

MPs identify objection to UFO thesis

Joanna Mather

The granting of a doctorate of philosophy in the study of unidentified flying objects has raised eyebrows among members of a parliamentary inquiry into the provision of research training in universities.

As university representatives met in Sydney yesterday to pitch their case for more federal funding, the University of Melbourne faced criticism for conferring a PhD in ufology – the study of UFOs – on Martin Plowman.

Fran Bailey, MP for McEwen and deputy chairwoman of the House of Representatives industry, science and innovation committee, said the project's merits were questionable.

"In this environment where money is so scarce and we are all wanting to get the highest level of research possible, it did seem to me there was a bit of a question mark about that," she said.

Representatives from several universities had said the government needed to provide funding to cover the full cost of research training and increase the commonwealth stipend for postgraduate students.

Mr Plowman will become Dr Plowman this week after investigating hundreds of UFO sightings and interviewing dozens of ufologists for his thesis, which looks at the links between UFO sightings and religion, politics, national security and popular culture.

He visited key sites Roswell in New Mexico and Wiltshire in England, a crop circle hot spot.

The committee is holding public hearings as it considers issues such as the contribution of research training programs to Australia's competitiveness in science and innovation.

Andrew Cheetham, the pro-vice-chancellor of research at the University of Western Sydney, told the committee the thesis might be sociologically valuable and Australia should perhaps devote more time to sociological research.

Maria Vamvakinou, the MP for Calwell and chairwoman of the committee, said: "I think knowledge is infinite, such as the universe, so I can't wait to get my hands on that PhD."

Mr Plowman is working on a book, thanks to sponsorship from the University of Melbourne's Writing Centre for Scholars and Researchers.

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