

Report on Participation in 31st ICSU General Assembly, Auckland, New Zealand, 31 August to 2 September 2104

Summary

With support from ATSE, I participated in the ICSU General Assembly (GA) in New Zealand from 31 August to 2 September 2014. The GA was well organised and New Zealand were excellent hosts. The participation of CAETS was worthwhile, as my presentation to the GA was well received and I had several useful discussions with representatives of groups interested in linking with CAETS.

Introduction

As a key partner of ICSU, CAETS was invited to make brief presentation in the opening session of the GA. In consultation, I prepared a statement for that presentation, covering issues on the GA agenda and with interest to CAETS members. As there was a time limit of 3 minutes for such presentations, I reduced the words in the prepared statement so that all the key points were given within the time limit. Copies of the full statement along with copies of the CAETS 35-years booklet were available in the room where participants gathered for coffee and lunch. The presentation was well received and was the basis of several discussions with people on establishing effective links between CAETS and other organisations.

Links with CAETS

IAP

The most substantial discussion on links was with Daya Reddy (Academy of Science of South Africa), who is a member of the executive committee of the Inter-Academy Partnership (IAP). (Another member of the executive is Jinghai Li, who is a foreign fellow of SATW, RAEng and ATSE.) The IAP is an amalgamation of the Inter-Academy Panel, the Inter-Academy Council (IAC) and the Inter-Academy Medical Panel (IAMP), based on the recognition that separate existence meant that each group was not globally viable. The amalgamation has been occurring over about a two-year period, and full rationalisation of governance and administration is still occurring. The formal agreement between the three organisations is still to be finalised, but Reddy said he would informally send me the current documentation. I have sent him a copy of the CAETS By-laws to confirm our membership criteria.

Informal discussion with delegates at the ICSU GA suggested uniform agreement on the value of the amalgamation. The amalgamation is based on a framework of research (IAC), science (old IAP) and health (IAMP). Reddy noted that they would like to include engineering, and so there is potential for CAETS to be formally involved. If IAP is to be discussed at the upcoming CAETS executive meeting, then it would appropriate to obtain documentation on the process and plans for IAP evolution. At the very least, continuing dialogue with IAP would be appropriate.

Future Earth

There was much discussion of Future Earth (FE) at the GA. Much of the representation from unions and countries was to enlarge it to include everyone and everything. However, the key criticism was the need to focus on a few major topics of sustainability. Discussion with Mark Stafford-Smith, Chair of the FE Science Committee, indicated that such focus will soon be

announced by the Science Committee.

There is general agreement that engineering and technological sciences need to be represented on the FE Engagement Committee. The Committee will be announced this month, but the membership was not discussed.

GCOS

In my presentation, I noted the WMO-led review of GCOS and the upcoming review by ICSU of its involvement in global observing systems. Carolin Richter, GCOS Director, is confident about the outcome of the current GCOS review and of ICSU's continuing role.

She also noted that she is planning to have a meeting with WFEO on instrumentation for measuring climate variables, and she suggested that CAETS may have a role. The development and manufacture of climate-variable instrumentation is rather specialised and often evolves from research activities. However, if CAETS is invited to participate, it would be appropriate to determine whether there are members with the relevant interest.

Other groups

Other groups also had discussion with me on the potential to include engineers in their evolving programs. This is based on the recognition that engineering is central to many of the problems that they are trying to address. Sometimes they have links with the academic engineering community, but are aware that practising engineers may be needed for some issues. They also recognise the challenge in engaging practising engineers in broad research problems. Where appropriate, CAETS may be able to use its members to identify individuals who could discuss these issues with program leaders.

This process may apply to the following groups (contacts also given):

IRDR (Rudiger Klein, Executive Director)

ISSC (Heide Hackmann, Executive Director)

DIVERSITAS (Anne-Helene Prieur-Richard, Acting Executive Director).

Other issues

Network of chief science advisers

On the suggestion of ICSU, the Chief Scientist for New Zealand arranged a meeting of chief science advisers in the week before the GA. There was agreement that the session was worthwhile (even if the process needed some refinement), and that a continuing network of chief science advisers would be established.

Open access to data for research

In my presentation, there was support for the continuing call by ICSU for open access to data for research. From my view, the discussion at the GA was often narrow and confused. There was a mixing of access to data vs access to publications vs access to intellectual property. There was also a lack of consideration of data as a public good, when funded by governments.

Management of the meeting

With about 500 participants, ICSU GAs are major undertakings and this one was well executed. The ICSU management was very effective and the events organised by New Zealand were excellent. The Prime Minister opened the meeting and the Chief Scientist reported on the meeting of science advisers, as well as giving a speech during the opening dinner. I was present for only one of the science lectures, but it was informative and well presented. Auckland city sponsored an evening event on research on sustainable cities that they are funding (in order to raise Auckland in the global ranking of liveable cities).

Steven Wilson (ICSU, Executive Director) has clearly played a major role in the management of ICSU over the past three years. He is leaving the position soon after the GA to return to UK. The interim executive director for up to six months will be Peter Liss, who is well known to the environmental science community. The new president of ICSU is Gordon McBean, who is also from the environmental science community.

Michael Manton
3 September 2014