Can you begin by revealing why you founded the blog Women in Science AUSTRALIA?

MEG: As a woman in science passionate about a research career and strongly committed to energising Australian science and innovation, I wanted to contribute to making that happen. While I could find several discipline-specific women in science groups that held regular networking events and workshops, I was keen to actively debate and improve practices and policies that enable women in science to succeed. I wanted to create enduring professional contacts, tap into a diverse array of mentors, cross-fertilise ideas and exchange skills with women leaders in different sectors. It became clear that there was a need for a united voice for women in science – particularly at a national level.

Women in Science AUSTRALIA started on Twitter (@WomenSciAUST) to share information and events. Before we knew it, there were hundreds of followers. Realising the potential and wanting to bridge the gap between industry and academia, Michelle and I formally co-founded Women in Science AUSTRALIA. We now have thousands of followers traversing industry, government, academia, education and business. We are keen to connect women in science and are establishing a vibrant network of talented role models and mentors.

There is an alarming deficit of women in STEM leadership roles in Australia, and the nation is losing out on considerable talent that could transform its knowledge economy. To tackle this, Marguerite Evans-Galea and Michelle Gallaher have joined forces to develop Women in Science AUSTRALIA – a network that gives inspiration and empowerment to the next generation of women leaders in science.
MG: The blog is what I wanted 15 years ago, when I was starting to build momentum in my career and searching for mentors to follow and learn from. There were so few women (and men) that I felt comfortable to turn to for advice. I therefore wanted to create a dialogue and opportunities for people to learn and draw strength from.

What is your core mission for this blog?

MEG: The blog aims to connect women and men in science who champion change and want to see Australian science at its very best. Articles aim to discuss the issues, debate gender equity policies, share personal perspectives and tell stories that are relevant to women in science. Our articles start brave conversations. Excitingly, our authors and readers include people from rural and regional Australia as well as the big cities – we are truly engaging everyone in this conversation!

How have your differing skills and experiences helped with the development of Women in Science AUSTRALIA?

MEG: The exciting part about working with Michelle is that she has had a very different career in science to me. She has qualifications in science and finance, alongside executive level experience in the biotech industry. While our skills and networks have some overlap, they are largely complementary.

MG: Our strength is in our differences. No one woman’s pathway in science is the same: mine is as different to Marguerite’s as they come, and the pathways for women are changing year by year. We all have to be open to change and empower women and men to shift the boundaries to ensure a balanced and innovative approach.

To what extent is gender inequality in STEM an issue in Australia?

MEG: Australia has had gender parity in undergraduate science since the mid-1980s, yet this drops dramatically as you move up the career ladder. It’s not just about attracting more women to science; in academia, it is the transition to independent group leader where the cracks in the pipeline widen. This affects all women in research, but especially impacts laboratory-based women scientists.

MG: Australia is a laggard in gender equality compared with other nations. Frankly, we should be ashamed. Corporate and academic Australia is a boys’ club; we are missing out on 50 per cent of Australia’s talent in science leadership. Half of our graduates in science are women yet only a fraction make it to leadership roles, and the excuse that there are not enough women to choose from screams lazy and elitist in every instance. I have zero tolerance for that excuse.

Do you think there is a unified and equal effort to increase diversity in STEM across the board, including not only gender but also race, ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status and so on?

MEG: While gender is the current focus of Women in Science AUSTRALIA, it is not at the exclusion of other minority groups, nor is it ignoring the need for diversity more broadly. Diversity is considered throughout the process, and many of the practices and policies developed will not only benefit women and men in science, but also minority groups.

MG: Diversity and equity are not gender issues. Diversity ensures representation, clarity, perspective, alternative points of view and diligence. It shouldn’t matter if that comes from a man or a woman. What matters is the fact that most of our leadership structures, in STEM and other industries, tend to seek out ‘same’ not ‘different’. Diversity and equity are considered ‘hard work’ by some and, as such, many will turn away from the challenge rather than embrace the opportunity.
I would like to see a far broader public dialogue about diversity and equity that is separate from gender – but I think we need to address gender first in the greater endeavour to be genuinely inclusive and focused on advancement in STEM. I believe gender equity is a discussion that will shepherd subsequent dialogue about race, sexuality, ethnicity, age and socioeconomic status. I think Women in Science AUSTRALIA will open the door on a wider, freer community debate about diversity.

In what ways is Women in Science AUSTRALIA connecting women in STEM across numerous professional sectors?

