



New Zealand Society of Plant Biologists

President's Report 2013

Welcome to the 35th annual meeting as an incorporated Society. This year we are meeting as a joint NZSPB/NZIAHS conference at Massey University in Palmerston North. The programme looks very interesting and so I hope those members that are attending have a very productive meeting. At last year's AGM a number of important items were raised one of which was the lack of career pathways for young researchers. I was essentially requested to make this a priority in my role as President of the Society. Below I outline the progress that has been made.

Career Pathways for young scientists

After raising this issue at the November 2012 meeting of the Royal Society Vice President's committee, I had the issue placed on the agenda for the next meeting in March 2013 and was asked to lead the discussion. I also requested feedback from our Society which allowed me to prepare the notes that were circulated and used in the VP panel meeting for discussion on 19.3.2013 (these notes are attached as an appendix to this report). The VP panel's feedback from the discussions were presented to the Royal Society Council in April. This apparently stimulated a substantive discussion and recommendations for further research funding. Hopefully all research organisations will now take this problem into consideration. Universities, in particular, have the perfect opportunity to invest PBRF funding into productive post-doctoral positions. I will continue to promote this issue at every opportunity.

Roger Slack Award

It is a great pleasure to announce that the recipient of the 2013 Roger Slack Award is Dr Richard Macknight. The Roger Slack Award is the major award of our Society and Richard is fully deserving of this honour. Richard gained his PhD in biochemistry from Otago University in 1994. After post-doctoral research at the prestigious John Innes Institute in the UK, Richard returned to Otago University where he is now a Senior Lecturer. From 2011 he has also worked for Plant and Food Research. Richard has made a major contribution to the molecular understanding of plant reproductive biology. He initially cloned and characterised the flowering timing gene, FCA from Arabidopsis. Richard has continued detailed studies on FCA regulation and extended his research into agriculturally important legume crops. From legumes he has isolated circadian clock genes, such as ELF4 and also FT genes which are central to the induction of flowering. His research has now demonstrated the potential to induce flowering on demand using a novel combination of endogenous and heterologous FT genes. This is obviously of substantial biotechnological interest. Richard's research has been published in highly respected international journals such as Nature, Plant Cell and PNAS.

Richard has international recognition for his research and developed significant collaborations with colleagues in the UK and Australia. Overall, Richard's studies have provided very important insight into understanding the environmental control of flowering.

Richard Macknight will present the Roger Slack Award address, entitled "Discovering how plants know when to flower" at the 2013 NZSPB meeting in Palmerston North. Richard will be presented with his award at the conference dinner.

Travel Awards

It is a major role of the Society to support travel for our postgraduate students. The support that we have given this financial year is detailed in the Treasurer's report. In addition, to postgraduate students it was decided at last year's AGM that we should offer some support to technical staff who are members of the Society. This year we have had interest from a number of members and will discuss the details further at the coming AGM with the intention to action this as a priority in the coming year.

Development of the Web and Marketing

We have received a number of comments suggesting that our Web site is somewhat out of date. Philippa Barrell has now taken over responsibility for the Web and has been assisted by Mike Clearwater to understand Expression Engine, the software that runs the NZSPB Web site. Thank you to Mike for previously looking after the Web. Philippa has up-dated email addresses and asks members to inform her of any change of address that has taken place in the last couple of years. It would also be helpful if members could check their research interests on the membership page and inform Philippa of any changes. Philippa would also like members to send her ideas on what they would like from the NZSPB Web site. Please also send new images so that we can include them on the home page. We will make it a priority to up-date the Web site, adding to it new images and other relevant information.

In December 2012, Cate Macinnis-Ng produced a document outlining various strategies to grow the Society. There was a large variety of feedback which included surveying members, member incentives to encourage colleagues to join and a focus to increase the low number of members from Auckland. Cate has now devised a survey which will be further considered by our Council before sending out to all members. Cate has also looked at Facebook and Twitter accounts of other Societies and would be willing to run a similar member interface if considered to be valuable. These ideas are very useful and will be discussed at the 2013 AGM.

Future meetings

At present we do not have any meetings planned for 2014. There is however, the Horticulture Congress in 2014 which many members will attend. There is also a lot of interest from our members to attend the QMB meeting in 2014 and incorporate a plant satellite meeting. In 2015 we will be involved in Combio again.

Acknowledgements

Most importantly, I would like to thank the Council for their contribution to the Society, Rainer Hofmann as Vice President, Tina Summerfield as Treasurer and Marian McKenzie as Secretary, Cate Macinnis-Ng, Philippa Barrell, Nick Gould and Mike Clearwater. The Council members are all very busy people and give up their time willingly to assist with regular matters, such as organising the annual conference, assessing student travel awards, and dealing with those issues that arise throughout the course of the year. I am very grateful for their support to the Society which is invaluable.

