

New Zealand Association of Scientists 71st Annual Report*

President's Report for 2011/12

This is my first report as President of the New Zealand Association of Scientists. It has been a great honour and privilege to lead the Association for the past year. Thanks to the contributions of our members and our Council, I am pleased to observe that the close of 2012 sees the Association in very good health:

- Membership is up by 20% from late 2011 (almost 300 now, up from 240 in late 2011, and 210 in late 2010);
- Our new web site continues to function well. New members can join via the website while existing members now have the ability to pay membership dues on-line.
- We have maintained a good media profile and are regularly approached for comment on science policy issues.
- The *New Zealand Science Review* continues to be relevant to the New Zealand science community and maintains a wide readership.

In February we co-hosted the inaugural Science Policy Studies conference (SPS 2012) on the contributions that science can make to policy, and in April we held the very successful conference that highlighted the plight of emerging scientists.

We are in a very good financial position, thanks to increases in membership and *Science Review* subscriptions.

These achievements indicate the relevance of the organisation to New Zealand and its science community.

This year saw science and technology very much in the spotlight. Vote Science and Innovation distinguished itself in the 2012 Budget by receiving an increase in funding against a background of cuts to almost everything else. New money was promised for initiatives such as the National Science Challenges and the Advanced Technology Institute. As President I found myself in the very interesting position during Budget week of having to explain these initiatives to the media as best I could. There seemed to be a vacuum of information on these at the time, and many questions still remain, even as I write. Nonetheless the Association welcomed the injection of funding into the science system, even if it came through new initiatives rather than more established mechanisms. My suspicion, however, is that there has been a net leak of funding from the science budget for public science providers into private sector innovation spending. The budgets for public good science were trimmed, and it is not clear that additional funding for the high-value manufacturing portfolio is finding its way to scientists.

What is clear is that the Ministry has struggled with its workload this year, as it ran a major contestable funding round at the same time as trying to kick-start these new initiatives. Two major restructurings in as many years have generated a very high turnover of staff and a significant loss in institutional knowledge. We can only hope that the new Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment will provide a better resourced and more stable home for our counterparts on Bowen St.

This turmoil may be one of the reasons why we have yet to see any serious attempt by government to address the problems

faced by our emerging scientists. Figures from the Ministry of Science and Innovation show that the number of postdoctoral positions funded by the Ministry fell from 386 in 2007/08 to 323 in 2009/10. With the phase-out of the Science & Technology postdoctoral fellowships, a rough estimate suggests that by mid-2013 we will have 40% fewer postdoctoral fellows than we had in 2007/08. It seems that these postdoctoral fellows are being replaced in the laboratory by PhD students, who are more cost-effective but require more training and will generally be less able to deliver in short time frames. This can't be sustainable: we are churning out more and more PhDs and offering fewer and fewer opportunities for them to progress.

While the Ministry has continued to study the problem, our conference *Do Emerging Scientists Have a Future in New Zealand?* (organised by Council members Kate McGrath and Justin Hodgkiss) has led to some tangible outcomes. In early November, for instance, the Wellington Early and Mid-career Researcher (WEMCR) Network was launched. Styling itself along the lines of the University of Auckland's Stratus network of emerging and early career researchers, the group held an inaugural meeting on 6 November that was attended by around seventy scientists and researchers. The aim of this regional network is to provide a voice for younger researchers in the greater Wellington region, as well as opportunities for mentoring and career development. Stratus is also planning to extend its reach across the Auckland region by inviting researchers from other institutions to join. I hope that the success of Stratus and WEMCR will encourage other centres to develop similar organisations that embrace new researchers from across the science community. Follow them on twitter via @StratusNZ and @wtn_emcr.

These issues and others continue to keep the Association busy. It is only through the dedication and enthusiasm of our Council that we are able to maintain a voice on these issues, so I would like to thank all those members of Council who have made contributions over the past year. In particular, our Secretary, Fiona McDonald (at Otago University in Dunedin) continues to provide sterling service for Council, despite the fact that she is not able to attend Council meetings. I would also like to thank Peter Buchanan, our other non-Wellington Councillor, who took over the administration of our annual awards from Neil Curtis. There have been several changes to the Council again this year, with Kate McGrath and Ed Abraham both standing down. Kate and Ed have each made important contributions to the Association. Kate served for many years on Council, including a pivotal stint as President from 2007 to 2009. Ed was the person behind our new website, which has now become a very effective platform for our on-line presence. Earlier this year we gained a Vice-President, David Frame, who has become an active member of Council. Nicola Gaston also joined us this year and has played an important role on our communications sub-committee by running our twitter account (follow us on @nzscientists).

Membership

It is very encouraging to see our membership continue to increase, likely a result of tumultuous change taking place in our

*Presented at the 71st Annual General Meeting held on Thursday 15 November 2012 at Milk and Honey Café, Rankine Brown Building, Kelburn Campus, Victoria University of Wellington.

sector and the relevance of our 2011 and 2012 conferences to this change. Our membership now stands at nearly 300, which is a strong improvement on recent years. We still have a long way to go to meet our goal to represent at least 10% of all New Zealand-based scientists, however. We would encourage all of our members to promote the Association to their professional colleagues.

Awards and medals

The Minister of Science and Innovation, Steven Joyce, presented our annual awards at Rutherford House at Victoria University of Wellington on 27 November 2012. The awards this year highlight the broad strength of fundamental science in New Zealand. The recipients come from a range of disciplines, including physics, geoscience, microbiology and mathematics. All of these scientists have produced research that crosses disciplinary boundaries, and it is very encouraging to see them making such an impact. The winners are profiled below.

For the first time this year we allowed for electronic nominations, which in the long run should ease the burden of administering the awards and encourage more submissions. We also no longer require nominations by third parties, and are encouraging applicants to put themselves forward. This is consistent with the way several awards schemes are now run, including the Prime Minister's Science Prizes.

Council Membership and Affiliates

I would like to thank and acknowledge the following members of Council who have served during 2012:

Neil Curtis, our Patron.

James Renwick, Immediate Past President and Chair of the Communications Subcommittee.

David Frame, Vice-President (who joined us this year).

Hamish Campbell, Chair of the *New Zealand Science Review* Subcommittee.

Paul Gandar, Treasurer and Membership Secretary.

Fiona MacDonald, Executive Secretary.

Allen Petrey, Editor of *New Zealand Science Review*.

Edward Abraham, out-going web manager.

Justin Hodgkiss, in-coming web manager.

Kathryn McGrath and Justin Hodgkiss for organising the 2012 NZAS conference: 'Do Emerging Scientists have a Future in New Zealand?'

Peter Buchanan, Chair of the Awards Subcommittee.

Desmond Darby, who judged the Research Medal.

I would also like to acknowledge other members of Council: Mike Berridge, John Clare, Nicola Gaston (who joined us earlier this year), Chris Sissons, and Justin Hodgkiss, who have all been very active members and have acted on various subcommittees. Their contributions have been very important for the smooth running of the NZAS during the year. In particular, I would again like to note the long-standing contribution of Kathryn McGrath, who stepped down this year after more than five years on the Council, including two years as President, as well as Ed Abraham, who also stepped down from Council this year.

Finally, I would like to recognise the contributions made by a number of members who are not on Council: Brian Robinson (Otago) and Geoff Jameson (Massey), who jointly judged the Marsden Medal this year; John Hay, who was responsible for the Shorland Medal; and Phil Johnstone, President of the Science Communicators Association of New Zealand, who judged our Science Communicator Award. I must also note the contribution of Janet Grieve, who helped to organise the SPS2012 conference.

Shaun Hendy
President