

Speech

Senator the Hon Kim Carr

24 Sep 2008

OPEN ACCESS AND RESEARCH CONFERENCE

Video Address

Brisbane, Queensland

The Cutler Report on the National Innovation System contains several recommendations to make public information – including the fruits of publicly funded research – more accessible.

It urges all Australian governments to adopt open publishing standards and creative commons licences.

It says we should ensure that 'the scientific knowledge produced in Australia is placed in machine searchable repositories'.

It argues that to 'the maximum extent practicable ... research ... funded by Australian governments ... should be made freely available over the internet as part of the global public commons'.

These are all recommendations dear to my heart.

It is my firm view that publicly funded research should be widely available to other researchers, industry and the general public.

That doesn't just mean letting people search for keywords or abstracts.

It means full, open access to research data and outputs.

If we are serious about boosting innovation, we have to get knowledge and information flowing freely.

The Government is weighing these recommendations and will respond to them in an Innovation Policy White Paper.

If adopted, the review panel's recommendations will require a rethink of the push we've witnessed in recent years to have researchers commercialise their own discoveries.

The jury is now in on this policy, and I think it can safely be declared a failure.

Only a tiny number of patents held by a tiny number of institutions have made serious money anywhere in the world.

Australian universities generally earn less than 1 per cent of their income from royalties, patents and licences.

The Productivity Commission, the OECD, and most recently Professor Mary O'Kane's Review of the Cooperative Research Centres Program have all questioned the value of asking researchers and research institutions to do their own commercialisation.

Not only have their efforts produced meagre results.

They have in many cases been counter-productive.

To quote the OECD: 'commercialisation requires secrecy in the interests of appropriating the benefits of knowledge, whereas universities may play a stronger role in the economy by diffusing and divulging results.'

Or as Professor O'Kane puts it, "while the economic impact of the [CRC] Program has been considerable, it has been primarily through end-user application of research rather than direct commercialisation".

The overzealous protection of intellectual property rights in this environment raises the cost of knowledge to the community.

When that knowledge is created using tax-payer dollars, the community might reasonably feel that it has paid for it once already.

Making the results of publicly funded research freely available in a reasonable time is good for industry, good for the public and good for researchers themselves, whose work will be much more widely recognised and appreciated.

The Commonwealth is already funding the infrastructure needed to improve access.

We are investing \$75 million in the Platforms for Collaboration component of the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy.

It supports infrastructure for collecting, storing, sharing and retrieving research data.

We are giving universities another \$25 million to establish and upgrade knowledge banks through the Australian Scheme for Higher Education Repositories.

The Commonwealth has also contributed to the Open Access to Knowledge Law Project (OAKLAW) at Queensland University of Technology, which is developing legal protocols for managing the often complex copyright issues associated with open access.

As a net importer of knowledge and ideas, Australia has everything to gain from the kind of 'global digital commons' outlined in the Cutler report.

Public research funding agencies in Europe, the United States and the United Kingdom are already swinging in this direction.

To help maintain the momentum, Australia may want to consider making its own competitive research grants conditional on recipients sharing their research results through open access repositories – including the Internet.

This is just one idea, and I'm sure participants in the Open Access and Research Conference 2008 will have many more.

Thanks for this opportunity to speak to you.

I'm looking forward to continuing the conversation in the months ahead.