

# Cut, cut, and cut – the pressures on our university research system

Chris Whelan\*

Chief Executive, Universities New Zealand – Te Pōkai Tara

One of the best-known scenes from the movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is Arthur's fight against the Black Knight. As limbs are removed one by one, the Black Knight cries, "'tis but a scratch!"

I'd really like this to not be an analogy for research in the university system, but it's starting to feel like one.

Our university research continues to be of high quality, contributing across most areas of society. We produce highly skilled researchers and demand for them remains very strong. But the cuts are more than mere scratches now. It's getting harder. In the context of the recently announced science system review, here are some factors that need to be considered.

30% of university income comes from funding for research, representing around \$1.33 billion dollars in 2022. Of that \$1.33 billion:

- \$301m was through the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) – administered through Vote Tertiary Education.
- \$419m was through other channels such as Marsden Funding, the Health Research Council, Centres of Research Excellence, and other funds – mostly Crown funding sitting within Vote SI&T.

None of this funding has increased at all since 2018 but inflation has been nearly 25%. This has created huge pressure in a range of areas.

Firstly, although we are still employing about the same number of academics, there just isn't as much money (in real terms) to support their research. This is especially problematic with PBRF which is the only fund available to support early career researchers to help them develop into mid-career researchers able to compete successfully for external funding.

Secondly, there's less money to support our doctoral students and our post-doctoral researchers. PBRF is a key source of funding for universities to provide doctoral students with scholarships that cover fees and some living expenses. In the past five years, all universities have increased scholarship stipends in line with cost-of-living increases. But they have also had to reduce the number

of scholarships offered given the pool of funding has not increased.

New Zealand has roughly half as many masters and PhD qualified people in the workforce (7%) as the OECD average (15%) and the current level of funding is not going to help us close that gap.

We also need to reinstate the postgraduate student allowance that was discontinued in 2013. If we can't help people live while they study, people won't aim for the higher-level qualifications that develop them as researchers, innovators, and knowledge generators.

And thirdly, there's even more insecurity now for our post-doctoral research workforce. This group often try to gain access to academic careers by joining externally funded research projects. But their remuneration is affected by the amount of funding provided for the project and their tenure tends to be subject to the project making satisfactory progress and being eligible to receive the next tranche of funding.

Money shouldn't be everything, but the reality is we can't do much without it. We cannot transform to a knowledge economy without knowledge.

At present, just 1.4% of New Zealand GDP goes into research, compared with an OECD average of 2.7%. Some of this should be public spending, but much of it should be seeding companies with the skilled workforce and ideas that will encourage innovation and diversification.

I'm not arguing for more public spending (though I wouldn't say no to it either). Rather I think that we can do more to close the gap by lifting company investment in innovation and diversification. This will only happen when companies have access to ideas worth investing in and people to generate and develop them.

\*Correspondence: [chris.whelan@universitiesnz.ac.nz](mailto:chris.whelan@universitiesnz.ac.nz)