

Making Waves Down Under: The Australian Developmental Biology Workshop

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Among the challenges facing developmental biologists in a large and sparsely populated country such as Australia are the issues of critical mass and networking. The future of the discipline rests on our ability to inspire and train new developmental biologists, and open the eyes of workers in other disciplines to what developmental biology has to offer.

The Australian Developmental Biology Workshop was instigated in 2001 with the aims of promoting the discipline of developmental biology generally, providing scientists and students in developmental biology with a conceptual toolkit that can be used to facilitate their research, and providing opportunities for networking and collaboration in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region. The workshop is organized and run by: Peter Koopman, from the Institute for Molecular Bioscience and Faculty of Biological and Chemical Sciences, The University of Queensland, Brisbane; Rob Saint, Centre for Molecular Genetics of Development, University of Adelaide; Patrick Tam, Children's Medical Research Institute, Sydney and Richard Harvey, Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute, Sydney. The initial plan is to rotate the workshop between the three states represented on the steering committee (South Australia, Queensland, and New South Wales), but as the workshop gains momentum, the composition of the committee and the choice of venues is likely to broaden.

The workshop is an intensive, 3-4 day meeting with a small number of participants. This style of meeting is loosely modelled on

Gordon conferences and the Cold Spring Harbor summer courses: enough participants to make the meeting fun, representative and worthwhile, but small enough to create an intimate and personal atmosphere. The emphasis is on getting to know people and building a network of developmental biologists. In this sense the workshop fills an important niche, particularly for younger researchers, since relatively few opportunities exist for getting to know new people at larger national and international meetings. The workshop caters to researchers at all career stages.

Given the difficulties imposed by the variety of systems covered in Australia, and financial and time constraints, the workshop does not currently include a practical component. So in what sense is this a workshop, as opposed to a lecture course or conference? The answer lies in the focus on problem solving, on discussing strategies for studying development, on audience participation, and on issues such as career development that typically do not get a hearing at regular conferences. Workshop sessions devoted to strategies such as gene discovery, functional analysis, experimental embryology and choosing the best organism to answer different types of questions are presented in round-table format, with contributions invited from all participants and lecturers. The workshop also features extended (3-hour) talks by international developmental biologists, providing the opportunity to present a far greater level of detail, and allow time for more interjected questions, than is possible in a one-hour presentation.

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Fig. 1. Participants at the First Australian Developmental Biology Workshop at Victor Harbour, South Australia. Front (L-R): Richard Behringer, Peter Koopman, Richard Harvey, Edwina Ashby, Rob Saint, Robb Krumlauf, Patrick Tam, Ruth Lehmann. **Back:** Adam Hart, Fred Martinson, James St John, Stephen Gregory, Craig Smith, Peter Smibert, Helen Abud, Meredith Downes, Lindsay Fowles, Stephen Rodda, Tammy Ellis, Jo Bowles, Meghan Thomas, Milena Furtado, Andrew Perkins, Mel Ziman, Peter Farlie, Edwina McGlenn, Joanne Britto, Michael Lardelli. Photo courtesy of Olympus Australia.

Feedback from the 21 participants (Fig. 1) in the first workshop was overwhelmingly positive. Above all, it was clear that the opportunity to build links with other participants, to interact at a personal level with the organizers and speakers – particularly international speakers of the calibre of Robb Krumlauf, Ruth Lehmann and Richard Behringer - and to ask unlimited questions were the most valued features of the workshop. In the future, as the workshop gathers momentum, it is likely to cater for more applicants from New Zealand, the South-East Asian region, and perhaps beyond. The high level of interest shown by corporate

sponsors should also lead to more extensive featuring of equipment, products and services available to developmental biologists. Given its successful start, the Australian Developmental Biology Workshop will certainly be viable for the coming years, and may serve as a useful model for developmental biology communities in other countries.

The second Australian Developmental Biology Workshop will be held at North Stradbroke Island, Queensland, in 2002. Enquiries can be directed to Peter Koopman at p.koopman@imb.uq.edu.au