
Combio2014 Women in Science dinner

Activity report

Anne-Sophie Dielen

A. Event summary – Women in Science dinner & discussion forum

For the first time, a Women in Science dinner & discussion forum took place on the 28th of September 2014 at Teatro Vivaldi on ANU Campus. This event, held in conjunction with ComBio2014, was to provide an opportunity for students and early career scientists to network with more senior female researchers in an atmosphere of sharing, cooperation and support. The event was organized & facilitated by Dr Anne-Sophie Dielen, assisted by Drs Britta Forster and Elena Martin-Avila. The three hour discussion and social gathering was attended by 70 (predominantly) female scientists and students.

The event was made possible thanks to the very generous financial support of several co-sponsors: the ARC Centre of Excellence for Translational Photosynthesis, the University of Canberra, the Australian Society of Plant Scientists, the ANU Gender Institute, the Centre of Excellence for Plant Energy Biology, the Australian Society of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology and Nectar (ANU's Early Career Scientists and Academics association). Their contributions made the event free for all attendees, which enabled many students and early-career scientists to attend in spite of having reached their budget limits due to interstate travel and conference fees. Co-sponsors were acknowledged as widely as possible on all flyers and posters distributed for the event as well as during the event.

Importantly, numbers of attendees were well balanced with respect to their academic levels between students (24) early-career scientists (32) and senior scientists (14).

Most attendees are currently based in Australia (Table I), but originate from various parts of the world.

| Australian Capital Territory | 21 | Australian National University University of Canberra |
|------------------------------|----|--|
| New South Wales | 18 | University of Sydney |
| | | University of Western Sydney |
| | | University of New South Wales |
| | | Macquarie University |
| | | Centenary Institute |
| | | Children's Medical Research Institute |
| Victoria | 14 | University of Wollongong |
| | | Monash University |
| | | La Trobe University |
| | | RMIT |
| South Australia | 5 | University of Melbourne |
| | | University of Adelaide ACPGF |
| Queensland | 4 | University of Queensland |
| | | Griffith University |
| | | QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute |
| Western Australia | 3 | University of Western Australia |
| Tasmania | 1 | University of Tasmania |
| Overseas | 4 | University of Western Ontario |
| | | National Institutes of Health |
| | | Mount Sinai School of Medicine |

A highlight of the evening was the discussion forum comprised of six female scientists from all over Australia. The panellists were:

- Dr Margaret Barbour (University of Sydney),
- Dr Rachel Burton (University of Adelaide),
- Dr Adele Holloway (University of Tasmania).
- Dr Helen Irving (Monash University),
- Dr Martha Ludwig (University of Western Australia),
- Dr Sudha Rao (University of Canberra),

Each panellist introduced herself with a brief overview of her careers with emphasis on what it means for them to be female in science, how they cope and benefit. The panel discussion was limited to a little more than an hour but could have gone much longer as the audience was very enthusiastic and asked many questions. Discussions continued throughout the evening. The main issues attendees raised were about work/life balance, grant applications and mentoring.

The panellists agreed unanimously that balancing the workload of an early/middle career in science with family life had been difficult, especially without extended family around. Several solutions were brought forward. For example, initiatives such as the Athena Swan charter were discussed. Rachel Burton highlighted ideas that could help women, such as allocating technical support for two years to women going on maternity leave. Helen Irving and Sudha Rao confirmed that both NHMRC and ARC committees take career disruption such as maternity leave in serious consideration while reviewing grant applications. Adele Holloway and Martha Ludwig told attendees that, more than mentors, they need champions or advocates, people who will make them aware of opportunities and push them forward because women tend to wait too long before asking for promotion. All panellists strongly agreed that things are starting to change but also that broader changes are required and that a career in science is very challenging, particularly as a female.



Networking time!



Some more networking...



It's now time to start the panel!



Our six panellists are introduced to the audience



Rachel talks about the Athena Swan Charter



A very focused and enthusiastic audience

(All photos were taken by Dr Elena Martin-Avila)

B. Feedback from attendees

We envisioned this event to be a rewarding opportunity for students and early-career scientists to get to know other female researchers, establish the basis for potential future collaboration, possibly meet mentors for their career, or simply find encouragement.

According to the answers we received to our feedback survey, this has been achieved. 40% of the attendees answered the survey we sent them and the overall feedback has been very positive. 93% of the attendees found Combio Women in Science dinner very helpful in terms of networking, sharing and support. A few of the comments we received about what attendees have enjoyed the most during this event have been listed below:

“
The chance to hear excellent women scientists share their experience at different stages of their career / The really friendly exchange and openness of women talking to other women regardless of their position in science / Catching up with everyone and meeting some new people. Hearing other people's experience is also always useful / Exchange of information and listening to issues that others deal with and how they have dealt with them / Relaxed atmosphere, everyone was very open to share their experiences, great food and drinks / The social interactions before the conference started were great, it meant that throughout the conference there were familiar faces you could talk to
”

Attendees made suggestions in terms of improvements and changes that could be happening if a similar event was to be organised again. A few comments were relative to the venue: the dinner was so successful that Teatro Vivaldi turned out to be too crowded. Quite a few comments also highlighted the fact that they would have liked the event to last longer, to have even more time to network with others.

Other main comments were about organising a ‘Scientists without Gender’ event, inviting both female and male scientists, to further discuss these issues. It was also suggested that PhD students and early career scientists could be part of the panel to even broaden the range of experiences. Some attendees would like to see ‘one on one’ sessions organised to discuss more specific issues. This can be related to the fact that about 25% of the attendees didn’t feel overly confident to raise issues and/or questions during the panel, even if they said the dinner atmosphere was kind and relaxed.

Attendees also asked to hear more from equity initiatives that are taking place in the different institutions. This suggestion will be addressed by creating a monthly newsletter to be sent to all attendees, listing initiatives as well as talks and/or grant applications.

94% of attendees have already said that they would attend again such an event.

C. Financial report

\$3000 were raised for this event and the total cost was of \$2990. Invoice was paid on the 7th of October by Adele Doust, Chief Operations Officer for the ARC Centre of Excellence for Translational Photosynthesis and we are currently in the process of sending the invoices to all co-sponsors.