

Science's next generation finds its own way

Quirin Schiermeier, Marrakech

A throng of young scientists from six continents hit the dance floor of a Moroccan disco in the heart of Marrakech. They were there to unwind to an eclectic mix of Arabic tunes and Latin salsa after three days of intense networking and discussions about their future.

The crowd was celebrating the foundation of the World Academy of Young Scientists (WAYS), the first body to represent young researchers of all disciplines from every corner of the planet. Earlier in the evening, after lengthy and sometimes heated debate, members had finally agreed on a constitution, leadership and rules of governance for the new academy.

Around 150 researchers and observers from 85 countries made it to the inaugural meeting on 13 December, lending the assembly the air of a full-blown carnival of nations. "In all my professional life I have never seen such a diversity of cultures," gushes Diana Malpede, a science-policy specialist at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which provided most of the meeting's funding.

The idea of a global organization of young scientists was first conceived at the 1999 UNESCO World Conference on Science in Budapest, Hungary (see *Nature* 400, 100; 1999). The creation of WAYS was then officially announced at 2003's World Science Forum in the Hungarian capital. The group's primary goal, says Gaëll Mainguy, a French developmental biologist and the first president of WAYS, is to strengthen the voice of students and young researchers in both science and

science-policy discussions at the global level.

Granting a stronger say to young scientists is overdue, says Thomas Rosswall, executive director of the International Council for Science, a global organization of national scientific bodies and international scientific unions. "At any given academy meeting anywhere on the globe you see grey-haired men speaking to other grey-haired men," he says. "We would appreciate a partnership, through WAYS, with the next generation of scientists. We need their inspiration."

WAYS has so far accepted membership applications from around 1,000 young scientists, of various ages and experience. Sally Tan, for example, is just 16 years old and a mathematics student at the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy in Aurora, an institution for exceptionally talented undergraduates. Other WAYS members are older — working researchers who are worried about their generation's, or their nation's, lack of representation in debates about scientific issues.

Some members are also on the look-out for co-workers. "I need partners to help me raise interest in fish farming in my country," says

Jean Fall, a Senegalese fisheries nutritionist who is completing his PhD at the National Taiwan Ocean University in Keelung.

WAYS's projects have yet to take shape, however. Meeting attendees were too busy hammering out an institutional framework to figure out what the group should actually do once it gets going. Candidate projects include the creation of a journal specifically for young scientists; training programmes to help people write their research papers; free online access to scientific literature; and a database of groups to help set up collaborations with young scientists from disadvantaged countries.

Way to go

Poorer nations are particularly optimistic about WAYS. "In many African countries, an official affiliation is crucial when speaking to the authorities," explains Serge Sawadogo, an immunologist from Burkina Faso, who recently finished his PhD in Marseille. "Being a member of WAYS could open doors."

Sawadogo plans to build up free online access to journals for science students at the University of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, where he is about to start a six-month malaria project. During his stay in France he has frequently supplied scientific literature to colleagues in his home country, whom he feels obliged to support. "Normally it takes them at least three months to get hold of a paper which they might need for their work," he says.

WAYS accepts all science students and researchers under 40 who demonstrate an active interest in research and support the academy's goals. But the group — or a division of it — should eventually evolve into a real academy, choosing its members on their scientific merits, suggests György Pálfi, a science attaché at the Hungarian embassy in Paris and senior adviser to WAYS.

Pálfi dreams of a 'junior Nobel prize', awarded by WAYS, and he has begun searching for potential sponsors. The academy's honorary members — six Nobel laureates, including Leon Ledermann, winner of the 1988 prize for physics — might be persuaded to play jury, he hopes.

But the ambitions of most of the young scientists in Marrakech are more down to Earth. "I hope to get access to other labs and meet people interested in my field," says Nermeen Youssef, a 21-year-old hepatitis researcher at the University of Cairo, who joined the nascent WAYS network in 2003.

WAYS's success in overcoming cultural barriers in science, and becoming a global mouthpiece for the younger generation of researchers, will be evaluated by its audit committee before the next meeting in 2006. ■

♦ www.waysnet.org



Researchers at a UNESCO-sponsored conference worked to bring young scientists together.



Road to the future: Marrakech hosted the inaugural meeting of the World Academy of Young Scientists.