**MEG:** Women in Science AUSTRALIA has developed an extensive professional network of talented women in science from universities, research institutes, government organisations, industry, science education, state and federal governments, advocacy groups, and social enterprises striving to develop more women leaders in this sector. We are harnessing our network to strengthen the voice of women leaders in science through policy development, advocacy work and mentoring. We encourage each other to leave our comfort zone, provide constructive feedback and support, and cheer each other on with gusto when we succeed!

**MG:** Australia’s innovation opportunities will come from the convergence spaces, such as bioinformatics, digital health, clean mining and advanced manufacturing technologies. It is bridges like these that could give Australia the competitive and innovative advantages it craves. Innovation thrives in knowledge networks, but the same old STEM networks just aren’t delivering results like they used to. Women in Science AUSTRALIA could be the secret weapon we need to get our country back on track to deliver a deep, diverse and sustainable knowledge economy.

Can you outline the key issues in Australia that need to be tackled for increasing, supporting and improving the careers of women in STEM?

**MEG:** I’m asked this question a lot, and every time I say that it is time for us to move beyond the issues and talk about the solutions. We know the issues contributing to the poor representation of women in science – and we have done for a long time. They are many and complex, but zooming out, largely fall into four areas: family and health-related issues; the metrics by which we measure success in scientists; the hypercompetitive nature of ‘the system’; and organisational culture. These all impact the ability of women to stay in science.

Our national funding bodies have significantly improved their processes to ensure grants are reviewed ‘relative to opportunity’, career disruptions are discussed and women are part of decision-making processes. Yet the success rate for grants led by women investigators is still much lower than those led by men. In addition to providing greater support to primary carers, we need to increase job security, address unconscious bias, promote an inclusive workplace culture, ensure women serve in decision-making roles, understand that a career disruption has a ‘whole-of-career’ impact and examine how we can better measure success in science.

**MG:** I support mandatory quotas of women in leadership roles across all industries. Women and men need to carefully consider joining boards or expert advisory committees where the ratio of men to women is significantly skewed one way or the other. We can all apply a little pressure and encourage a more considered approach to diversity and equity.

How important is it for today’s successful women in science to inspire the potential women in science of tomorrow?

**MEG:** This is absolutely crucial on a professional level, but as the mother of a teenager with an interest and aptitude for science, it is also incredibly important to me on a personal
level. My daughter bears witness to the challenges I face in my academic science career – and they impact how she sees science and scientists. So I do my best to convey to her the wonder of chasing a discovery, the reward of developing a therapy and the thrill of learning something completely new – this is the same whether you are a man or a woman! I also assure her that there are many gratifying careers in science – and that each and every one makes a positive contribution to the greater good. We must ensure our children see women science professionals as ‘the norm’. My daughter also knows about Women in Science AUSTRALIA – and will for years to come!

**MG:** It is vital for women and men to act as role models, supporting and encouraging the women of tomorrow. We simply can’t leave equity and diversity up to chance. It won’t take care of itself. It’s important that success is recognised not just in those who reach the Director or CEO office – success happens at all levels and at all stages. Leadership also comes from many places, not just those at the top of an organisational chart. It’s vital that women celebrate their successes and those of their colleagues at every stage of their career progression and feel welcome to ask for help when help is called for.

**Where do you see Women in Science AUSTRALIA heading in the near future?**

**MEG:** Women in Science AUSTRALIA is on an exciting trajectory! Working with our Board, we will host Australia’s first national symposium aimed at creating an inclusive culture that recognises and promotes women and men in science. We are keen to connect talented young researchers with high profile leaders and help decision makers recognise unconscious bias. Another important goal is engaging with science teachers and school students. We are keen to connect girls in STEM with women in STEM and extend the network of women in science education. It is inspiring to see how quickly Women in Science AUSTRALIA has garnered support. Momentum continues to build and it motivates us to maximise our efforts for women in STEM Down Under.

**MG:** I’d love to see 1 million women and men connected to Women in Science AUSTRALIA via an online channel. I don’t think that’s unrealistic. My dad is connected to Women in Science AUSTRALIA; he supports me and cares that I, and the women to come after me, have the opportunities that he knows we are capable of delivering.

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**Disparity Down Under**

The dearth of women in science – both in academia and in industry – is profound in Australia. The nation has had gender parity at the BSc graduate level since the mid-1980s, and there are now more women BSc graduates (60 per cent) than men. Yet only around 25 per cent of women transition to independent group leader and, worse still, only 10-15 per cent of women achieve the highest academic level of professor. Indeed, some medical research institutes have no women professors at all. This is a global issue that crosses disciplines and professional sectors emphasising the extent of change that is needed.