
Letter to the editor

Editor,

What should be the outcome from the NZAS 2013 conference?

The topic of the recent NZAS conference was: What is the value of science in New Zealand? This broad topic was addressed by politicians, public servants, established, entrepreneurial, young and social scientists, an economist and a poet.

Value is a multi-faceted concept. Do we understand the value of science as: the money it generates for the (New Zealand) economy (resulting from new products or efficiencies), or public health outcomes resulting from research, or the evidence-based scientific method itself? Or perhaps hope, understanding, and the spirit of exploration are how we value science? Most speakers were perhaps guilty of not clarifying their conception of 'value', and the ensuing discussion was a little unfocused because of it. Nevertheless, Hon. Steven Joyce's address clearly focused on economic value, whilst Dr Russell Norman and the younger scientists emphasised the 'public good' value.

Most surprising for me, given the audience, was that there were no robust statistics quoted on the economic value of (New Zealand) science (to New Zealand). The invited economist, Les Oxley, would argue that this is because it is an unquantifiable – and that given the limitations of valid economic experiments, never will be quantifiable. In response, Shaun Hendy presented his group's work, arguing that a nation's wealth is generally dependent on its investment in scientific research.

While there is clearly a need for a more robust quantification of the value of scientific research to measurable economic outcomes, people do not always think in terms of \$s (granted, though, that they often do). It is important to realise that *people are not always swayed by evidence-based arguments*. This point was highlighted by the (sadly, unemployed) science communicator, David Winter, whose reasoned response to Ken Ring's 'earthquake predictions' after the Christchurch earthquakes seemed to be widely considered equally valid to Ken Ring's contributions. As Winter suggested, popular opinion seems to be swayed not by the quality of argument, but rather by the number of voices opining a position.

Similarly, sound economic arguments *may* persuade a politician to invest more in scientific research, but what will more surely persuade this investment is a significant voting population that values it.

I suggest that the key outcome from this conference must be an investment by the scientific community in the *communication* of what we do.

To whom, what and how are the questions we should focus on. We should be guided here by our talented and passionate science communicators, but I will say that the conference reinforced my belief that there is an un-sated interest in science from the general New Zealand public. This should be prioritised, and another 'Ever wondered?'-like series on national TV would be great – perhaps based on the recent National Science Challenges!

So, a question to finish with: Do our universities, CRIs and CoREs invest sufficiently in science communication?

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