

The SAF Program

*Contribution to the review of SAF:
a report by Dr Richard Bissell*

Disclaimer

The content of this report does not represent the official views of the ACOLA Council or the Expert Working Groups that created the SAF reports.

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Terms of Reference

In 2012 the Australian Chief Scientist, with funding from the Australian Research Council, commissioned the Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA), to undertake a program of leading to evidence-based findings in support of public policy-making. The program entitled *Securing Australia's Future* (SAF) is due to complete in June 2016. By then SAF will have completed 12 projects across a range of issues.

SAF is a unique program in the Australian context and in some ways an experiment. As SAF approaches completion ACOLA Council wishes to assess the program, to capture the broad cross-cutting themes that have emerged, to understand which aspects have been most successful and particularly to understand lessons learned that might strengthen the case for a subsequent program.

To this end, ACOLA Council wishes to commission Dr Richard Bissell, Executive Director, Public Policy & Global Affairs, of the National Academies in Washington, to assess the SAF program and report on its management and operation including:

- the definition and scope of projects
- the construction and selection of Expert Working groups
- the appropriateness of the final reports as advice to Government
- the appropriateness of peer review process
- the role of the individual Academies in supporting the SAF program
- the role and effectiveness of the Program Steering Committee in overseeing the SAF program
- the role of the ACOLA Secretariat in managing the program.

In reporting, Council wishes to have:

- comparisons with the way that The National Academies in Washington would have conducted such a program
- recommendations that might improve the program if a similar venture was undertaken in the future.

Contribution to the review of *Securing Australia's Future*

Report by Dr Richard Bissell, Executive Director, Policy and Global Affairs, US National Academies.

Based on a short visit with 24 interviews, I am better positioned to offer you issues rather than answers. It is clear, however, that SAF stakeholders could continue with a second phase of work, given the fact that the SAF has already provided significant value for money to the government with strong evidence-based policy findings.

I was tasked to focus on KEQ2 from the SAF review: *To what extent was the SAF program model (including processes) fit for purpose and how does it compare to international good practice?*

The author is Executive Director of Policy and Global Affairs at the US National Academies, but the views expressed are solely his personal conclusions, and do not necessarily represent the views of the Academies.

Governance

- 1.1 The defining characteristic is the existence of four independent Academies coming together for a common purpose. The closest comparators would be the Council of Canadian Academies (on the national level) or the InterAcademy Council (at the international level). Because the US National Academies are a single legal entity, certain aspects are less relevant for comparative value.
- 1.2 As a matter of function, the ACOLA Council is extensively engaged in SAF's substance and management issues, including the review of report content. In the US National Academies, that function was removed (progressively in recent decades) from the governing Council to be delegated to a quality assurance function embodied in a Report Review Committee consisting of members of the three Academies. But other functions in SAF are equally centered on the Council, such as the appointment of EWG members, the setting of priority topics, and the scoping of projects. If the SAF program were to scale up, the Council will undoubtedly have to consider how to delegate some of those functions to the PSC or an entity to be created.
- 1.3 The Council members could play a larger communications function, conveying the importance of ACOLA and SAF activities to the members' respective Fellowships. Such feedback can be useful not only to inform the Fellows of reports being issued in the name of the Academies, but also to foster an expectation of volunteerism when called to serve on a future EWG or the PSC.
- 1.4 Given the diverse range of potential audiences in government departments, Council members can also be empowered to reach out to departmental leaderships to foster agreement on new areas of inquiry for SAF-style reviews. Whether this is of value depends on whether the Office of the Chief Scientist steps back from being the sole interlocutor for government.

