Nurturing the next generation of Nobel laureates in partnership with Lindau Nobel Laureate Meetings
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How to nurture Nobel Laureates? What a question to consider in just seven minutes!

The Go8, which I represent as Chief Executive here today, certainly has some strong and compelling views on the subject....but I thought I should delve into history first.

I found that, for example, George Beadle who won a Nobel prize for medicine in 1958 said “study diligently, respect DNA, don’t smoke, don’t drink and avoid women and politics”.

I am not sure how much we want to progress that methodology today!

Meanwhile, Leon Lederman who won a Nobel prize for physics in 1988 suggested “compulsive dedication to work that engages hearts as well as minds”.

Now I am sure we are not going to argue with that viewpoint when the Nobel Prize is the highest intellectual award in the world.

And of course the Go8 is extremely proud of the fact that the 15 Nobel Laureates awarded in Australia have all been associated with Group of Eight members.

However, how to nurture Nobel Laureates for Australia into the future is a whole other story.

First, in such a competitive global marketplace, it seems glaringly obvious that we must first provide the right environment for our researchers to even stay here in the first place.

“Compulsive dedication to work that engages hearts as well as minds” isn’t enough in 2015.

Rather we need to look at environment.

We need to ask, very seriously, why should our young researchers even stay here?

Why study here, why choose to research here if we – and by that I mean Australia – cannot provide an environment that encourages them, supports them, values them .........and to use that all important word; nurtures them.

Today the world is always on offer - easily on offer - to the brightest and the best.
This means we need them far more than they need us.

So to all politicians and those architects of good public policy, please keep making your speeches and statements about how much Australia will benefit from being a knowledge economy, and how much science matters.

But also please act. Please do something about it by recognising this actually takes both significant political will; and the proper level of financial commitment.

Universities cannot do it alone.

I am sure everyone in this audience knows that the more research we, the Go8, do in Australia the more money we must find to fund that research from another “bucket”.

This is simply because University research in Australia is only ever part-funded by Government.

The Go8 has 67% of Australia’s “ERA 5” world leading research groups – the natural habitat of a Nobel Prize winner, such as Professor Schmidt’s Astronomy group at ANU.

The percentage of Go8 research at this level is more than 3 times that in the rest of the sector.

In 2013 we earned 68% of all research income to Australian Universities, and 57% of the government block grants to support research – a grand total of about $3.4 Billion.

Sounds a lot doesn’t it?

But the Go8 actually spends $6 Billion on research each year.

$2Billion of that is spent on the critical medical research of which Australia is so proud; and so globally renowned.

‘But simple arithmetic says that $3.5bn in and $6bn out leaves Go8 universities a long way short of the sustainable research funding they need’.

Both major parties in Australia have cut funding for higher education in the past three years. Since 2012 almost $1 billion has been removed from research funding programs.

A further $262 million over three years was removed from the Sustainable Research Excellence fund in this year’s Federal Budget.

The major parties are peas in a pod when it comes to funding Universities….. they just go about it in different ways.

This means Australia’s researchers, one or more of whom could very well be that future Nobel Laureate whom we should be nurturing, suffer most.
The financial aspect of all this is certainly core.

If I can put it crudely... it’s put your money where your mouth is.

Researchers research for the pure and determined love, dedication and commitment of it.

They research for our global benefit far more than their own.

And as I keep hammering home to anyone who will listen; It’s us, every one of us, who benefits from the results of that mentality, that research.

And, it should be blindingly obvious too that they work best where they are appreciated.

Is that really so hard for policy makers to understand?

Delivering that appreciation is quite simple.

Other nations do it.

In OECD terms we lag horribly in our prioritisation of research spending which is really another way of saying we lag horribly in Nobel Laureate nurturing.

OECD data for 2013 show Australia ranks 18th out of 20 counties for Government spending on R&D, at 0.44% of GDP. This leaves us uncomfortably nestled between Greece and Slovenia and at less than half the level of investment of OECD leaders.

What appreciation means is recognition of the basic tools researchers need to do their job – infrastructure, equipment, space, support.

All of which comes back to adequate funding to do what needs to be done.

Jozeph Rotblat the physicist who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1995 said that science is the “exercise of the supreme power of the human intellect”.

Australia must harness that supreme power tightly, not let it disappear or dissipate, or our past Nobel Prize winners may be our total for a long time to come.

I am someone who never finds researchers to be greedy.

As with their missing egos, their mindset is too focussed on reaching the goals that benefit society.

They are a group who only raise their voices in protest as a very last resort.

So what they ask for is indeed what they need... the tools of their trade.

It is these tools that create the environment that will allow us to nurture future Nobel Laureates.
There is another important aspect to this also.

I was fascinated to read how many Nobel Prize winners – the majority - so profusely thanked a mentor for their award.

But you can’t have mentors if they are not there to have.

So we don’t only need to nurture a generation’s potential Nobel Laureates, we are also responsible for nurturing a future generation of mentors also.

This is really all about back to basics.

If we value ourselves and our nation’s future we will value our University researchers.

Because if we don’t, then another nation most certainly will.

In closing, there is another critical element that I must mention.

The Go8 takes what we believe is a sensible and logical stance that the taxpayer funding of university research should be directed to supporting excellence – the best research in Australia, wherever it’s done. Scarce public money should not be wasted on mediocrity.

To develop the Australian researchers of the future, our nation needs to build up a high quality, world class research environment. Mediocrity damages the future of our young researchers and weakens the potential for future Nobel Laureates.

There must be quality to ensure quality outcomes.

The funding should go where that quality is. This means any research area in any university that has an ERA rating of three or above.

When we talk future Nobel Laureates and the mentors they so laud, we have to realise that putting funds where they should go rather than the current model of every child wins a prize regardless of quality, is integral.

Our future Nobel Laureates will only exist if they are trained where there is a culture of research excellence.

Australia is now in AN election year so the airing of this subject matter is timely.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if our politicians showed by their election policies that they cared as much about nurturing future Nobel Laureates as we do.

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