

The accidental Head of School



When she accepted the role in 2009, Professor Frances Separovic, a self-described strategic thinker, neither coveted nor planned to be the Head of the School of Chemistry and did not envision a second term. It did not take her long, however, to work out what to do: there were teaching and research laboratories to renovate and build, people to appoint and succession plans to develop; all this in the context of the Science Faculty's 'Revitalisation Plan' and the University's 'Business Improvement Plan.' Now in 2016, six years and two terms later, Professor Separovic is passing the baton onto Professor Evan Bieske. Before she gets too busy embarking on new challenges, she reflects here on her time as Head of School: on the challenges, achievements, leadership and on the role and importance of Schools as homes to disciplines and departments.

From how to dress, to how to behave and what and what not to say, there were many who were anxious to impart advice when she commenced her role as Head of School. "I do attribute this to being a woman. I do not think that this would have occurred, if I'd been a man. Although well-intentioned, it often came across as criticism, which causes you to doubt yourself," she says. It did not bother her for long, as she soon decided to do things her own way: Frances Separovic enjoys making decisions. She also dismisses advice to women that they should change their language to sound more assertive in male-dominated workplaces. "Politeness is important and frequently missing in workplaces. I sometimes couch my criticism in humour, but not everyone realizes it. Being nice is not a sign of weakness," Separovic says.

Continuing the work done by her predecessor of merging the Physical, Organic and Inorganic Chemistry Departments, Professor Separovic says she was keen to promote the culture of 'Chemistry' as a whole. "It is difficult to categorise people into one little box. I've often been put in the 'Organic' corner, as I work with biological molecules, but I teach Physical Chemistry," she explains. In terms of promoting departments and disciplines, Professor Separovic believes it's important to obtain the disciplinary depth before you can undertake multidisciplinary work. Her own research cuts across many disciplines and she describes herself as a 'biophysical chemist'.

Communication, an important part of the job, did not come easily to Separovic. "I had to force myself to do the industry engagement and networking and to meet and get to know people in the School and other departments," and she laments the little time that was available for such things. Coffee breaks were strategically employed to this end.

Professor Separovic is particularly proud of using her influence to assist junior researchers. Through the Professional Development Review (PDR) framework adapted for the School of Chemistry, she encouraged supervisors to ensure that the young researchers in their groups were given opportunities to teach, publish and present at conferences. "These are necessary and sometimes neglected experiences that young researchers need to pursue successful careers in research and beyond," she says.

Looking back, Professor Separovic muses: "It was a challenging time and I was the Head of School they had to have, - I was willing to do anything". Frances harnessed her strengths in strategy and planning and position as head to get things done. At the end of her two terms, the teaching and research laboratories were completed; succession plans were implemented; significant appointments had been made and talented staff retained; the ERA ranking had risen from 4.0 to 5.0 and key areas in the School strengthened with a new Theoretical Chemistry initiative and industry links. "The best chemistry departments are comprehensive, good at everything, not just some select disciplines and it's not easy to achieve. I've attempted to do this in my time as Head of School."

All the while, Professor Separovic continued to teach and pursue her own research. Heading a team at the Bio21 Institute, Professor Separovic uses nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) spectroscopy techniques to study the structure and function of membrane-bound molecules, such as host-defence peptides in relation to antibiotic resistance and the amyloid A β protein involved in Alzheimer's disease.

So, what's next? Apart from the purchase of a DNP magnetic resonance spectrometer with increased sensitivity for studying intracellular peptides, Frances Separovic plans to take a series of sabbaticals in 2016: to Bordeaux, to study amyloid proteins involved in Alzheimer's disease using high-field solid-state NMR; Southampton, to study ion channel formation in antimicrobial peptides for her work on antibiotic resistance; and ending in Harvard, where she will be working on high-field solution NMR to study membrane pores. Now, that sounds like a plan!