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The Young Academy Movement

I HAVE OFTEN ARGUED ON THIS PAGE THAT SCIENTISTS NEED TO DO MORE THAN SIMPLY ADVANCE their individual research projects. Maintaining excellence in the global scientific enterprise will require constant adjustments to policies and programs. In addition, much more outreach by scientists will be needed to make science better understood by the general public and by governments. Promising progress toward both of these goals comes from a movement that is forging new organizations of young scientists—the “young academies”—around the world. A few weeks ago, a new international organization, the Global Young Academy, held its initial meeting in Berlin to discuss spreading the idea to many more nations (www.globalyoungacademy.org). This effort deserves full support from all of society.

In 2000, a new type of organization, Die Junge Akademie (the Young Academy), was created as a joint venture by two German academies. This Young Academy was described as “an organization intended to harness the resources of both academies in ways that would fertilize research fields with new ideas and bolster career pathways, as well as invigorate older academies by involving the young scientific community in critical policy-related work.”* In 2005, a similar Young Academy was established in the Netherlands. The success of these two experiments has recently inspired six other nations to create their own Young Academies: Egypt, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sudan, Thailand, and Uganda; all nations where the tolerance and rationality inherent to science will be invaluable.

I see this empowerment of young scientists as the next step in a process that began in 1993 in New Delhi, when the national academies of sciences from more than 60 nations came together to develop a coherent scientific position on world population issues in preparation for the major 1994 United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo. This first-ever meeting of the world’s science academies soon created the InterAcademy Panel (IAP), now a vibrant global network of more than 100 member academies (www.interacademies.net). The IAP functions as a mutual support organization for the existing science academies around the world.

But the empowerment of national science academies with distinguished, well-established members can leave a gap between these influential organizations and the young, dynamic scientists who represent the future in each nation. This is precisely the gap that has been filled by the Young Academies: each a group of fewer than 200 scientists, typically selected by their national science academies to serve in 4-year leadership roles. Through its connection to a prestigious national science academy, each Young Academy is empowered to exert national leadership in advancing science through projects that the young scientists themselves determine. These young scientists can often be more effective than their older peers in interactions with society and with politicians. They also bring new energy to these interactions, with a better gender balance due to the advances that women scientists have made in recent decades.

By bringing together outstanding scientists from many different disciplines, Young Academies catalyze the formation of multidisciplinary scientific collaborations that generate innovative new discoveries. Participation in a Young Academy also strengthens a nation’s scientific enterprise by training its next generation of leaders. The work exposes them to important policy issues while building networks of trusted personal relationships that can bridge disciplines for a lifetime. And by providing a shortcut for outstanding young scientists to exert national leadership, Young Academies can be highly effective in recruiting a nation’s most talented students to scientific careers—a critical issue for the future of every nation.

By fusing the promotion of the larger goals of science with an integration of young scientists into public service, the Young Academy movement is well positioned to drive the creation of the tolerant, rational societies that the world so badly needs.

– Bruce Alberts

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*V. ter Meulen, G. Stock, *Science* **330**, 1455 (2010).

