

AN HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF ARMS



*A speech by Janet Dibb-Smith on 19 September
at the 2007 ARM Conference*

Nine years ago, a group of research managers – several of whom are here tonight – met in Canberra during our annual session with the ARC and agreed that we needed to take some responsibility for our profession.

We felt that if we were to be more than mere processors of ARC grants – and were to truly add value to the research activities and aspirations of our academic colleagues – then we needed to broaden the scope of our discussions, and include in those discussions research managers from hospitals and medical research institutes, CRCs and state governments, sponsor organisations and private companies as well as universities. We wanted to take control of our own meeting agenda.

The group concluded that our next meeting need not be held in Canberra (the traditional venue) but might move around the country – and our colleagues suggested that the City of Adelaide would be an excellent destination.

Mark Hochman (UniSA), Wayne Harvey (at Flinders at the time) and I (then from University of Adelaide) offered to organise the first event. This event being the first multi-sector, multi-issue, multi-role research management conference to be held in Australia.

We set out to organise what we hoped would be an exciting, enticing, engaging and challenging conference with an interesting array of topics, speakers and panellists. At the same time, we began canvassing the idea of forming a professional society that would support such activities – and the research management profession generally – into the future.

Mark, Wayne and I agreed on a theme – “Helping Research Happen” (borrowing Mark’s Research Services office motto) which we felt would resonate with research managers in all sectors – universities, sponsor agencies, government, hospitals and medical research institutes and some private sector colleagues (such as IP and tech transfer consultants).

Using our respective networks, and our colleagues’ networks, we knobbed some wonderful speakers – again, from all sectors involved in research, as well as Government and the political arena. Our Mayor at the time, Jane Lomax-Smith (now a State Minister) opened our Conference at the SA Art Gallery.

Our conference profiled the themes of Research Policy and the National Agenda Research Funding Opportunities and Priorities Research Regulations, Ethics and Probity.

We organised workshops – ethics and commercialisation are two examples. It was clear that research managers from different kinds of organisations and in different roles really valued the opportunity to exchange perspectives and experiences, learned from each other and wanted to keep in touch.

Our social program included dancing, a magician and a somewhat cheeky dinner address by a former Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) – now a Vice-Chancellor.

The conference was, by all accounts, a success – with 280 registrants, representing all Australian universities, as well as hospitals, granting bodies, CRCs and the government – from Australia, New Zealand and Hong Kong.

As we were organising that conference, a group of us were also putting together a proposal to establish an Australasian Research Management Society. An organising group – from

university, government, medical and private sector research environments – consulting with our colleagues – outlined a draft mission statement and suggested a way forward. The proposal drew on the experience of the North American based Society of Research Administrators (which some of us belonged to) but we wanted to tailor it to the Australian research environment.

We then took the very risky step of inviting Conference delegates to a special, optional meeting to discuss the proposal – at 8am on the morning after the Conference Dinner. To our utter delight, we had about 100 people attend the meeting which unanimously and enthusiastically supported the establishment of ARMS.

At that early morning meeting, a foundation executive was appointed to oversee the establishment of ARMS. Vice-President was Philip Marshall of NorthField Laboratories Pty Ltd. Secretary was Russell Dawe, formally of Swinburne University of Technology. Treasurer was Kathy Heinze of CSIRO. And Norma Gilbert (QUT) and Robert Opiat (Garvan Institute of Medical Research) were also on the Inaugural Executive Committee. I had the great privilege of being the first President.

One year later, we had 200 official members – from Australia, New Zealand and Korea – including Australia's Chief Scientist (Robin Batterham, who has been a strong supporter through the years). And, one year on, the Queensland chapter – led by the wonderful Jan Massey (3rd ARMS President) – hosted the first official ARMS-badged conference.

Let me quickly remind you of a few achievements.

- ARMS conferences have established an international profile and have regularly attracted a large overseas delegation – from the UK, US, Denmark, Korea, South Africa and Canada – in addition to our New Zealand members.
- We've gone from a private PO box in Adelaide to a professional secretariat.
- We have a history of good sponsorship of our state and national events.
- Consistent with its professional development objectives, ARMS has active mentoring and travel grant programs.
- The State and NZ chapters have been active in organising regular seminars and workshops on specific current issues, and are attracting wider attention and involvement with their interesting topics.
- ARMS is increasingly being “invited to the table” to provide a much-needed perspective at national functions and discussions – such as Science meets Parliament.
- The ARMS International Committee, chaired for so many years by Fiona Wood and strongly supported by Jan Massey and Helen Fullgrave in particular, has been very active, including organising a very successful national forum in 2004 “Beyond Brain Drain”, the published outcomes of which proved of great interest to the federal government.
- ARMS has strong (formal and informal) ties with its counterpart societies around the world – in North America, the UK, South Africa and Europe in particular – and we participate in each other's events.
- ARMS played a lead role in the establishment of the International Network of Research Management Societies (INORMS), coordinated the first multi-national forum where this was formalised and hosted the First International Research Management Congress on behalf of our sister societies. Some 450 people attended, including 130 international delegates from 23 countries.