

WALTER AND ELIZA HALL INST.



Australian science needs more female fellows

The Australian Academy of Science must take urgent steps to address the lack of gender equality among its elected fellows, warns Douglas Hilton.

The Australian Academy of Science (AAS) is a hall of fame for Australian scientists. To be elected as a fellow of the taxpayer-funded academy, which was modelled on the Royal Society in the United Kingdom, is a high honour indeed. So why does the AAS treat female scientists with such disdain?

Of the almost 500 living fellows of the academy, 92% are men and 8% are women. Given that fellows have been elected over the past 60 or so years, and science has historically been a male-dominated profession, this imbalance is not altogether surprising. Indeed, the problem of gender inequality in science is an international issue (see go.nature.com/zzexkh). With the increasing participation of women in science since the 1970s and with some fields containing a majority of women as undergraduate and postgraduate students for many years, one would expect the situation to be changing for the better every year — but this is not the case in Australia.

In fact, 2013 represented a low point in the history of the AAS: not one of the 37 candidates shortlisted for election was a woman, and so none of the 20 newly elected fellows was a woman. To put it another way, the academy believed that there were at least 37 male candidates more worthy than the best female candidate. This is disappointing enough, but perhaps the greater scandal is that there was no acknowledgement that this was even a problem. Unfortunately, 2013 was not exceptional: in 6 of the past 12 years, only one female member has been elected and, as a consequence, improvement in the overall gender balance has been slow.

It is farcical that in 2013 the academy could not find a single woman whom it deemed worthy of election. Clearly, the processes and procedures that it uses to find, consider and elect fellows are so flawed that a complete overhaul is required.

The academy does go to a great deal of trouble to ensure equal participation of researchers from the physical and biological sciences. Its 13 membership committees are structured around scientific disciplines and ensure that, almost without exception, between one and three new members from each area are elected each year. If the top five candidates for election come from a single discipline, then tough luck — two will miss out to less-competitive candidates from other disciplines. The academy rightly believes that inclusive participation of researchers across fields is essential to its long-term vibrancy and viability, and that quotas are an acceptable means of achieving this outcome. What a shame that its inclusive policies do not stretch to gender.

A key recommendation from the 2005 Australian government review of the Australian learned academies was that academies should “focus on addressing gender imbalances in their fellowships”. This should have been a call

to action, a spur to decisive and creative policy changes; however, this was not the case. The government has in effect placed the academy on notice, with its funding now at risk.

There are several ways to remedy the situation.

Ironically, the academy recently released a blueprint to tackle the gender-equality problem in science — *Gender Equity: Current Issues, Best Practice and New Ideas*. It recommended that a university or institute should receive government funding only if it provides evidence that it has a functional gender-equity committee. This is a proposal that the academy itself should adopt. It should create a standing committee, with the chair of that committee taking a seat on its governing council. This committee would ensure that as broad a range of talented women as possible are nominated for election to the academy and to improve gender-equity procedures.

A second change is a variant of the quota system that the academy has long employed to ensure disciplinary diversity. One option would be to limit the number of new male members to the number of female members elected. In this way, there would be equal numbers of men and women elected every year, and the overall gender balance would improve over time. Despite the fact that the academy has been willing to use similar tools to ensure discipline diversity for more than 60 years, to promote female scientists in this way would no doubt generate howls of protest. Critics say that it will produce a two-tier system, in which women will be viewed, and might view themselves, as ‘second-class citizens’. In reality,

however, only outstanding women will be elected, and perhaps the only cost will be that fewer men will be elected each year.

A third innovation that the academy must embrace is to be open about its problem. One of the most disappointing aspects of this year’s election was that among the press releases and fanfare about election of new members and the wonderful state of Australian science, there was no public acknowledgement that the failure to find a single woman worthy of election is even a problem.

Addressing this issue is not rocket science. Surely an organization that includes the best mathematicians, chemists, physicists and biologists — and, yes, rocket scientists — can find the time, energy, imagination, passion and intellect to bring the hall of fame of Australian science into the modern age. ■

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