
President's column

Winter is coming, and its proximity, as always, serves to highlight how quickly the year is moving along. NZAS has had a very busy start to the year, running our annual conference in Auckland this year, in conjunction with a public screening of *Thin Ice*, the climate change documentary. Our medallists and award winners from 2013 were presented with their awards by the Minister of Science and Innovation, Hon Steven Joyce, and we had a day of excellent discussion of the 'Science and Society' Challenge currently being worked on by the Ministry of Business, Innovation, and Employment. A fuller report on the conference is available on our website, and is also included in this issue of *New Zealand Science Review*. Very much on my mind on the day, listening to the conference presentations, was how much has changed in the science system in the last few years, but how slow the pace of some of that change is. The issues explored in the last two conferences: the loss of postdoctoral fellowships, and the value – beyond commercial value – of scientific activity, are clearly still with us.

A continuing issue for the Association is the status of Callaghan Innovation, and its relationship with the scientific community. It has become increasingly clear that Callaghan Innovation has very little in common with Industrial Research Ltd (IRL) beyond the continued occupation of the Gracefield site. It can only be appropriate to mourn the loss of the Crown research institute that occupied quite a singular role in the physical sciences in New Zealand, and that had inherited a distinguished history of scientific activity from the old Department of Scientific and Industrial Research. The hole that IRL leaves in our science system is yet to be fully understood.

However, we can at least hope to see positive action from the new Government agency. If, in its mission to make stronger connections between researchers and businesses throughout New Zealand, Callaghan Innovation can reduce the overhead cost to individual researchers in trying to establish and maintain such relationships, that would indeed be a positive thing for us all. Yet the scientists at most risk from the current changes are those who remain employed by the organisation. In the financial report on Callaghan Innovation by the Parliamentary Select Committee on Education and Science that came out in January this year, the language was quite explicit: *Callaghan has no need to employ specialist researchers itself*. What then is to become of the remaining research staff at Gracefield? NZAS will continue to watch this issue closely.

Of serious concern for other reasons has been the proposed Education Amendment Bill, now under consideration by the Education and Science Select Committee. The proposed reduction of size of university councils, and consequent loss of representation of diverse voices is a significant concern. Our universities are not diverse places, and yet most New Zealanders would like to believe that equal access to tertiary education means that family background has no bearing on educational success. For this to have a hope of being true, we need to include student, Māori, and a range of perspectives in the governance of our universities.

The Association's submission on the matter, available on our website, highlights the many differences between universities and companies of a similar size, in particular in terms of the diversity of university stakeholders, and the complexity of the

financial and broader social environment in which they operate. The role of the university in supporting academic freedom and a role as critic and conscience of society is also affected by Steven Joyce's apparent move towards greater direction of university strategy.

It is hard to see the currently proposed changes as anything other than a means to enable greater ministerial control, which should concern any observer of the changes in the science sector in the last few years. While ministerial direction and control is appropriate in those areas of science funding where strategic direction is warranted, overly prescriptive governance can do a lot of damage in a small country such as New Zealand, where small changes in incentives can quickly have a much greater impact than intended. This is as true in the education sector as it is in science.

A particular concern, in my mind, is that some of the debate about the increasing government focus on STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, maths) has been framed as a conflict between science and engineering on the one hand, and the arts and humanities on the other. Certainly it is true that scientific disciplines have a much easier time of explaining the economic relevance of their outputs: however, the continued push to judge outputs of research in purely economic terms does as much damage to scientific fields of inquiry as it does to any research that is in the business of generating knowledge. Any commercialisable science is developed in dependence on a basis of knowledge that is continually being both renewed and extended; just as the ability of an apple tree to produce fruit depends on the health of the entire tree.

It is becoming apparent, even if you don't pay much attention to politics, that we are now well into election year. Issues of science and education are unlikely to get as much media time as some others, and understanding the relevant policies of different parties can feel a bit like reading the tea leaves, when it comes to turning policy into practical action. In an effort to better inform our members, NZAS will be surveying the major political parties on their approach to a number of current issues across the science sector: if there is something that matters to you, let us know and we will see what answers are forthcoming.

No matter to whom you are inclined to give your vote, election year is a good time to tell your representatives what you think about the issues that matter to you. Some of your major concerns may be related to science, but many of them will not be. But as scientists, do we perhaps have a responsibility to advocate for science? Or, on funding matters in which we may be perceived to have a self-interest, does speaking up risk damaging public perception? I have heard both opinions on this, and I do not have a perfect answer. What I do know is that I had access, early in my career, to funding mechanisms – nationally contestable PhD and postdoctoral fellowships – that no longer exist in any form. As someone who profited from such schemes, I believe that I have a duty to say so. I believe we all have a duty to advocate on behalf of the next generation of scientists, our current students, for whom the educational playing field seems to have become so much more unequal than it used to be.

Nicola Gaston
President