President's column

This President's Column serves as an updated version of my address to our November 2020 Annual General Meeting. Like many other aspects of 2020, the President's address would have been disrupted and out-of-date quickly, so I hope you find my words below timely, and also a good summary.

I was elected to the Presidency at our 2019 Conference, which focused on the deep issues of equity and diversity in science. This formed a theme for the year, with multiple publications helping to provide evidence for the potential severity of Covid-19 impacts on diversity in science. First, Ann Brower and Alex James quantified the wage gap between female academics and their male counterparts, over a career, and showed that without intervention this gap would continue. Furthermore, Tara McCallister, Sereana Naepi and others have published a string of papers quantifying how underrepresented Māori and Pasifika are in research, and specifically in science.

This emerging work, and the consensus from our conference, provided weight to argue strongly for measures from funding agencies and institutions to mitigate the expected impacts of the pandemic on diversity and equity in the science workforce. The initial response was a mixed bag, with a top-up of existing MBIE programmes as the simplest way to keep money flowing into the research system, but a cancellation of the Smart Ideas prior to the full proposal stage was seen as a significant blow to innovative new science and younger researchers. Only in recent weeks has the main thing we've called for finally got underway – a new national post-doctoral fellowship scheme. This is the first since the long-standing post-doc scheme was cancelled in 2010, as a result of what then-NZAS President Shaun Hendy eventually identified as a maths mistake by the Ministry. The new scheme is initially funded as a one-off, so we will lobby hard for it to continue and for an assessment of whether it should be enlarged, perhaps to 50 fellows per year rather than the current 30.

This year's most frustrating issue by far has been Massey University's plan to cut about one-third of its science staffing, including much of the excellence in fundamental sciences that founded the Albany campus in Auckland's fast-growing north. While some consolidation could be understood, claims that teaching of nearly all previous subjects can be continued digitally must be questioned. Worse, changes to the finances and expectations of academics appear incompatible with committing senior staff national and international research leadership, and Massey has silenced its academics from commenting publicly. Our members are deeply concerned, and I welcome contact[1] from any who haven't been in touch. So far, NZAS has led an open letter to the Ministers of Tertiary Education and Research, Science and Innovation from the presidents and past-presidents of a number of New Zealand's learned societies, suggesting that Massey's actions are inconsistent with all aspects of the definition of universities in the Education Act, with particular concerns about research[2].

Our letter requested intervention, not directly from the Minister, but by installing an independent mechanism of oversight and review to ensure consistency with the legislation. The Minister has made clear that the views are appreciated, and the solution was potentially elegant, but after legal review apparently not feasible under the Act due to the mechanisms maintaining the independence of Universities. Massey continues on its course, though perhaps more slowly and carefully than otherwise would have occurred. We stand by to debate every step in the media, and to seek accountability through the Official Information Act and other mechanisms so much as we are able. The biggest concern, looking across the ditch to Australian Universities, including Murdoch and Southern Cross that have enacted similar schemes, is wider application of the same goals and tactics to the detriment of science excellence and great uncertainty for scientists.

Focusing on a wide issue where we can be proactive, Council plans to continue making the case for improvements to the sustainability of science careers in New Zealand. The pandemic's challenges force us to think hard and make action more urgent. The problems are threefold and start with steps toward workable early career progression within New Zealand rather than a dependence on sending talent overseas and recruiting talent to these shores. Following immediately on that is the need to address diversity and equity imbalances, starting simply with the ability of scientists to also remain connected with family, whanau and place-based research. The last is a broader issue we will also focus on – the need to rebalance the science system to support capability directly in the form of people, equipment, laboratories and institutions. Our system remains internationally unique in being so dependent on 'turning the crank' to deliver research outputs. A number of reports and analyses, including our own, point out the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for a reset.

I will close with a brief thank you to all on Council for their continued efforts and note the following special efforts. The *New Zealand Science Review* and its guest editors have produced two remarkable special issues on Mātauranga and Science; Georgia Carson has led an effort to develop NZAS as a hub of Early Career Researcher networking and engagement; and congratulations to former President and continuing Councillor Shaun Hendy on being named a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to science.

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[2] See p. 112.