



6 August 2014

Press release

National Science Challenges under fire

Almost 300 scientists from government science institutions, universities and independent research organizations have condemned the way in which the Government's National Science Challenges (NSCs) are being rolled out, and have expressed scepticism for the potential of the Challenges to deliver benefit to New Zealand, in a recent poll run by the New Zealand Association of Scientists (NZAS). The results, published on the NZAS website, starkly contradict the recent statement by Minister Joyce that there are no problems with the NSC process. NZAS President, Dr Nicola Gaston says 'the sad thing that we see from these responses is how disengaged scientists have become from the process. The good news, however, is that scientists in New Zealand feel a clear responsibility to ensure that taxpayers' money is spent well, and they are prepared to speak up despite concerns that the new money being put into the Challenges could yet be taken away.'

'I was struck by the remarkable consistency of the responses, which provide broadly similar criticisms by involvement, age, or institution type of the respondent', said Dr Gaston. 'Many of the respondents were greatly concerned by the lack of transparency in the process and some had the perception that the NSCs had been captured by a small number of senior scientists'. A sample breakdown of the questions is appended.

The Government has proposed ten NSCs that will eventually assimilate about half of the total science investment by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE). Three challenges have already been launched, High Value Nutrition, Science for Society and today, Deep South. Problems have been indicated with many of the proposed challenges, but the lack of transparency of the process makes it hard to judge progress. Another key criticism by scientists is that new bureaucracies are being established to run each NSC, leading to an unacceptable growth in overheads across the science system.

The NZAS urges the Minister to take these concerns seriously, and launch an independent review of the entire NSC process, led by international science experts. This review should consider the opportunity cost of repurposing the allocated NSC funding into alternative existing science funding mechanisms within NZ such as the Marsden Fund, the Health Research Council, and the MBIE contestable round.

Sample demographic breakdown of responses: (we are happy to supply a further breakdown as requested, but we would caution against over-interpretation of these numbers without taking a look at the full survey).

By involvement

	0 hr	<20 hr	20–100 hr	>100 hr
Q2: Strongly dissatisfied with the way the challenges have been managed	41%	56%	63%	50%
Q3: Strongly disagree the NSCs are the best way to organise research to benefit NZ	36%	64%	63%	44%
Q6: See themselves being significantly involved in future	7%	6%	4%	33%

By age

	<35	35–50	>50
Q2: Strongly dissatisfied with the way the challenges have been managed	47%	56%	47%
Q3: Strongly disagree the NSCs are the best way to organise research to benefit NZ	41%	53%	58%
Q6: See themselves being significantly involved in future	9%	11%	3%

By institution of employment

	University	CRI	All other
Q2: Strongly dissatisfied with the way the challenges have been managed	58%	38%	48%
Q3: Strongly disagree the NSCs are the best way to organise research to benefit NZ	60%	41%	46%
Q6: See themselves being significantly involved in future	7%	13%	0%

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Results, including extensive written comments, are available at:

<http://scientists.org.nz/news/2014/08/national-science-challenges-survey-results>