

# ROYAL AUSTRALASIAN COLLEGE OF SURGEONS

## Submission To

### Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

#### Review of Higher Education in Australia

The Royal Australasian College of Surgeons is one of 12 post-graduate specialist medical training colleges in Australia. We provide vocational education and training beyond the conventional tertiary level.

As a fellowship based organisation, the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons commits to ensuring the highest standard of safe and comprehensive surgical care for the community we serve through excellence in surgical education, training, professional development and support.

In 2001 the College of Surgeons was the first specialist medical college to be accredited by the Australian Medical Council and we received re-accreditation in 2007.

Between 2001 and 2008 within the Education Portfolio the College has:

- Developed an integrated approach to skills development in surgical education and training
- Increased skills course capacity and support to achieve sustainable growth
- Recruited and retained additional supervisors and trainers
- Developed research based initiatives that support sustainability
- Ensured all competencies and curricula development is relevant to surgical practice
- Developed and enhanced participation of trainees in evaluation
- Developed online educational capacity in particular providing support for supervisor material and the use of videos as training tools
- Developed more effective partnerships with other bodies for delivery of educational material.

In developing and enhancing the education and training materials for surgical training the College is constantly searching for examples of best practice from overseas and within the Australian medical and educational communities.

The College undertakes consultation with a wide range of stakeholders on all of its key activities including regular meetings with state and federal government representatives and working with jurisdictional representatives in relation to workforce issues.

As a College within a sub-sector of higher education that does not fall under the category of either a university, or a vocational education provider (as it currently defined) our perspective in this submission may provide a somewhat different understanding of the issues under review.

In this submission we focus on four of the areas identified in the Discussion Paper as 'characteristics of higher education in modern Australia'. Those areas are:

1. Meeting labour market and industry needs for high level skills
2. Providing opportunities for all capable students to participate in higher education
3. Providing students with a stimulating and rewarding higher education experience
4. Connecting effectively with other education and training sectors

#### **1. Meeting labour market and industry needs for high level skills**

As a College focusing specifically on the development of high level skills in a specialized profession this is a key area of our education and training.

Recognising an ageing specialist workforce and increasing demands for surgery, we are cognizant of the need to increase training opportunities and have regular meetings with jurisdictional representatives to negotiate the provision of training opportunities. The constraint from the jurisdictional point of view is frequently the provision of funding from state, territory and federal sources to provide training programs of sufficient quality to meet accreditation standards.

We are increasingly looking to the private hospital sector to improve training opportunities (see *Appendix 1, Table 1 indicating the ages of the specialist surgical workforce*).

The College is also aware of research that indicates that there is an uneven distribution of or highly skilled graduates between urban and regional/rural hospitals. There are many factors that contribute to this uneven distribution, not the least of which are the different resources and case numbers between hospitals in these settings.

Some of the challenges in this area for us therefore are:

- *Identifying enough quality training positions*
- *Ensuring that there is an appropriate distribution of our trained specialists*

## **2. Providing opportunities for all capable students to participate in higher education**

In 2008 the College introduced a new program designed to provide earlier access to specialist training and to eliminate one of the selection stages in progressing towards successful completion of training.

Being aware of the research in Australia and overseas indicating that the numbers of medical graduates who are choosing to enter surgery is declining the College is keen to increase the awareness of medical students, and potential medical students, of the benefits and challenges of surgery as a career (see *Appendix 1, Table 2 indicating the regional location and number of trainees*).

Two of the challenges in this area for us therefore are:

- *Encouraging an increasing number of capable students to consider surgery as a career choice*
- *Encouraging capable students from different socio-economic and cultural groups, and from regional and rural areas, to make surgery their career choice*

## **3. Providing students with a stimulating and rewarding higher education experience**

By its very nature a very high proportion of surgical training occurs in hospitals. Trainees are therefore concurrently employees in a hospital and trainees. Such a learning environment has the potential to be extremely stimulating and rewarding. However, we are aware of some environments where trainees are at risk of working very long hours in service delivery. The College monitors this through Trainee report (four times per year) Trainee's Evaluation of their training experiences (twice a year) and through our hospital accreditation process.

A second environmental pressure on our trainees is the need for them to have sufficient experience in a wide range of appropriate procedures in hospitals where surgical lists and access to patients are being reduced. This is monitored twice a year through the Trainee Logbooks.

Another pressure on our trainee's training experience is the reduced number of years of the training program from what was previously up to 10 years to five or six years. Part of this process is being addressed through the international trend away from counting hours and numbers of procedures to identify levels of achieved competence.

