

# A Strong and Resilient Research System is Built by Valuing People

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## Background

A major round of reforms of the New Zealand research system started in the late 1980's and ran through the early 1990's. These reforms brought in New Public Management (Lodge and Gill, 2011), sometimes called corporatism, managerialism, or neo-liberalism, as the basis of how the new system would operate. To get a sense of what researchers thought of this new system as it was at the beginning and after the first 10 (out of 30) years I offer these quotes:

“When the history of science in this country comes to be written, the six years between 1986 and 1992 will appear barren and traumatic ones – ones principally of discouragement to scientists.”

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E.G. Bollard (Royal Society Te Apārangi, 2012)

“I would not see a scientific career as compatible with human existence, at the present time. Scientists lead a bloody miserable life”

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Sir Peter Gluckman (Gluckman, 2001).

“At the beginning of my study I thought the major concern of scientific workers would be intellectual property and the commodification of knowledge. When I started talking to people I quickly discovered that this was not an issue at all. Staff were worried about something much more mundane but of much more consequence – their survival.”

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Lesley M. Hunt (Hunt, 2003)

While these quotes speak of science and scientists, if one substituted research and researchers the sentiment (and lived experiences) would remain essentially the same. One would hope that the situation had improved in the last 20 years, in which case this would be a more pleasant piece to read (and indeed write). Not only are conditions still poor for our researchers, but I argue our research system itself has, on the whole, suffered from that round of

reforms. My perspective on the state of the public research system are informed by having worked in it, having ongoing relationships with researchers in many different disciplines and career stages, and providing research services here and abroad through my company. I will take stock of the current situation for researchers. Then look at ways to improve both the working lives of researchers and the research system along with them.

## (Under)Valuing Knowledge Producers

Different kinds of researchers use different tools and approaches, but creating new knowledge is what makes it research. Most other activities in life do not create knowledge. Many researchers' first taste of doing research happens when they are Master's degree or Doctoral (PhD) scholars. This process typically results in new knowledge that enables a better understanding of the world around us and contributes to improve the condition in which we all live.

Researchers at this early stage are under-valued and over-worked (a common theme as we will see). The average pay from PhD scholarships is below minimum wage. The time it takes to do the work necessary for a PhD is often longer than the three-year scholarships (Soar et al., 2022). Too often they receive no pay during the time between the end of the scholarship and completing their research. The situation is similar or even worse for Master's degree scholars. In 2021, there were a number of researcher-led efforts to increase the pay of these emerging scholars. One of those was addressed at the Royal Society's Marsden Fund (Morton, 2021). That effort was successful, to a point. The Marsden fund increased the pay for Doctoral scholars funded by its grant to minimum wage starting in the 2022 rounds. In the meantime, cost of living increases resulted in a rise in minimum wage. That rise started before the next Marsden round, leaving those scholars earning less than minimum wage, still. This comes as no surprise to those pushing for better pay (Macmillan and Calverley, 2022).

After completing a PhD, researchers find themselves competing for what few positions are available. There are many fewer positions (most not permanent) than there are those seeking them. This puts early career researchers in an unstable situation, both professionally and personally. A term often used to describe this situation is precarious.

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The group of people in a precarious situation, are sometimes called the precariat. A 2021 survey of the academic work (Simpson et al., 2022) found New Zealand has a pool of highly trained researchers who are in unstable employment conditions, sometimes for decades and often with multiple short-term contracts with the same employer in one year. These researchers lack the benefits one has with permanent employment of any type.

For those who do gain a permanent position, the situation is one of continual competition. The institutions (universities and Crown Research Institutes) in which mid and senior career researchers work, have expected all staff (including researchers) to do more as a result of repeated rounds of cost cutting measures and down-sizing. This effort leaves little time and energy to do considered thinking about a topic or issue which, for many, is fundamental to research. It also motivates restructuring and redundancies which shows that permanent positions are not really permanent. Furthermore, this kind of competition can lead to negative behaviour such as bullying (Täuber and Mahmoudi, 2022) or wage theft (Cahill, 2021). In the following we look at ways to improve the situation for science and scientists in Aotearoa.

## Towards Valuing People

How do we get from the system we have to one that builds a strong, resilient research system? We do the things that will build a research work force with stability in employment, and which supports professional growth starting at the earliest stages of research careers. In 2005, the European Commission published a single, short (36 page) document containing the “European Charter for Researchers and a Code of Conduct for Recruitment of Researchers” (Directorate-General for Research Human resources and mobility (Marie Curie Actions), 2005). The Charter lists a number of recommendations around surety of funding, transparency of processes, sustainable careers as well as international complementarity. As an example, the Institute of Agrifood Research and Technology in Catalonia adopted these practices and was awarded the “HR Excellence in Research” by the European Commission in 2015 (Institute of Agrifood Research and Technology, 2015). The two key plans that were highlighted by the European Commission were IRTA’s Code of Research Ethics (Institute of Agrifood Research and Technology, 2016) and IRTA’s Equal Opportunities Plan (Institute of Agrifood Research and Technology, 2017). We could learn much from the approach this institution has taken.

I present two examples of the application of the section ‘Dissemination, exploitation of results’ in the European Charter for Researchers (Directorate-General for Research Human resources and mobility (Marie Curie Actions), 2005). In the context of commercialisation, our system considers patents and patent applications as measures of success, often without further evidence of uptake (e.g. licensing of the patent). Moving towards metrics of use, including those not related to patents, could be considered more appropriate to reaching the aim of commercialisation.

In regard to dissemination, there are many examples of research projects where data generated is held by Māori groups as the kaitiaki, but the copyright of the research papers are held by overseas multinationals. This presents an obstacle for those same Māori groups to access the findings, and generates concerns about ownership. Open access licensing is one way to address the former. Issues of ownership would require substantive national discussions and can be viewed as an example of evolving the ideas in the charter to Aotearoa New Zealand contexts.

Adopting a version of the European Charter for Researchers and A Code of Conduct for Recruitment of Researchers would go a long way towards improving our research workforce, their working conditions, and the research system itself. Purging the system of bullying and related behaviour is also clearly necessary. Re-enabling a research culture of idea exchange that was central to research prior to the introduction of New Public Management and the secrecy it instilled will ignite innovation. These actions are not the kind of tinkering around the edges that has characterised the middling reforms in since the last major system wide reform. They are part of the fundamentals. To paraphrase Baisden (2022), the system will resist “change unless a major transformation can be designed”. The ideas presented here can be part of that design.

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