

ARMS CONFERENCE REPORT

The theme of the 2024 ARMS conference, “Global and local research for a sustainable future”, held particular resonance for me, as co-convenor of the Research Impact Special Interest Group. It is a truth universally acknowledged in our current climate that the value of research resides in its societal utility; the contribution it makes to sustainability, equity and health, or in other words, impact. The presentations at ARMS 2024 provided a rich variety of perspectives and provocations, so I want to reflect here on a few examples with implications for my own professional practice.

Prof. Toby Walsh’s keynote on the AI “bubble” left me more convinced than ever that while machine learning has become absolutely indispensable across almost all sectors and disciplines, the recent phenomenon of generative (or more accurately, predictive) language models should not be embraced without caveats. While its limitations – such as the tendency towards “hallucinated” content and inability to spot logical flaws – have spawned some hilarious memes, there is also a serious side to over-reliance on large language models to broker interpersonal communication. Research impact is predicated on relationships, and relationships on language. Carina Nandlal’s emphasis on the importance and technique of active listening, and Milena Arsenijevic’s observation that good communication is the *sine qua non* of successful partnerships, should give us cause for some healthy scepticism when it comes to outsourcing our deployment of language.

One of the most striking sessions for me personally was the panel on philanthropy. Appealing neither to public nor to private (i.e. commercial) interests, the pitch for philanthropic funding is altogether personal. Telling a compelling story is therefore vital, complemented by the development of long-term, authentic relationships. My main take-away from this session was that philanthropy is a major untapped opportunity for research with a social conscience, and that donors can be approached as genuine partners in the quest for sustainable development.

Several papers, notably Prof. Rahman’s opening address, Prof. Nair’s keynote and Monash University’s Lucy Donaldson examined strategies for driving mission-led or values-led research. I do not wish in any way to diminish the importance of initiatives such as Malaysia’s [10-10 MYSTIE Framework](#) and Monash’s [Mission-oriented research and innovation](#) as rationales for a research agenda. However, the unspoken question that kept troubling me during these sessions was whether global sustainability challenges actually require further investment in knowledge production – that is, original research, measured in outputs. The problems are clearly understood. The solutions have an abundant evidence base. The impediment to solving grand challenges, I’d suggest, is not a lack of knowledge, but rather its restricted circulation. We are brimming with knowledge, here in the higher education sector. The bottleneck is effective translation. Rather than encouraging researchers to keep adding to the astronomical quantity of scientific articles published each year and the \$1.3bn profit accrued as a result to Elsevier, we should perhaps be incentivising knowledge mobilisation – for industry, for policy-makers and activists, for the high-net-worth plutocrats, and for the wider community.

This is where I would like to bring in by way of conclusion the panel on ethical impact chaired by Faith Welch. Public involvement in research, or co-design, is a hot topic at the moment. We all need to do it, and we all need to do it better. In particular, by way of a call to action, we need to address the absence of standardised guidelines for the ethical administration of co-design. Research impact depends on effective translation, and effective translation depends on empathetic two-way communication between research teams and stakeholders. As Vesna Stefanovski pointed out in her paper on maximising impact, as research management professionals, we are the arch-communicators – the polyglots – and as such perfectly positioned to deliver as translators.