Management

- 2.1 On a spectrum of international models, the SAF program is near the decentralized end. Once a statement of task has been agreed and the members of an EWG appointed, management is effectively delegated to the EWG Chair and the project management team established by the implementing Academy (with one exception in the current cycle). This approach raises questions as to who outside the EWG can and should influence the report content during the process, and who “owns” the report when released. The latter issue is of emerging importance in light of the general agreement that the SAF reports should be given broader circulation to a wide range of audiences; responsibility for that function would need to be fixed.
- 2.2 In this atmosphere of decentralization, the role of the ACOLA secretariat has been largely financial, ensuring proper stewardship of the multi-year government award. It might be worthwhile examining if there are other services common to the SAF and its study processes that could be provided more efficiently by a single focal point in the ACOLA secretariat. A time/expense inventory of project steps and analysis by a consultant could reveal any opportunities in this regard.
- 2.3 It appears that the PSC has also assumed a management role, to a degree not expected by some EWG Chairs. The regular reporting by the chairs at each PSC meeting, the receipt of suggestions from PSC members for alternative lines of inquiry for the report, and the appointment of liaisons from the PSC to participate in EWG meetings were procedural adaptations that emerged during the course of the SAF. They have met varying responses from the Academies and EWG chairs. Developing a guide for PSC members and for newly-appointed chairs about the appropriate role of each might help to avoid irritation in future projects. There are models for such a guide available from non-Australian academies.
- 2.4 The management role of the EWG chair is interpreted in diverse ways, partially differentiated by those of academic, business or government background. Some chairs see the report process through the lens of a “principal investigator” model, where the chair takes on primary authorship responsibility for content and management; they often hire a postdoc or former student to serve as project manager. Other chairs see their job to be to mobilize the right cohort of consultants to research and write the report, so the Chair and members of the EWG can simply guide the report. In too many cases, the workload for the Chair appears to have soared well beyond what was expected when the appointment was accepted. That frequently consisted of the Chair undertaking much of the drafting of the report in the absence of a readily available alternative. A modest handbook for a prospective or newly-appointed Chair could do much to avoid unmet expectations not only on the part of the Chair, but also for the PSC and the ACOLA Secretariat in actual management of the project, supplemented by a terms of reference for each project with an explicit work plan to better forecast the time requirements for the EWG Chair and members.
- 2.5 Among the most sensitive management issues is the oversight of changes in the statement of task guiding an EWG. Interviews with the chairs affirmed the frequency of such changes, often quite significant. Such changes generally involved the PSC, but not always at the same stage. Some of the changes stemmed from the initial scoping of a project being too broad to be accomplished in the time allotted. The importance of how one changes the substantive task is widely recognized. There has been inconsistent practice as to whether the EWG Chair was engaged in the original scoping of the study. The appointment of the Chair after adoption of a project scope inevitably results in changes belatedly made in the statement of task. A less obvious problem is the change in the study protocol to answer the assigned areas of inquiry. For instance, when the EWG finds that the expected data for the study cannot be found, or it is made available with methodological errors, should the EWG go “upstream” and undertake the original research themselves? Such shifts in the work plan can have major impacts on the timetable and the cost structure of the project.

Implementation

- 3.1 Among the array of completed projects, there is significant variation in the actual execution of the research projects. While some of the range can be explained by the scale and complexity of the topic in question, it is also driven by the management style of the Academy in charge of the particular EWG. Such divergence of style is normal in academic endeavors, but has clearly—government—operating on non-academic timelines.
- 3.2 The importance of timeliness in policy advice is sometimes unappreciated by professionals working outside government. Policymakers are inevitably opportunistic, and that particularly means forcing decisions on initiatives on a schedule determined by much larger forces, whether outside advice is available or not. The SAF program has generally shown some agility in response to such demands, with some grumbling, but one conclusion about the already-issued SAF reports was that all projects need to be completed on a more expedited schedule, in 12 months or less. This shortening of time horizons appears to be a fact of life in all major democracies with scientific advisory bodies, with policymakers pushing for more rapid decision-making processes.
- 3.3 Raising standards for timeliness and consistent quality has major implications for the staffing of such projects. The current approach is very *ad hoc*. While this may be acceptable to the participants within the SAF program, and preferred by the Academies implementing each project, it raises a risk of muddying the “brand” of SAF reports. Are policymakers receiving advice from an interdisciplinary panel of experts? From a single-author academic with peer input? From an edited collection of consultant contributions with an interpretive introductory essay? While there will inevitably be some variation in implementation to allow for personal styles of project leaders, some boundaries would create for greater consistency of final products. Out of the various approaches taken in this first round of SAF projects, some judgments could be made by leadership about the most effective implementation to serve as a model going forward. Overall, the predominant view was that the reports need to be drafted in the future based on more limited scopes, utilizing experts as staff or hired writers so that the reports are shorter, sharper, and the findings are so crisp as to avoid ambiguity when it comes to government considering how to turn them into actions. The skill mix required of the primary author could be articulated so expectations are set before hiring of staff.
- 3.4 This review might find it useful to collect and analyze the timelines of each project completed, with milestone targets and achievements (appointment of Chair and EWG, approval of scope and terms of reference, meetings of the EWG, data collection, report drafting, peer review, release, and dissemination). If there are patterns of where challenges emerge, they would guide priority areas for development of implementation guidelines.
- 3.5 These guidelines would be useful to many audiences, e.g., EWG chairs, ACOLA secretariat, PSC, executive directors of the individual Academies, and the project

managers. In the last case, problems in implementation always arise, and have to be addressed in real time. While the ACOLA secretariat serves as a source of advice in finding solutions, the secretariat might find it useful to have a virtual “support group” of such project managers to converse both periodically and then to get counsel from each other as issues arise. Since the managers of interdisciplinary and inter-Academy studies have many challenges in common, increasing communication would not only solve immediate problems but might also over time foster a cadre of senior staff professionally skilled in this type of work. Conversations between the academies in different countries are remarkably frequent and often relate to management solutions in the advisory process.

