**Australian Society of Plant Scientists**

**Annual General Meeting**

**PRESIDENT’S REPORT**

**by Peter Ryan**

**25 November 2021**

The following notes summarise most of my activities from October 2020 – November 2021

**1. Awards Presentations**

We had an outstanding collection of submissions this year for our major prizes the Goldacre Medal and the Jan Anderson Award. The executive organised a group of independent and highly regarded assessors, most of whom reside overseas. The quality of the candidates for these awards was reflected in the many glowing comments we read in their reports.

We do need to encourage more submissions for the Education & Outreach and Robertson Travelling Awards. The broadening of the E&O award from a sole emphasis on teaching should help this. Details for the 2022 awards will be distributed in December.

**2. Future Meetings**

2022: ASPS is formally participating in two meetings: (1) ComBIO 27-30 Sept at the Melbourne Convention Centre and Ros Gleadow, John Golz and I have been attending preliminary meetings; (2) 13th International Congress of Plant Molecular Biology (IPMB2021) which was postponed from 2021 to 23-27 October 2022 in Cairns. The Chair is Josh Mylne (Curtin Univ) and ASPS has been allocated one session chaired by Mike Haydon. ASPS will provide student travel support and poster awards to both meetings ASPS

2023 planned for Tasmania (late November);

2024 to be determined

**3. Science and Technology Australia**

I am very supportive of this organisation and our participation in it. STA represents 90,000 STEM professionals in ~60 member societies. STA provides resources to the members, develop policies, conducts surveys and lobbies decision makers. “Meet & greets” are organised as well as Presidents Forums to help develop policy by hearing about our concerns and canvassing ideas. Examples of their activities include these:

1. STA recently conducted a survey highlighting the precarious employment status for many STEM professionals and concluding that 20% are likely to leave science altogether. This is a bleak situation which needs to be publicised widely. It benefits no-one for these professionals to change careers after years of resources to train to be competent scientists and technologists.
2. STA also actively opposed an ARC policy concerning the banning of preprints as references in grant applications (BioRxiv etc). Our Treasurer Mike Haydon drafted a separate response/petition on behalf of ASPS which was distributed to all members so they could sign/support it if they felt strongly about this issue.
3. For the coming election STA released the following policy priorities for all parties:

- Increase R&D investment from 1.8% GNP to the OECD average (2.4%) and ideally to 3%

- Invest in a $2.4 billion Research Translation Fund

- Tackle job insecurity for scientist.

- Emphasise the need for a more ambition climate change policy by more rapid transitioning to a net-zero emissions economy and safeguarding Australia’s biodiversity.

- Renew a long-term investment in National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy.

- Address the decline in STEM education in schools and encourage STEM participation.

- Boost diversity and inclusion in STEM-related work-places.

- Science Meets Parliament in a major event organised by STA each year. It facilitates meetings between scientists and politicians to discuss science and policy. Some useful training is provided on how to lobby effectively, how to talk with politicians and policy makers and how to pitch ideas. ASPS is allowed two representatives to SmP. For 2021 these were Diana Ramirez Garces (ANU) and Joseph Pegler (Univ Newcastle). Their reports are available on the ASPS website. Science Meets Parliament 2022 occurs as a virtual experience again between 28 Feb to 4 Mar and we need another two identify two representatives again soon. It is highly recommended.

**4. Function Plant Biology and other Journals**

Functional Plant Biology:

Representatives from ASPS (Rana Munns, Oula Ghannoum and myself), from Plant Functional Biology (Sergey Shabala, Editor) and indirectly from CSIRO Publishing (Marisa Spiniello) held discussions for how we can generate closer ties between ASPS and FPB. The idea it that ASPS members who publish in FPB get cheap open access and in return FPB gets a flush of quality papers which will help increase their IF. In addition, we initiated other measures to help boost FPB’s profile. We plan to be more diligent in encouraging winners of the Goldacre Medal to submit a manuscript to FPB (a requirement), and we decided to invite reviews and opinion articles from leaders in different fields. Rana, Oula and I are helping with these initiatives. I think this is a worthwhile objective since the cost of open access is an important factor for choosing where people publish.

Other Journals:

There has been some discussion about the current links between ASPS and other “for profit” journals including *Plants* (MDPI) and *International Journal of Molecular Sciences* (also MDPI). If we establish closer links with FPB do we want to maintain these other links? The Home pages of their websites state:

“The [Australian Society of Plant Scientists (ASPS)](about:blank), [Epigenetics Society](about:blank), [European Calcium Society (ECS)](about:blank), [European Chitin Society (EUCHIS)](about:blank), [Spanish Society for Cell Biology (SEBC)](about:blank) and [Signal Transduction Society (STS)](about:blank) are affiliated and their members receive a discount on the article processing charges.”