Professor Brian Jordan

(President of the New Zealand Society of Plant Biologists)

25.6.2013

Appendix

- ❖ Introduction: Developing a successful science career pathway has been a longstanding problem worldwide. However, the situation in New Zealand has to use common jargon got to the situation of a “perfect storm”. The most recent discussion was initiated by an open letter from Melanie Massaro et al. to MSI in September 2011 signed by 560 researchers voicing concerns about the Rutherford Discovery Fellowship scheme. A review of the RDF carried out by Dr Prue Williams then took place at which I attended (plus Prof. Alison Stewart, Prof. Stephen Goldson, etc). Relatively minor changes consequently took place to the RDF scheme. I refer you to the review by Massaro et al. (2012). Trapped in the postdoctoral void: Lack of postdoctoral opportunities in New Zealand forces emerging researchers to exit science or seek employment overseas. *New Zealand Science Review* 69(2) 30-39.
- ❖ At the 2012 AGM for The Society of Plant Biologists this topic was of great concern and I was tasked to bring this issue to the attention of the VP panel (which I did at the November 2012 meeting). I also circulated a letter to my members requesting their feedback on this issue.
- ❖ Although the focus of the debate has centred on post-doctoral fellowships the problem is much broader and we as a panel should consider the wider context.
- ❖ The problems include over-production of PhDs (approximately 4000 to 8000 between 2003 and 2010) which is driven by funding to Universities (“bums on seats”). Few post-doctoral positions from providers such as Rutherford, AgMardt and Universities creating a bottle neck to the career progression of PhDs. The high overheads associated with post-doctoral positions are seen by some as a major disincentive. The PBRF system is also seen as a negative for employment of young career scientists (as they have low PBRF scores).
- ❖ Feed-back to me (I would particularly like to acknowledge the thoughtful comments of Professor Ian Warrington, Massey University) suggested that trying to reduce overheads was an institutional non-starter! Any reduction would result in loss of capex investment, etc. There is, however, a counter point that lower overheads could lead to more

willingness to support post-doctoral positions and Universities and CRIs would see financial (PBRF output), quality (better mentoring of PhDs) and productivity gains (post-doctoral researchers know their careers depend on output!). Generally there is great concern for the wider career opportunities and criticism of the competitive funding system that was introduced in the early 1990s. This aspect has potentially improved recently with more core funding being available within CRIs. The lack of pressure to retire in research/academic institutions will, however, do nothing to help the problem.

- ❖ There is now an imperative for the development of career pathways for emerging researchers within science research organisations. Will CRIs continue to stand alone or be “merged” with Universities as seen in the UK? Certainly, much greater integration of research providers from the tertiary sector and CRIs has to be beneficial for developing employment prospects for PhD graduates.
- ❖ Will more post-doctoral fellowships help or create more circling scientists in a holding pattern with still no career pathway? My view is that post-doctoral fellowships are invaluable for career development, productivity and mentoring potential within Universities. Consequently, there certainly should be greater investment to provide a sensible number of positions. Post-doctoral fellowships are, however, only part of the solution to provide career pathways for emerging researchers.
- ❖ The general organisation of science with respect to the creation of career pathways needs to be urgently addressed. This, I believe, is a very important issue that the New Zealand Royal Society should consider with the highest priority to provide solutions to this significant problem for young scientists.



New Zealand Society of Plant Biologists

Treasurer's Report 2013

As of 31st March 2013 we had 154 members on our books (96 Full Members, 51 Associate Members and 7 Life Members), a similar number to last year.

Total income was \$6,478.30, the majority (\$5,000) from the Ethylene conference 2012, remaining income was from members subscription and interest on term saver account. this is slightly decreased on last year. Total expenses were \$5,992.04, more than last year primarily due to increased student support for travel this year. Student subsidies and prizes were increased this year compared to last year to a total of \$5,000 this year. Eight students received travel awards, this included four awards of \$800 for international conference attendance and four awards of \$400 to travel to the NZSPB ComBio 2012 conference. Increased funding was awarded per student attending ComBio than in previous years as this conference was in Adelaide. Travel awards were given to: Shirley Nichols, Rubina Jibrán, Georgina Rae, Tina Sehrish, for travel to international conferences, and to Jared Fudge, Kate Calcott, Rebecca Bloomer, Wouter Ballizany to travel to ComBio2012. In addition, Jared Fudge was awarded \$100 for the ComBio best student poster at the NZSPB meeting and Jimmy Thomas was awarded \$100 for best student presentation (2011). Expenditure for the Roger Slack Award included cost of the medal and awardee David Chagné's travel expenses.

The bulk of our funds are held in a term saver that earns interest of 2.75%. I would like to raise the possibility of transferring some of this to a longer term saver, e.g., \$14, 000 into a one year option that would earn 4.20%.

Tina Summerfield

Treasurer NZSPB