- 3.6 The final stage of any policy advisory study—ensuring that it is read and appreciated by whatever audiences play a role in implementation—is not a simple process. The original approach appears to have vested this responsibility in the Office of the Chief Scientist, and after several years of experience, all (including the current Chief Scientist) agree that a broader approach needs to be taken, with the initiative taken by the respective managing Academy and/or ACOLA. Emblematic of this new approach might be the unusual steps taken by the Australian Academy of the Humanities to share the results of SAF03 with Asian communities in Australia and its planned symposium in 2016 on the report. Examples already exist among non-SAF products

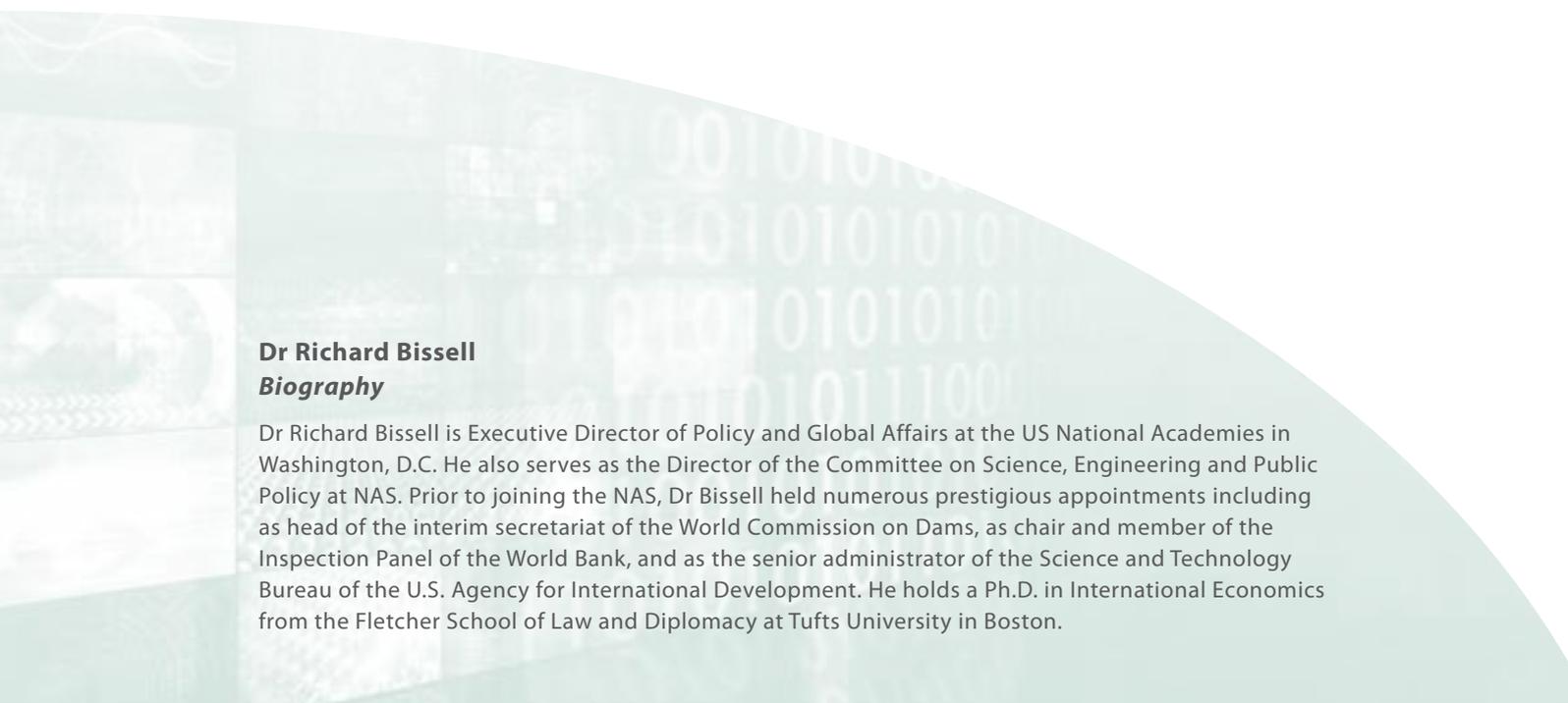
of the four learned Academies as well as overseas counterparts for targeted, punchier summaries of the key points in reports. The question for ACOLA is where to vest that skill set, the knowledge to develop strategic dissemination plans, and the clearance process to ensure such derivative products remain faithful to the findings of the report. The end result could not only be more impactful individual reports, but also the emergence of an ACOLA brand that commands instant respect.

