

The EMCR forum at the Australian Academy of Science:

Do emerging scientists have a future in New Zealand ... or over the ditch?

Nicola Gaston*

Victoria University of Wellington

At the end of September, the Australian Academy of Science hosted their inaugural meeting of the Early/Mid Career Researcher Forum. The Forum was set up in recognition of 'the challenges faced by Australia's emerging researchers' in 2011, in order to 'help inform its policy recommendations to government'.

Having attended the meeting of the New Zealand Association of Scientists earlier this year, which addressed the question 'Do emerging scientists have a future in New Zealand?' I was very interested to see how these issues differed across the Tasman. The audience was similar, in that it included PhD students, also established researchers with their own research groups, and a few eminent scientists with some pithy things to say; these included the Australian Chief Scientist Professor Ian Chubb, and the recent Nobel Prize Laureate, Professor Brian Schmidt (@cosmicpinot).

Ian Chubb talked about Australian science as a whole, with a lot of the key messages highly relevant to New Zealand as well: the need to 'overinvest' in science, relative to the rest of the world, if we want to maintain our status as relatively advanced economies.

He also called the lack of value placed on a PhD a serious cultural issue in Australia; again this is something we would seem to have in common. He finished on a note of serious interest to the audience by addressing the issue of job security: young researchers need it, but established researchers should have employment dependent on performance.

The discussion of job insecurity continued with Brian Schmidt speaking at length about the two-body problem in science: dual-career couples who find the challenges of short-term funding and frequent relocation a significant barrier. He shared some of the ways in which he has tried to mitigate these issues, by offering 5 year fellowships to post-docs and support those – both men and women – who wish to work part-time.

The issues of women in science were touched upon by many of the speakers, but most directly by Dr Marnie Blewitt, Laboratory Head at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute (a medical research

institute). She spoke about family-friendly policies that promote gender equity, but more that just policies: real initiatives and financially significant schemes to prevent the loss of women from research.

The conference also made extensive use of twitter, under the hashtag #emcrforum (a summary of the conference in tweets can be found at <http://storify.com/whereisdaz/science-pathways>). The online discussion enhanced the points made by the invited speakers, and led into excellent question sessions throughout the meeting.

For example, in response to comments on the need to communicate the value of science to the public and politicians, a Forum member @whereisdaz tweeted: 'Are we shooting ourselves in the foot by making purely economic arguments for research funding?'

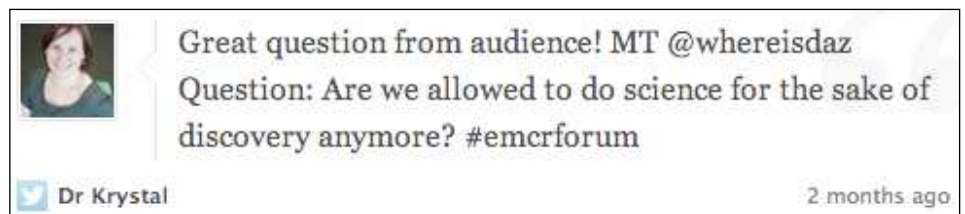


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In response, connections were made to previous topics of discussion, such as job insecurity (from @SimonCopland):



And if you asked a good question, you got to know about it:



On the website they claim: 'Importantly, the Forum provides a vital connection between Australia's most eminent scientists and tomorrow's future scientific leaders.' I thought that they actually managed to do more than that in this meeting, partly through the use of twitter to encourage engagement and dialogue, but also through the insistence on real practical outcomes, and the willingness of the chair of the Forum, Dr Marguerite Galea (@

* Correspondence: Nicola.Gaston@vuw.ac.nz

mveg001) to facilitate these. For example, see their submission to the McKeon review on the science.org.au website. This was a recent review of Health and Medical Research in Australia, but many of the recommendations made by the Forum are pertinent to any field of science. Just as our own Early and Mid-Career Networks (such as Stratus, profiled in the previous

issue of the New Zealand Science Review, and the Wellington EMCR network introduced in this issue) start to make a real difference in advocating for early career researchers, it will be worth keeping an eye on what happens on the other side of the Tasman.