The review panel recommends that:

1. funding for the Centre for the second half of 2010 and through to the end of 2013 be confirmed;
2. extension funding to 31 December 2013 be approved at the level of \$1.6million per year;
3. the Centre continue to engage the Advisory Board and identify ways to better utilise the expertise available within the Advisory Board;
4. the Centre complete updates to its website and make the updated site available as a matter of priority;
5. the Centre ensure appropriate signage acknowledging the presence of the ARC Centre of Excellence in Vision Science around Centre nodes is addressed; and
6. the Centre allocate \$100,000 per annum to support the Young Visionaries Program.

Recommendations arising from the 2008 review

The Panel recommends that the Centre:

1. develop a program for professional and career development for students in order to provide opportunities for flow-on of students into industry or other professional endeavours and to provide advice on opportunities available in the biomedical field;
2. substantially expand its outreach and promotion activities and appoint a permanent Outreach/Promotions Officer to package and promote the Centre to industry and the community and to provide the Centre with a greater sense of unity between the nodes
3. demonstrate more fully that the three research themes are adding value to the Centre as a whole rather than operating as individual research groups and to ensure more open and visible collaboration between the nodes;
4. ensure that staff and students are more aware of obligations regarding Centre affiliation(s) and that this is included on all publications and conference attributions;
5. improve signage and attribution around the primary ANU building where the Centre is housed to improve the profile as an ARC Centre of Excellence;
6. recruit the target number of PhD students;
7. provide more opportunities for students to travel between Centre nodes to provide a better sense of unity; and
8. encourage a stronger engagement with the Advisory Board and to more effectively draw upon the skills base of the Board.