The challenges for us therefore are:

- *Balancing the demands on our trainees as employees in a hospital*
- *Ensuring that they are receiving adequate training experience, whilst*
- *Working within the necessary constraints of safe hours, and*
- *Responding to pressure to reduce the training period whilst maintaining quality and standards.*

#### **4. Connecting effectively with other education and training sectors**

Our College has a distinctive mission as stated above, and we are working towards both horizontal and vertical connection with other medical education and training providers by:

- a. Recognising that other specialist medical colleges in the sub-sector are training to achieve many of the same medical competencies and working towards developing some mechanisms to recognise those competencies
- b. Working towards improving the links with medical faculties within universities and with the Post Graduate Medical Council.

However, because we function and are accredited outside higher education as it currently defined (university and vocational education – TAFE) there is a gap between higher education and specialist medical training.

The challenges for us are that:

- *Our sub-sector is, to a large degree, invisible in Higher Education in Australia and as such there is a risk that in future planning the contribution of this college, and the other 11 medical specialist colleges, to society and the economy may be overlooked*
- *The professional pathway to becoming a surgeon (or other medical specialist) is not clear for the community, or for potential trainees.*

Concluding comments:

The Royal Australasian College of Surgeons offers this preliminary submission to highlight our involvement in the higher education sector. We are vitally interested in the progress of the review and look forward to the opportunity to make further contributions as the work develops.

## Appendix 1

The following Tables represent the numbers of Fellows and Trainees (as at December 31, 2007). These numbers represent the Fellows and Trainees across nine surgical specialties being Cardiothoracic Surgery; General Surgery; Neurosurgery; Orthopaedic surgery; Otolaryngology Head and Neck surgery; Paediatric Surgery; Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery; Urology and Vascular Surgery.

**Table 1: ACTIVE FELLOWS BY REGION AND AGE**

The Northern Territory has the lowest percentage of active Fellows under the age of 55.

Regions Specialty	ACT	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	TAS	VIC	WA	Aust	NZ	O/S	Total 2007
≤39	9	173	1	113	46	16	127	50	535	70	67	672
40-44	9	221	3	119	46	6	143	56	603	104	40	747
45-49	10	201	2	134	55	15	165	50	632	133	52	817
50-54	13	160	2	102	51	18	130	63	539	116	46	701
55-59	8	156	3	70	42	11	114	25	429	76	62	567
60-64	7	183	4	77	52	10	150	37	520	73	68	661
65-69	8	126	1	60	33	6	104	27	365	50	41	456
70+	2	132	2	37	18	3	104	19	317	27	31	375
<b>Total</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>1,352</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>712</b>	<b>343</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>1,037</b>	<b>327</b>	<b>3,940</b>	<b>649</b>	<b>407</b>	<b>4,996</b>
<b>% Of Active Fellows under 55 years</b>												
<b>%</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>56%</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>59%</b>

Source: RACS, Management Report, As at 31 December 2007

**Table 2:****ALL BASIC SURGICAL TRAINEES BY REGION AND YEAR OF TRAINING**

Note: from the beginning of 2008 this program is being phased out

Region & Year of Training	ACT	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	TAS	VIC	WA	Total AUST	NZ	O/S	Total
Year 1	6	47	2	39	14	1	52	16	177	47	2	226
Year 2	3	64	0	41	13	3	81	12	217	48	3	268
Year 3	2	46	1	24	14	2	44	14	147	32	0	179
Year 4	2	17	1	7	5	0	6	3	41	15	0	56
<b>Total</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>174</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>582</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>729</b>

**ACTIVE SURGICAL SPECIALIST TRAINEES BY YEAR OF TRAINING AND LOCATION OF HOSPITAL POST**

Location & Year	ACT	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	TAS	VIC	WA	Total AUST	NZ	O/S	Total
Year 1	4	70	4	35	21	9	55	23	221	41	2	264
Year 2	5	66	2	32	9	6	46	16	182	39	2	223
Year 3	2	68	0	37	16	1	39	15	178	31	7	216
Year 4	0	55	0	24	10	0	53	19	161	38	5	204
Year 5	0	15	0	2	3	0	13	4	37	5	1	43
Year 6	0	3	0	1	1	0	6	1	12	0	1	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>277</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>212</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>791</b>	<b>154</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>963</b>

Source: RACS. Management Report, As at 31 December 2007