- 3.7 One specific aspect of dissemination that was of interest to some interviewees was the possibility of multiple derivative products, particularly those that might complement the impact of the main report. The idea was raised, for instance, as to whether the reports of consultants might be published separately (whether by ACOLA, simply posted on the ACOLA or project website, or independently by the consultant) and thus increase interest in the project. Other academies do this in various formats and with appropriate disclaimers that the consultant’s views do not represent the view of the EWG. The second source of complementary products can be any workshops held in the course of evidence gathering where the presentations and discussions are of sufficient import on their own to warrant publishing a summary of the workshop, without any conclusive findings that would undermine or contradict the final project report. These workshop reports have been utilized elsewhere to whet interest in the main project, particularly where that becomes a relatively extended process.

Structure

- 4.1 The current structure for the SAF program was largely driven by the existing ACOLA approach and has resulted in some tension to be expected with a drastic expansion of capabilities to implement a \$10 million program. The structure has delivered surprisingly well, presumably due to the underlying goodwill and civility of the academy participants. Many lessons could be drawn from the way in which the Academies, the Council, the Board, and the Secretariat have addressed the challenges, but to some extent any conclusions may have to await decisions from the government about structuring requirements going forward.
- 4.2 A fundamental tenet about the SAF's unique contribution to national policy-making is the interdisciplinary nature of the enterprise. The ability to mobilize first-rate expertise across the science, engineering, social science and humanities communities is quite extraordinary. Indeed, there is no comparable effort outside Australia that has been able to sustain such an integrated structure beyond a one-off study (for instance, in reports issued by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences). In that sense, the work of the SAF is not only a unique asset in Australia; it is also a model that academies abroad should watch closely to see whether it can be institutionalized.
- 4.3 The SAF has taken a highly integrated approach to ensuring inter-disciplinarity. The EWGs have been composed with representation from all four Academies, as has the PSC. As a matter of governance, of course, the Council and the Board both have an equal number of seats as well for each Academy. This commitment to equality has its value, but may have two unintended consequences: it may leave some EWG members marginalized as appointees for their affiliation rather than their relevance to the statement of task, and the existence of multiple representatives in each project from each Academy seems to obscure the sense of responsibility for keeping all Academy colleagues informed about progress of the project. When the latter happens, concerns about a report may be raised very late in the process, too late to adequately come up with a remedy. A clearer elaboration of the responsibilities of EWG members, PSC members, and Academy staff for communicating progress in a project to all Academies could emerge from this review. Given the importance of retaining the balanced treatment of science, engineering, social science, and humanities to fulfill the potential of the SAF, frequent progress reviews would seem to be essential.

- 4.4 Several issues came up in conversation about the roles of the EWG Chair and members. Since all serve as volunteers—the norm in academies around the world—the question of recognition for their potentially major contributions does arise. The greatest recognition is to know that their report has made a difference in government policy. But for too many of the SAF reports, the Chair actually had little or no feedback from government about recommendations that may have been forwarded to departments or the PM, or whether they had been adopted. The current process seems highly linear, with reports going into the OCS, and little coming back. Volunteer satisfaction is closely related to building a feedback loop so the EWG knows that the unpaid time and effort of the members and Chair paid off.
- 4.5 Finally, the overall SAF/ACOLA structure began this program locked into the role of the Chief Scientist and his expectations that the PM's Science Council (later CSC) would be the door through which advice would impact the government. This is being reconsidered, with implications for everything from negotiation of scope to financing the studies. Among foreign counterparts, there are examples of both approaches as well as a hybrid in the case of the Council of Canadian Academies. If the choice is made to work more directly with specific departments, one way to keep a foot in the camp of the OCS is by issuing an annual synthesis of the various interdisciplinary reports from all four Academies. This has been in place for some time by the US National Academies, although at the present time that annual synthesis is formally presented to the Congress rather than to the White House Science Advisor.



Dr Richard Bissell
Biography

Dr Richard Bissell is Executive Director of Policy and Global Affairs at the US National Academies in Washington, D.C. He also serves as the Director of the Committee on Science, Engineering and Public Policy at NAS. Prior to joining the NAS, Dr Bissell held numerous prestigious appointments including as head of the interim secretariat of the World Commission on Dams, as chair and member of the Inspection Panel of the World Bank, and as the senior administrator of the Science and Technology Bureau of the U.S. Agency for International Development. He holds a Ph.D. in International Economics from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University in Boston.



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