

Australian Association of von Humboldt Fellows

Biennial Meeting, University of Otago, January, 2010

President's Report

It is a pleasure to be able to submit this report to members covering the time from April, 2009 when I was asked by the Association's Committee to take over the presidency from Prof. Peter Schwerdtfeger, our inaugural President. We owe a very great debt of gratitude to Peter, whose drive and vision since the inception of the Association in 1983 has enabled it to become a significant national network for academics and scientists from all fields, the common factor being that priceless connection with the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. This very great contribution will be recognized formally in a presentation during the Humboldt Symposium. Peter may wish to add his own thoughts on his presidency to mine at the present meeting.

Firstly let me thank the many members who have helped the transition of the presidency go smoothly and with various activities over what has been a very busy nine months. The most time-consuming task has undoubtedly been dealing with our Kiwi counterparts in the organizing of the present symposium. Let me thank in particular our Vice-President, Prof. Gabrielle McMullen, the Treasurer, A/Prof. Gary Bryant, our webmaster, Dr. Patrick Kluth, acting/Secretary Prof. Trevor Finlayson and all the state representatives. I should like to extend a special word of thanks to our Secretary since 2005, Dr. Julian Lower, who, for personal reasons, had to withdraw from the position of Secretary in late 2009 and who has decided not to seek re-election to the Executive Committee for the coming two years. The nature of modern academic life is such that there is an ever increasing demand on our time, but without exception everybody has contributed to Association activities by responding promptly to requests and otherwise ensuring the smooth running of the Association.

Before outlining the developments over the period since April, 2009, let me go back a little further in time to early December, 2008, when as Vice-President I visited Dr Stefan Mehlich at the AvH in Bonn, and expressed the concern felt by some members that there could be more interaction between the AvH and our Association. I am pleased to say that Dr Mehlich responded positively, and that his successor, Dr. Katrin Amian, has further invigorated the spirit of cooperation. A special word of thanks also goes to Fr. Cäcilia Nauderer at the AvH, for whom no request is ever too much.

At all recent biennial meetings there has been concern expressed about the age profile of our Association, and the fact that we need to attract younger Humboldt Fellows to become members. To that end I visited the Prince of Wales Research Institute in Sydney in May at the invitation of NSW representative, Dr Kay Double, for discussions with Dr Andreas Jäger of the DAAD concerning a possible mentoring scheme involving our members (the mentors) and students of the DAAD (the mentees). This is an item for discussion at our business meeting. The general recruitment of younger members should be helped by the fact that for the first time the AvH has supplied us with the names of recent Australian Humboldt Fellows in Germany and promises to do this on a regular basis.

There other things that we can all do to raise the profile of the Association and to promote the AvH amongst the academic community at large and younger people in particular. The AvH encourages the holding of Humboldt Symposia on just about any scientific theme, and even on a more modest level there are ways in which every member can contribute. I have suggested a series of "Humboldt lectures" around the nation dealing with topics of current interest, beginning with a forum on issues surrounding the global climate. Members will no doubt have ideas for other themes of contemporary interest in which the Association can take a leading role in promoting rational, informed discussion.

The AvH is seeking applications from associations around the world to establish local networks, and is offering considerable sums of cash to that end. However, it would mean that some member(s) would have to make the application on behalf of the Association, and, as we all know, writing grants is time consuming. On the other hand, we have amongst us many who are skilled in the art of grantsmanship, and I hope that we can encourage someone to take up the running in this worthy cause. Other suggestions for new initiatives from members will of course be very welcome.

Thank you again for your support over the past nine months.

Robert Robson, President, AA vH