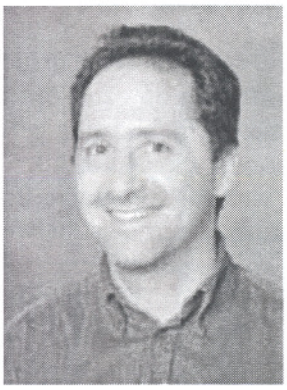
President's Report



The Australian Research Council has been encouraging inter-disciplinarity via the mechanism of the Australian Research Networks, which are being established in phases. Through these phases, groups of researchers communicate with other groups of researchers to find common goals and interests in a diversity of research areas. This staged process has allowed these groupings to refine their common research directions, advertise their plans, and seek other groups with whom a larger network becomes an attractive funding opportunity for the ARC.

This exercise in social engineering is interesting on several levels. With apologies to Shakespeare, we can see that the lure of network funding acquaints a researcher with strange bedfellows. Yet this interconnection between researchers from different disciplines is precisely the aim of this innovative ARC program.

Having developed programs to support the creation of excellence in Australia, for example through Centres of Excellence, Federation Fellowships, and large Discovery and Linkage grants, the next stage is to bring together outstanding groups to collaborate and to engender new, perhaps risky, but certainly innovative and creative research activities. As I read through the proposals, I can see that this effort is succeeding in creating the sort of dialogue that is needed to push research beyond its traditional boundaries.

The networks are interesting on a political dimension as well. Not only are networks meant to create novel and exciting science and technology, but they are also expected to transcend organisational and geographic boundaries and to nurture the next generation of scientists and technologists. Nascent networks are forced to consider the role of the network, not only as a leader of scientific progress, but also as a source of future leaders. These imperatives can seem contradictory, but the requirement to consider research in a broader social context is important to connect research to other needs of Australian society.

Also of interest is the continuing prominence of optics in Australian science and technology; in fact the Network for Optical and Quantum Science and Technology (NOQST) deserves special mention as their seed funding report highlights the Australian Optical Society conferences as evidence of the strength of their network. But optics is strong in other proposals as well: National Vision Research Network; Australian Nanotechnology Network; Photonics Microfabrication Network; Australian Synchroton Sciences Network; Network for Adaptive Optics; and X-rays, Electons and Neutrons.

The prevalence of optics in these multidisciplinary networks raises another interesting issue. Scientific and Technological Societies in Australia are discipline-based, albeit under the umbrella of the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies (FASTS), but how should scientific and technological societies adapt to this new push for interdisciplinarity? How will the formation of these networks affect conference attendance? Will interdisciplinarity increase or diminish membership in discipline-focussed societies? And should societies begin dialogues and create links to foster interdisciplinarity in step with ARC directions? These steps towards interdisciplinarity should make interesting discussions at the joint ACOFT/AOS '04 meeting 5-8 July 2004 at the Australian National University!

Barry Sanders
President, Australian Optical Society
March 2004