

Segue: Securing Australia's Future compendium

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It is far too early to have the final word on Securing Australia's Future (SAF). The conversations the series sparked have a long way to run, the evidence remains fresh, and the insights remain relevant. That is precisely the outcome we sought when we embarked on this great endeavour in 2012.

SAF's goal, after all, was not simply the production of a million words – as impressive as that tally now appears. It was to engage some of the nation's most respected minds on perhaps the country's most critical brief: the path to prosperity in the decades ahead. That mission, once begun, is a never-ending task.

In one important respect, however, we can say that SAF's task is done: it has laid the foundation for a follow-up phase of horizon-scanning reports, with the Commonwealth Science Council's strong support.

Five projects have already been commissioned and will be underway at the time this volume goes to print.

Now we will have the opportunity to pinpoint those high-impact developments in science which could radically reshape our lives and position policy makers to act wisely in anticipation.

We have also created an outstanding model of expert interdisciplinary research that can undoubtedly be adapted and used in other fields of endeavour. Other parties should and will come to the Australian Council of Learned Academies with project ideas of their own, if they see the benefits writ large in these reports.

So I write not so much SAF's 'epilogue' as a segue to the important mission that lies ahead.

What have we learned since SAF began, and how will that knowledge now shape the Commonwealth Science Council horizon-scanning reports?

We might begin with a reassertion of our time-tried definition of 'quality': excellence and impact combined.

We read in the newspapers that 'excellence' – in the sense of genuine expertise, rigorously applied – can now be considered dispensable, in a world that prefers common sense to inconvenient facts. I don't believe it. And if I did, it would be all the more reason for experts to stand up for the principles of objectivity, integrity and transparency.

Excellence and impact must not be mutually exclusive. On the contrary, it is the promise of excellence that gives a learned academy its capacity to be influential.

That does not mean that impact takes care of it itself. In my experience, any foresighting project needs four things to interest influential people in a topic beyond their urgent concerns.

First is a receptive audience with an interest in the topic and, ideally, some connection to the project. Second is exquisite timing, to catch that window when an issue is compelling but time still remains to act. Third is optimal form, picking the right medium to make helpful conclusions abundantly clear. And fourth is ongoing commitment, recognising that reports without explainers and advocates will simply sit on shelves.

On the first count, we enter with the benefit of interested leaders, already engaged with the horizon-scanning topics through the Commonwealth Science Council. As a collaborative body of decision makers in government, industry and research, chaired by the Prime Minister, the Council is well placed to identify the priority concerns for the country. My role as Executive Officer creates the conduit for ACOLA's work, and I look forward to tabling reports which excel against all three remaining criteria: timely, well constructed and well explained.

The experience of SAF demonstrates that the existing frameworks have many strengths in promoting reliably good results. In particular, the reports are living documents that show all the hallmarks of collaboration across disciplines and institutions. They are widely perceived as comprehensive, balanced and reliable, free from the suggestions of any ingoing ideology. In today's public policy landscape, that is no mean feat.

The challenge has been to achieve that rigorous standard, sometimes across very broad terms of reference, before the audience drifts – factoring in the time required to present the complex information in a succinct and compelling way. Concise reports, as we know, invariably take longer than weighty tomes.

I do not believe that efficiency needs to come at the expense of quality. We can deliver a high-calibre result within a 12-month window if we focus the inquiry on a high-value target, make on-time delivery a non-negotiable goal, and arrange the process to suit.

We will then be in a position to present the document to the public through the auspices of the Commonwealth Science Council – and we should not underestimate the amplifying role that such a high-level forum will play.

Finally, let me project forward to that day when the next segue will be written – reflecting on all that the horizon-scanning reports will have achieved.

How is Australia better as a result of the contributions that so many intelligent minds have made?

Will we have put forward evidence that has prompted national leaders to act in perceptive ways?

Will we have brought together researchers across disciplines, in new patterns of collaboration, from which truly novel ideas have formed?

Will we have fostered the interest of students and early career researchers in national policy concerns – and empowered them as a new generation of national thought-leaders?

That would be a future worth securing, and I look forward to working with you to point Australians on the way.