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Thought Leader

Leading the Australian Research Council means finding a balance between being an academic, an administrator, and a government agent. CEO of the council Aidan Byrne looks at the different aspects of this important position.

Images courtesy of the Australian Research Council

Education and research are vital elements of society that drive innovation. Whether in the fields of economics, technology, or health and medicine, the process of researching and questioning the norm has led to some of the most important discoveries and inventions of our time. Governments and industries recognise the importance of creating a research-focused culture, resulting in vested interest from public and private sectors.

CEO of the Australian Research Council (ARC) Aidan Byrne has worked in academia his whole career. After completing his Bachelor and Master of Science at the University of Auckland, Aidan commenced his PhD at Australian National University. It was there that he became a research fellow, working for the Department of Physics and the Department of Nuclear Physics. He was appointed head of the Department of Physics in 2003 and went on to become dean of science and the director of the ANU College of Physical & Mathematical Sciences. In July 2012, Aidan took up a new challenge, becoming CEO of the Australian Research Council.

Aidan spoke with *The CEO Magazine* about his role with the ARC, as well as the journey from a

teaching and research role to one with a more managerial and administrative focus.

The CEO Magazine: Can you describe the ARC's operations?

Aidan: The ARC is responsible for providing Commonwealth funding to support research activity across Australian universities through our National Competitive Grants Program [NCGP]. This is a competitive process, assessing research proposals and allocating funding across all discipline areas aside from clinical medicine and dentistry. The ARC has a particular responsibility for supporting basic research and research that connects universities and investigators to other parts of the innovation sector. In 2012–13, the ARC administered \$879 million and awarded almost 1,500 research grants through the NCGP.

The ARC is also responsible for assessing the quality of research across Australian universities, and uses information supplied by the universities regarding research activities, to build a picture of how we perform, the areas we are strong in, and where we need to improve.

One of my priorities as CEO is to ensure the ARC and other similar funding agencies such as the

National Health and Medical Research Council are more closely aligned in some of the things we do. For instance, there isn't a huge difference between our core policies on open access because we have a similar agenda for aiding research. It didn't make sense to have different policies.

How have you managed to balance the role of administrator with your academic endeavours?

Starting out in a research position in physics, you run nightshifts and dayshifts, and you're there in the lab all the time focusing on research. It's a really engaging, fascinating, and enjoyable job, and you layer on teaching and all sorts of other responsibilities. I began to engage more with administrative activities, and that's been part of shaping my career.

As the head of a university department, I had research and teaching activity responsibilities. Then as dean of science, I took on responsibility for a greater part of the research and teaching enterprises in a single university. You could say it's now viewing research and academia from the outside, but from a unique vantage point and being a part of it. Every part of my career has been interesting and provided me with valuable skills. And while a lot of my colleagues in academia wonder >

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why I have taken that path, I think there are a lot of interesting challenges in administrative roles.

It's about trying to find optimal solutions to complex problems, and I do think my training and background in experimental physics has given me some interesting insights into running and managing administrative structures. As a physicist, I was trained to take fragmentary pieces of information and synthesise them into a whole. In some ways, that's the sort of thing I have to do in my role as CEO. You don't always see the whole picture, but it's an obligation to integrate the various parts and put together the coherent story and determine the best direction to take.

Which do you miss most: research or teaching?

I actually miss the teaching the most. Teaching gives you exposure to young minds—particularly in university, where you've got people who are desperate to learn things

and are not scared of challenging the status quo—which is a really fantastic environment to work in. Interacting with people who think about issues and are deeply engaged is quite a stimulating thing. It's one of the valuable attributes that we do want to keep in our university sector.

I don't miss the marking and some of the toil, but when you start discussing ideas with students and you realise that they don't have the same background or ideas, it creates a buzz and challenges your way of thinking. If you're a person like me who's trained in a discipline that requires a lot of training and understanding, it forces you to understand your discipline very deeply.

Teaching forces you to think through your discipline so that you can articulate it to someone who doesn't understand it, and that in itself was a very important exercise for me. In a way, that is why universities are a special

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environment and an incubator for creative thought and innovative activity. I think we have a pretty good university sector in this country, and we've got to try to value that, preserve it, and improve. What makes this role worthwhile is having the capacity to make sure the sector keeps vibrant, alive, and doing new things.

As CEO of the ARC, I am lucky to be able to travel the country to speak about the ARC's programs and role in supporting the fantastic breadth of research and innovation occurring in our universities. So I still get to teach in a roundabout way.

You also wear a political hat. How do you manage that aspect of the job?

In my role as CEO of the ARC, I report directly to the minister for science and research, so I do have a boss. That's an interesting circumstance to be in, particularly since there have been changes to

the minister position since I've taken over the job. Again, that has been a very interesting dynamic. If a university changes its CEO, it's usually a very drawn-out process, which typically takes years; there's at least one year in the transition between a vice-chancellor and another.

I recently went home on a Friday and found out later that evening that my boss was no longer there. I came in on Tuesday and had a new boss. It's a very quick turnaround of people. And then, of course, you have to start the process again, which is about building a relationship with the person in government who is ultimately responsible for the whole portfolio. You've got to build those relationships with new people, and that's quite a challenge, but one that I am enjoying.

I'm a person who likes challenges. I've lived in Canberra and observed the political system in this country, and I'm certainly closer to it now,

but I don't pretend to understand it. I've only been at the ARC for a year, and I think you need a whole lifetime and to be much more deeply embedded to really understand politics.

It is interesting, though, to work closely with the people who have the responsibility for 'steering the ship', and you do have to give credit to ministers who have to make some very hard decisions.

I don't think it's an easy job. A lot of people want a bit of their time, everybody wants their resources, and they have to make very difficult decisions. So they deserve a bit of sympathy and a lot of respect, and the public often doesn't give them that. Particularly in a ministerial role, there are no easy solutions to any of these problems—they have to balance the right thing for the country with individual constituencies, including the ARC and the research sector we represent. ●



Dr Ijaz Zafarullah from the ARC Centre of Excellence for Quantum Computation and Communication Technology conducts an optical experiment for quantum information and communication systems in a Laser Laboratory, University of New South Wales (Canberra campus).

ELIZABETH VERGHESE WINS YOUNG ACHIEVER AWARD

We would like to congratulate Dr Elizabeth Vergheese, a researcher and lecturer from our College of Health and Biomedicine who recently won the 2013 BASF Victorian Young Achiever Award in the Science and Technology category.

Elizabeth is at the forefront of chronic kidney disease and renal cancer research, which is supported by the federally funded Collaborative Research Networks, the Betty Lowe Memorial Foundation and internal research grants.

Her research has been published in the field's leading journal, presented in national and international conferences, and won several prizes.

Victoria University students benefit from her passion to teach a new generation of health professionals including paramedics, nurses and scientists.



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Teaming up with research partners in Asia, the Middle East and the UK, and with funding support from the Australian Research Council, Professor Alameh's research continues to inspire new generations of research innovators and thinkers, perfecting leading-edge technology, and sending it out into the real world to solve big problems.

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