

Science Meets Parliament 2024

Report from Anna Shillabeer, Charles Sturt University

The opportunity to attend this event as a representative of ACDICT was very appreciated.

Key learnings:

To have influence with a Minister the best avenue of approach is through their advisors. The Ministers are too busy to manage cold calls and the request would usually be redirected and vetted by an advisor first. If there is an understanding of what the Minister's interests are and, the appropriate advisor is provided with a detailed, evidence based 'what's in it for the Minister' brief, then there is a high change of having the message presented. The advisors are also responsible for guiding the ministers and are highly trusted so it is the advisors rather than the specific ministers that should be the target.

There is a strong focus on multidisciplinary and collaborative science that can have broad impact and projects with this as the focus have greater chance of being approved and supported by Government.

Ed Husic (Minister for Education and Science) announced that the opening of \$40m of funding for science diplomacy would occur. There would be \$6m available specifically for SE Asia collaborations and \$10m to establish an Asia Pacific Office for the Internal Science Council as part of this funding.

All speakers made statements to the effect that the true value of scientific research was only realised through translation and direct impact on the external community. Australia must increase its investment in R and D to ensure it is the creator of knowledge, especially where it is of sovereign interest. To remain competitive Australia must become, and be seen as an innovation hub, Australia is currently on a downward trend in terms of research investment. The global average is 2.7% of GDP but Australia is only recording 1.68% and declining. To have international standing we must reach 3% by 2035 and a strong roadmap will be required to realise this. The higher education sector specifically is higher than the OECD however investment by government is required to grow. There was a call for the GO8 to collaboratively build a roadmap to build research activity nationally.

There was an alarming message regarding the perception of scientists in the broader community with a statement that 20% of scientists had reported receiving threats of violence or even death following publication or media coverage. This was especially prevalent during the early COVID years and for women scientists.

The panel presentation stated that there is a need to change our national focus from minerals, agriculture, natural resources, food, education and tourism to new areas including non-tangible products to build cyber resilience, and address climate change for example. Of particular importance was the need for research to address the aging population and to build and sustain natural biodiversity. This should be achieved through synergies between traditional and new knowledge. This shift would also help to develop greater financial diversity in Australia which is currently very low.

To enable these initiatives and focus areas we need to build capability and capacity by nurturing children in school towards a love of science and by graduating more scientists that can work on identified areas of national and global concern.

The Press Club address stated that there is a critical need for Australia to build microchip capability to avoid the local and global impact of an almost single source of product as experienced at the height of the pandemic. We need to increase our national prosperity if we are to grow. Our investment in research needs to reach 5% of GDP as soon as possible and will require another 42,000 high value jobs if we are to remain competitive in science and technology. Australia is good at creating new ideas and innovating but poor at commercialising and implementing and this much change.

General comments:

The event overall appeared to be well attended with a diverse range of participants from across the scientific community in Australia. Most that were spoken to reported their goal was to learn more about the Government plan for building a stronger science platform, understanding funding opportunities or presenting their personal or organisational views to a sitting member of parliament.

The principal messaging from the speakers was the need for science to have impact and visibility.

A key issue for some, including myself was the ability to access and run the SMP mobile app which reduced the potential to fully engage. I was therefore unable to attend the Press Club event although it was beamed live into the event room. It also resulted in being unable to schedule a meeting with a member of Parliament until very late if at all. Having said that, the opportunity to connect with members that were present between sessions was valued as a less formal activity.

The primary focus of the second half of the event was the opportunity to meet with a member of parliament. This was organised efficiently but the experience for some spoken to was not as expected as the potential to gain insight into specific pain points was not realised. It seemed that the value of the activity depended upon the member that was assigned and the personality of other attendees in the session.