
President's column

Time for a change

The Survey of Scientists, the CRI Taskforce review, changes to Government science agencies and funding structures – these are interesting times indeed in the New Zealand science sector.

The NZAS has identified a number of serious issues affecting the science sector in New Zealand, and we are very keen to see them addressed. There is a pervasive feeling amongst scientists in New Zealand that they are not as gainfully employed as they could be, as they used to be. Increasing levels of competition, and increasing levels of oversight and micro-management of publicly-funded research, means that bench scientists are now spending much less of their time on science than they did 10 or 20 years ago, and much more of their time on ‘overheads’. Combine that with a continued lack of vision and short-term thinking from Government science agencies, and uncertain fund-ing streams, and it's no wonder that many practising scientists are reluctant to recommend science as a career.

Such a situation cannot go on. It's inefficient use of public money, and a waste of the scientific ‘human resource. Thankfully, the National Government seem to have recognised this and appear ready to do something about it. Creating the position of Chief Science Advisor to the Prime Minister and appointing Professor Sir Peter Gluckman to the role was a significant step in the right direction.

The CRI Taskforce produced a very timely report, echoing many of the concerns identified in the NZAS Survey of Scientists, and has proposed a number of very sensible moves to address the issues. The Government appeared ready to implement many of the recommendations of the Taskforce report. Things were starting to sound really promising.

Recent events paint a slightly different picture, though. In the 2010 Budget, significant new funding for science has come in the form of (largely) money for technology transfer to business, with over a quarter of the ‘new money’ being taken away from funding for basic research in health, social and environmental sciences.

While it's understandable that the Government is concerned to boost economic growth through applications of science and technology, I am dismayed that this appears to translate to new

funding only for applications, not for the underpinning science. Going too far down that track will eventually undermine the science sector completely, leaving us with no new science to apply. A bit like picking the ripe fruit from the tree while starving the roots of water!

Maybe when the economy is healthier, there will be more public money invested in science and technology, but we'll have to wait and see.

As well as Budget moves, public science management structures are changing. As suggested in the CRI Taskforce review, MoRST and FRST are to be merged into a new entity, a new Department of Science. CRI management will change, with more non-contestable funding, and CRI Boards and Executive teams having more responsibility and accountability for science and organisational management.

Again, this sounds good. But, the time frames for change are very short. Structures that have evolved over 20 years are being redesigned in a matter of months. As noted in a recent NZAS media release, ‘we run the risk of making a quick fix, that will inevitably focus on the short-term, more operational side of the publicly-funded science sector. The opportunity to take the long view and plan carefully for the future may be lost through a desire to ‘get a result by Christmas’.’

This year, we have an opportunity to think strategically and really make a positive difference to the science sector in New Zealand. The risk is that with the next election only a little over a year away, short-term thinking will prevail and we'll end up with essentially more of the same: a continued lack of vision from central government science agencies, and continued over-competition amongst CRIs and other science agencies for a large fraction of their funding.

The NZAS is committed to making a positive difference to the process of change, for the good of those working in the New Zealand science system – you and me.

James Renwick
President