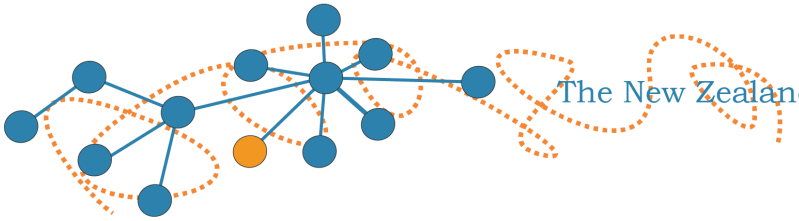

The New Zealand Association of Scientists
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NZAS Workforce Strategy 2026

https://scientists.org.nz/

Everything in science happens at the pace that people make it happen. The current science reforms are failing because the critical role of the workforce in the research system has been forgotten. This can be quickly repaired, to acknowledge workforce concerns and salvage the reform, or as the first step on a better path to rebuilding the research system.

We break 15 key actions down into three themes.

Replicate what succeeds in most nations and addresses contemporary issues

1. Create a stable career entry pathway, with a system of national postdoctoral fellowships that combine aims of stable careers and stable capacity clustered in areas of national interest.

2. Improve conditions for PhD students and ECRs to make careers attractive (rather than cheap labour), creating a shift toward a better supported sustainable population on this pathway, while building on and enhancing the new applied PhD scheme.

3. Match programme(s) of early/mid-career fellowships to clusters of activity where national capacity can be targeted around priorities and existing success.

4. Retain and enhance the value of experienced and senior researchers by supporting mentoring and advisory roles through coherent programmes.

5. Enable appropriate levels of mobility to drive innovation and connections, across PROs, universities and independent organisations, with particular regard to iwi/Māori led organisations.

Address our national weak points and strengthen international linkages

6. Stabilise research funding streams in all areas of critical national capability by mapping and shifting 40-75% of overhead to inclusively support people, buildings and kit at all levels from individuals to teams, groups and clusters, severely reducing the dependence on hypercontestable funding rounds and overheads that often cost 4 or more times the research.

7. Transfer responsibility for workforce support to science-led planning in each appropriate outcome area along with government funding, including but not limited to Environment, Conservation, Primary Industries, and Health, while continuing to look after innovation and advanced technology.

8. Recreate a competent stand-alone ministry overseeing the research system and linking its capacity and strategy to the tertiary education sector, based on examples such as Norway (Partridge and Stevenson, 2025).

9. Build schemes ensuring our national capacity enables Kiwi researchers selected for development internationally can land stably at home for ongoing careers, focussed initially on European initiatives such as Horizons Pillar 2 programmes and the prestigious MSCA Fellowships.

10. Enhance international collaborations to ensure enduring and workforce-scale collaboration is a key goal of all initiatives.

Build a stable, successful science system going forward

11. Ensure all areas of critical national capability have transparent assessments matching roadmap planning of outcome needs to workforce capacity, with appropriate levels of ownership by communities of researchers and practitioners.

12. Develop workforce planning that sees across the matrix of outcome areas and the responsibilities to maintain foundational science capacity, as well as provide for stewardship, policy, and technological innovation as outlined by SSAG.

13. Revise the funding model for national research capacity overhead and support structures until business and philanthropy can reliably access and pay for trusted capacity, noting these potential funders currently will not fund researchers in our institutions at current overheads

14. Review and reduce the role of (hyper) contestable funding on an ongoing basis to ensure remaining areas of competitive funding optimise ideation and innovation with the maximum capacity for good ideas to scale to successful outcomes over 5-20 years.

15. Develop the compact or social contract between science and society so that the nation feels supported by and trusts the researchers it has invested in and the research community feels a duty to serve the nation that stably supports careers.

Feedback on this document is welcome. Please send it to president@scientists.org.nz

Glossary

MSCA Fellowships: Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions are prestigious European Union research fellowships that fund researchers' salaries, mobility, and research costs, aimed at advancing careers through international and interdisciplinary postdoctoral training within the Horizon Europe programme (European Commission, n.d.*a*).

Horizons Europe is the European Union's main research and innovation funding framework programme, which supports collaborative and individual projects across research disciplines. New Zealand has joined Pillar 2 Missions (European Commission, n.d.*b*).

Overhead: In research funding, overhead (also called indirect costs) are institutional costs that cannot be directly attributed to a single project—such as administration, facilities, and utilities—and are recovered as a percentage on top of direct project costs (Truax et al., 2025). International norms of less 25-65% (US) and 25% (Horizons) require institutional support. New Zealand ranges from ∼120% in Universities to ≥400% in Crown Research Institutes. Ministerial Advice suggests a failure to understand and prevent escalating overhead (MBIE, 2025*a*).

ECRs: Early Career Researchers. See ECRs et al. (2026) for our recent compendium of concerns.

SSAG: Science System Advisory Group (MBIE, 2025*b*).

PRO: Public Research Organisation, generally referring to Crown Research Institutes.

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