Some suggest these journals, sometimes referred to as “predatory journals”, prioritize self-interest and profit over scholarship. However, many quality papers and high-profile labs do appear in these and other “for profit” journals - including *Frontiers in Plant Science* (IF 5.7) etc. Furthermore, we cannot tell where people publish and a deduction in publishing costs is a real saving. However, equally, we do not want ASPS to be linked with journals that have a suspect reputation for quality. This is an issue for debate within the society. It does not have to be decided immediately – especially when no agreements with FPB have been formalised.

**5. Diversity and Inclusion**

ASPS launched its D&I document which begins: “*This Diversity and Inclusion Policy sets out our commitment to diversity and inclusion in our programs, activities and the places we interact; how we achieve those objectives; and how we measure those achievements.*”

The whole document is available on the ASPS Website. We propose that it is a “living” document that is amended as ideas are developed. We are grateful to all the contributors and especially Eloise Foo, Megan Sheldon, Vanessa Melino, Kathy Soole and Georgia Koerber.

It was proposed that that ASPS appoint a D&I Officer – similar to a Discipline rep to ensure the policy is adhered to and updated. Furthermore, Eloise Foo raised the idea that ASPS help members with child-caring responsibilities attend meetings by providing some support for their parenting partner to travel with them. Perhaps an idea a new D&I Officer can develop.

In 2022 I would also like ASPS to acquire a licence to show the documentary “Picture a Scientist” in 2022. This hard-hitting movie highlights the discrimination that continues to affect junior and senior women in STEM fields – even in prestigious institutions.

**6. National Science Week**

We applied for funding from Department of Industry, Science, Energy and Resources and received ~$14,500 grant from the DISER to present Science Week activities under the theme of “**Plant Science Safeguarding our Future Food Security**”. An introductory video was produced with background information explaining the challenges to food production with a growing world population and a changing climate.

Ultimately eight institutions around the country and more than 70 people (ASPS members, invited speakers and students) volunteered their time to plan and deliver a range of activities and products. Although Covid interrupted plans and caused many activities to be cancelled we still delivered some terrific events.

Examples include face-to-face events at Adelaide University attracting ~45 people, face-to-face activities at La Trobe University with ~50 people and live on-line events at La Trobe University and Sydney hubs attracting 80 and 200 people, respectively. These events received excellent feedback from the public.

Of course, many of the presentations had to be cancelled and some of these were instead recorded. Ultimately 41 presentations and educational videos/lab tours etc were produced and placed on YouTube. These had been viewed ~1,500 times by mid Sept. A big thank you to Caitlin Byrt for setting up our You Tube account & posting all the videos. The full list of videos is here and ASPS Website:

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4-hDpe7OR3kwpMxy4ES6ng/playlists

Caitlin also came up with the idea of “Meet a Plant Scientist” videos where members had 30 sec to introduce themselves, their work and their research aspirations. In the end we were pleased that 23 members, young and old, completed their 30 sec videos. These are available here:

[https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLCjVjret6uSjalUbDCO8a8jjuJesKZ8y3](about:blank)

Many people deserve accolades here – too many to mention here but all appear in the final report to DISER. Perhaps most encouraging was the enthusiasm that I encountered among the members and the willingness of so many to contribute and to quickly adjust to Covid. This terrific response, during what was already a very difficult year, is a clear indication of the strength of our Society and the dedication of our academics.

ASPS is very grateful to DISER for funding and a full report will be in on the website.

**7. Finances**

The Honorary Treasurer, Mike Haydon, will provide a full report informing us that our finances are solid. In addition to this, ASPS has an unexpected ~$10K residual from the National Science Week because Covid cancelled many planned events. Rather than being lost in general kitty, it is more appropriate that this surplus be used for an education-related activity, for which it was initially granted by DISER. I proposed that ASPS consider producing a video on plant science to distribute to schools. The objective of this video would be to promote plant science and its critical role in our food security etc. We want to show that plant science and agriculture are engaging and important career options – indeed critical for our future. We may join forces with the CoE Plant Success in Nature and Agriculture, GRDC or even the NFF (“AgDayAU”). Something to discuss further.

**8. Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the Executive, Simon Williams (Secretary) and Mike Haydon (Treasurer), and the Council members for being so responsive and patient during my first year as President. I was very grateful to Kathy Soole, Ros Gleadow, Sergey Shabala and Rana Munns for forming a welcome brains trust.

A special thanks to Simon who finishes his term at this meeting. Simon started this job with little notice and less preparation but ended up doing an excellent job in a very trying couple of years. Thank you for your efforts Simon!

End of Report