

President's Column

Special Issue: The Research System Crisis

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Co-Presidents

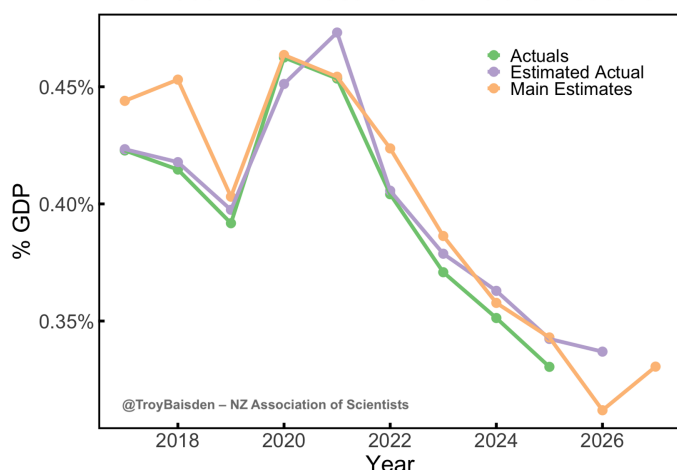
The last two issues of the New Zealand Science Review have focused on the twin crises in our university system and our wider research system. The articles in this issue have been written during a time when it has become increasingly apparent that – while nobody disagrees on the causes – it remains very difficult to get any movement from the current Government on solutions to the problems outlined within.

This issue includes viewpoints from early career researchers across the system; developments in marine research and tropical cyclone forecasting impacted by the end of the National Science Challenges; analysis of gender pay gaps; a report on cuts to jobs and funding for the period of 2024 and early 2025; the ‘perverse consequences’ of our full-cost, high-overhead system, one of the most-downloaded articles in this journal in recent years; and commentary on a court case involving academic freedom. All of these are underpinned by a steady decline in funding for fundamental science research and universities (Figure 1).

We think it is particularly notable that science spending has tracked under budgeted spending (as a percentage of GDP) over the last four years.

Meanwhile, Stats NZ's recently updated annual R&D Survey shows Business sector investment in R&D has also stalled (Figure 2), up just 0.36% between 2024 and 2025, a period where inflation averaged approximately 3% (Stats NZ, 2025). This represents a real-terms cut. The number of people employed as ‘researchers’ in the private sector has been static by both headcount and full-time equivalent since 2021 (Figure 3). This paints a very grim picture for both the early career researchers and the researchers documented as losing their jobs in this issue. There is no private sector refuge for those the public sector no longer has space for.

Foundational Investment in Public Research



Vote Tertiary Education as % GDP

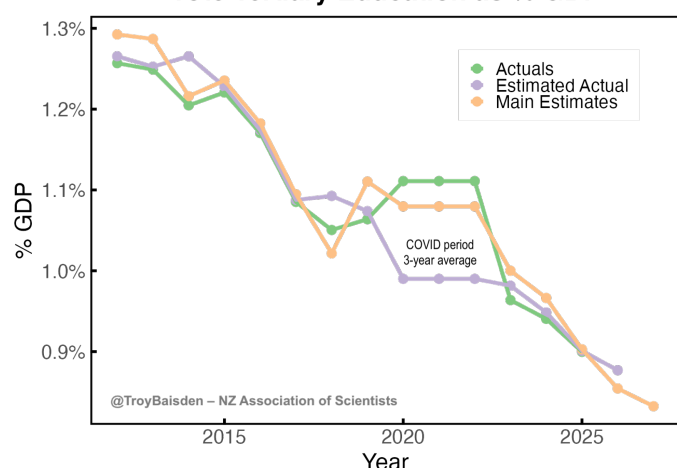


Figure 1: A steady decline in funding for fundamental science research and universities.

Business R&D Expenditure

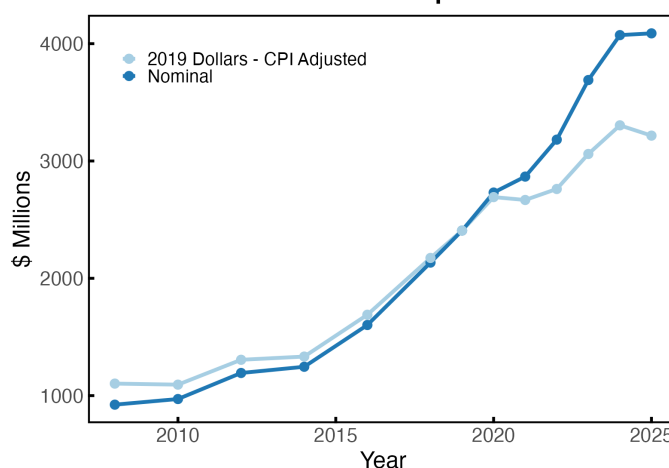


Figure 2: Private sector R&D spending from Stats NZ R&D Survey 2025 (Stats NZ, 2025), with inflation adjustment applied using RBNZ CPI series. Note, the R&D survey **only** includes government and higher education spending in even years.

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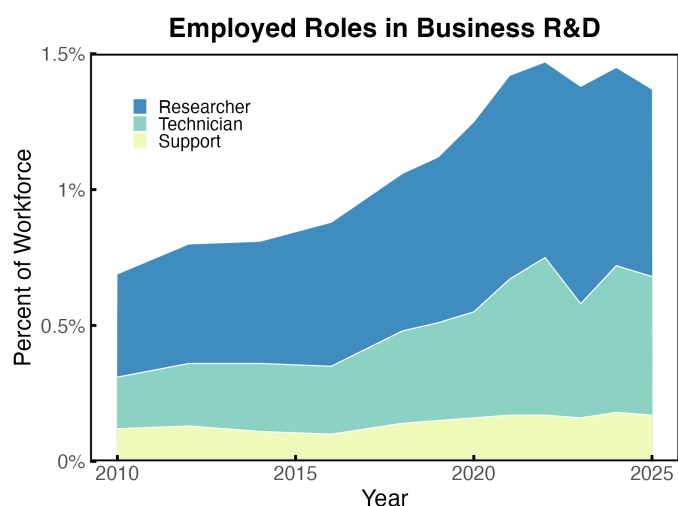


Figure 3: Employment in Business R&D as a percentage of all employment has been static since 2021. Data sources: Stats NZ R&D Survey and Quarterly Employment Survey (Stats NZ, 2026).

As this column was being written, Prime Minister Christopher Luxon was quoted in the media saying that “...I just hate it when I run into people and they go, ‘Oh, New Zealand invented a piece of science.’ You go, ‘That’s lovely, sunshine, but actually who invented the \$10 billion business?’ And it’ll be some American or some Australian that gets to do that” and that he wanted to “brutally commercialise our science system” (RNZ, 2026). The next week, the Prime Minister’s Science Prizes included awardees who teach using mātauranga Māori; study the impacts of climate change on natural hazard risk; communicate about palaeoecology to a broad audience; and took an idea from fundamental, blue-sky research to an intervention which has improved the lives of thousands of infants and their families worldwide. None of these areas are priorities under the current plans for our research system, yet they were selected by expert juries as worthy of recognition and acclaim. Following the announcement of this year’s awardees, the rules were amended to require that awardees in future years have done research which aligns with the government’s current, economic-oriented priorities (Meyer, 2026). This further impoverishes our national view of what science is and what kinds of research are worthy of recognition.

We would submit that this issue demonstrates ample evidence of brutality towards our research system, but little understanding of the value of research to the country, or what is actually involved in creating a research system that produces (among other, equally important results) commercialisable ideas.

References

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