
President's report for 2015/16

This is my first report as President of the New Zealand Association of Scientists. It has been a privilege, as well as a great learning experience, to lead the Association for the past year. I have to say that my predecessor, Nicola Gaston, undersold the workload a little. But she also didn't fully pass on the sense of reward that comes with learning more about the great science and scientists that cling to this rock in the Southern Ocean. This sense of reward was not the least due to it being the 75th Year of the Association and so I got a crash-course in New Zealand science history. A measure of our success is that the local science media (such as it is) chooses the NZAS as their number one point of contact when any science issue comes up. This maintains the legacy developed by my predecessors in this role around building relationships and profile. I suggest that this is perhaps a stronger indication of the health of the Association than membership numbers. We have impact!

The conference was a reasonable success, with the 75th year being a point at which to consider a balance of reflection and future thinking. All the key issues remain: career pathways especially postdoctoral opportunities, diversity, funding, etc. We finished the day with an Early-Career Researcher panel, which gave an excellent counterpoint to the mostly reflective day, as we looked at how we support the lead scientists of tomorrow. I closed my address with the point that societal challenges grow – climate, population, migration, health, education, housing, economy – nothing is getting easier. To paraphrase a recent movie – we're going to have to science the heck out of this.

We maintained a high media profile, which included press releases around science in the media, funding success rates, trusting and using data, and a good deal of coverage around the conference itself. We also achieved substantial attention for our Annual Awards. This supported our decision to shift the awards to earlier in the year to separate ourselves from the deluge of other awards that are about to arrive from November onwards. Recognising the challenges around accurately reflecting the community, we maintained gender balance in our medal assessment panels. It was a pleasure to see the reception of the renaming of the Research Award as the Beatrice Hill Tinsley Award. The coming year will see us looking to rename the Science Communication Medal. A big thankyou goes to Peter Buchanan and the judges for their efforts.

The National Science Challenges finally lumbered into action, with most actually signing contracts and commencing work. It is difficult to convey my feelings around balancing the new support for science, as well as the initiation of bona fide 'science missions', with the reality of the duplication, re-invention, business as usual disguised as not business as usual, and the dominance of the Usual Suspects. I sincerely hope the science can rise above this slow start.

It was against this background that it proved to be an important year for science and science funding in New Zealand. The 2016 Budget brought good news for New Zealand society and its economy that benefits from science of all flavours. The Health Research Council's funding, Marsden Fund and Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment's Contestable Fund (now called the Endeavour Fund) all received increases. Furthermore, MBIE cemented into place the processes around the Endeavour Fund. This has the benefit of opening up the scope of what can be applied for. But, in the absence of a dramatic increase in the level of funding available, this obviously means that success rates drop dramatically. Many excellent proposals go unfunded. This is a loss to New Zealand and brings to the fore accountability in decision-making. MBIE are dealing out millions of dollars in public money, and at the same time extracting thousands of hours of mostly futile labour from the Nation's best minds. The results are drawn from a black box with the words 'trust us' on the front in marker pen. The review process remains a farce. There needs to be more clarity around process and decision-making. There has to be a better way.

On the other hand, the Marsden Fund has demonstrated that even a fund with a very low success rate can have impact if it is applied consistently, and as openly as possible, and evolved in a measured fashion. This success demonstrates the stubbornness and tenacity of the New Zealand science community more than anything. The increase to this Fund in the last budget round was welcome. I believe its worth in the New Zealand science ecosystem is understood by MBIE and the Minister, but vigilance must be maintained. The Association provided comment on this to a recent MBIE review.

That fact that science funding was a priority in the 2016 New Zealand Budget was a positive sign. It was also pleasing to see that it followed, in some measured way, the initiatives set out in the National Statement of Science Investment¹. Once you look at a scale larger than the individual, a Plan, even an imperfect one, is better than no plan. These increases have to be viewed against the previous years of attrition which explains why, even with recent funding increases, we have such a low standing in science funding indicators internationally. Funding success rates in the Endeavour Round were disastrous. Eight per cent and 17% for Smart Ideas and Programmes, respectively. These compare with 8% in last year's Marsden Round. Putting this in context with overseas success rates, where numbers like 20–35% come up, makes things look tough. Critically, we return to accountability. The New Zealand system, with no meaningful feedback, gives no method of honing and evolving proposals.

¹<http://www.mbie.govt.nz/info-services/science-innovation/national-statement-science-investment>

If you are an institute, 17% looks OK. If you are the individual who spends a month developing the idea and writing a proposal which only funds 30% of your time (plus a team of colleagues and technicians) it starts to look just marginal. And, of course, if you were in the 83–92% that missed out, it looks really bad. I think we need to get a grip around what a science proposal is. They are treated pretty lightly by anyone who has not written one. A science proposal is not a fixed economic unit – it is not a new pergola in the back yard or a paint-job for the local council building – it is a leap into the unknown, supporting thinking and ideas that may, or may not, take us somewhere new. These ideas need to be valued more.

New Zealand Science Review continues to provide a key outlet for reporting around science policy and ideas. We continue to look at ways to improve delivery and benefit to authors. It is a particular pleasure to write this knowing that the next issue brings Geoff Gregory's history of the Association up to the present day. I reiterate my satisfaction at being able to publically acknowledge Geoff's work at the Annual Conference. Thanks go to Allen Petrey and the *Review's* editorial committee (Hamish Campbell, John Clare and Mike Berridge) for maintaining and enhancing the quality of this important voice for the Association and for Science.

The position of President is a two-year role. It takes a year to work out how the whole thing works – so that gives a year to inject ideas and energy and prepare for the next phase. As we have signalled, our key event – the annual conference – will have a theme around science outside the big institutes and usual players. If we want science and the Association to continue to be part of the science story in our society we have to get more people valuing, understanding and feeling part of science. We have an untapped resource, and that consists of all the people in the workforce and in society who have some science training and/or interest but don't directly work at the coal-face. We have to entrain these people into the conversation.

While the Association feels strong, actual membership numbers continue to be a struggle. We continue to look at ways to either boost numbers or change the way the Association works, reflecting changing attitudes to membership and Association utility – Troy Baisden especially is to be thanked for his efforts in this and many other fronts, despite a tough year health-wise.

My sincere thanks, on behalf of membership, goes to Council. This is all done 'on the side' by all of us, along with all the other things 'on the side'. If I had the energy I'd plot up the time-of-day some responses come in via email. Neil Curtis is thanked for his role as Patron. Fiona McDonald continues her vital secretarial/organisational duties, Chris Bumby wrestles with the accounts, Troy Baisden provides ideas and energy, Nicola Gaston and Shaun Hendy provide substantial support, wisdom, and experience – especially around working with the media. Peter Buchanan's tireless work to organise the awards is a great deal of effort handled smoothly. Simon Granville came on-board through the year specifically to provide support around web activity, but immediately provided much more besides this with ideas, passion and careful analysis (notwithstanding his tweet about my dress code for the awards night). Mike Berridge, John Clare, and Desmond Darby are, as ever, valued, with their wealth of experience around various aspects of the New Zealand science system. Natalie Plank and Joe O'Callaghan take a break from Council, but both have indicated their willingness to return in the future – I hope this will come to pass. I also thank the members of the Association outside Council who also helped out where needed. I look forward to the New Year and seeing what we can achieve for New Zealand science.

Craig Stevens
President
26 October 2016