

# President's Column

## Special Issue: The Crisis In Our Universities

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Welcome to the second volume of the New Zealand Science Review, published under our new editorial board structure. The New Zealand Association of Scientists, as the parent body of the New Zealand Science Review, advocates for scientists across the entire sector. This issue, however, is focusing primarily on scientists and researchers in the higher education sector.

By the numbers universities make up a very large proportion of scientific activity in Aotearoa New Zealand and employ a large proportion of scientists and researchers. According to the Statistics NZ 2022 Research and Development survey (Stats NZ, 2022), over half of government spending on research and development (R&D) and over eighty-five percent of all government-funded personnel involved in R&D are located in higher education, making up nearly fifty percent of all personnel involved in R&D nationwide. These numbers do include researchers outside the science sector specifically, but they broadly indicate the scale of scientific activity taking place within our university system.

Moreover, the activity of the NZAS is in large part supported by the infrastructure of universities, their host role to academics as the 'critic and conscience' of our society, and the longstanding belief that academic scientists have 'service' obligations to their community which can involve work such as serving on the NZAS Council. Our current open-source journal system which makes NZSR articles available open access at time of publication is hosted by Victoria University of Wellington. This move was part of our process to align the journal with the goals of our wider association, and was made considerably easier by the commitment of the university to improving open access to academic articles through this hosting structure.

Therefore, the university crisis to which the title of this issue refers is very much a concern of the New Zealand Association of Scientists. It is profound but by no means sudden. The transition to the competitive, neoliberal, user-pays model of university education in the 1990s has put increasing pressure on our universities to prioritise throughput of students-as-customers - in the colloquial usage, 'bums on seats' - arguably at the expense of their mission to combine research and education. One paper in this issue is written by authors who first discussed the increasing precarity of researchers at universities nearly two decades ago (Bennet et al., 2005). Others address issues

such as the limits of academic freedom of speech, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on university researchers, and the outcomes of two decades of policies to increase Māori and Pacific representation in the sciences.

Currently, we are waiting on Cabinet to consider the advice of the University Advisory Group led by Sir Peter Gluckman to see what the government's response will be to the crisis we consider in this issue. The alignment of this review with the simultaneous Science System Advisory Group review, also chaired by Sir Peter, offers in my opinion a genuine chance to improve the whole science sector and the connections between universities and other institutions in a way we have not seen before. However, it is unclear as I write this when these reports will be publicised and decisions made, let alone what those decisions will ultimately be.

In the two weeks before I finalised this column we have seen the current government introduce a bill to radically restrict academic freedom under the guise of 'freedom of speech', and make drastic cuts to the availability of funding for social sciences and the humanities through changes to the Marsden Fund and top-up funding for Horizon Europe. These make the work in this issue, to my mind, all the more timely - the crisis is only deepening.

There is still a chance for us to return to this topic with a sense of greater optimism in years to come, but it will require emphatic commitment from future governments, our universities, and our researchers to creating a better and more sustainable system. This issue serves as a record of the scope of the crisis, but I hope it can also serve as motivation to action.

### References

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