

MBIE TE ARA PAERANGI – FUTURE PATHWAYS

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WHAT IS MISSING FROM THE RSI SYSTEM IS NOT JUST MĀTAURANGA, IT IS TIKANGA

(note, this section was also included with the Indigenous Genomics Institute submission)

Successive generations of the RSI system have failed both researchers within the RSI system (including students), as well as the communities they work with. Core values of manaakitanga and kaitiakitanga are not embedded in the system. One of the causes of this is only valuing graduate students as sources of cheap academic labour for generating publications. This means the RSI sector trains too many PhD students for research jobs that do not exist. Although this makes for a 'productive' research landscape from the perspective that talent is always available, it is brutal and demoralizing to individuals who end up under-employed for the training that they have. Even for those who graduate and manage to secure a job in the RSI sector, the precarity of employment is soul destroying. It delays people from being able to buy homes, start families, and save for retirement. It stops them being able to put roots down, because it is likely with the end of each contract, they will have to move locations. In whatever new form the RSI sector takes, valuing people and their lives needs to be at the centre of it.

IMPACT SHOULD INCLUDE SATISFACTION OF PEOPLE TRAINED FOR THE RSI SECTOR

A few ideas for potential solutions. Universities should be at least partly assessed based on the satisfaction of former students with the jobs that they are now in. This is why it is slightly puzzling that PBRF has not been considered within the scope of this review. Currently, training of people within the workforce is largely driven by universities, where PBRF forms an appreciable chunk of funding. PBRF is skewed to rewarding publications rather than, for example, relationship building with local communities or ensuring trainees are going on to satisfying downstream careers. Without a holistic focus on all sources of funding, universities will continue to train students in an environment that prioritizes journal articles rather than communities and people, and these attitudes will propagate into the workforce at large through the people lucky enough to stay in the RSI sector.

THE PERIL OF BASE GRANTS GOING TO INSTITUTIONS

As pointed out in the green paper, overheads disincentivize employing people, and incentivize having students. However, most institutions have issues with structural racism and other inequities. Providing the institutions with “base-grants” will perpetuate these inequities. It would be better to put at least some of this base-funding in the hands of the researchers themselves e.g. if you meet a minimum standard of excellence (e.g. 2nd quintile on Marsden), you are eligible for funding/salary support. Including a target for Māori researchers funded at each institution would also be a way to address the chronic underrepresentation of Māori within the RSI workforce.

NETWORKING FOR BIDS CAN ADVERSELY IMPACT DIVERSITY

In further discussion about funding streams, we also need to ensure that National Science Challenges and other funded entities (e.g. Genomics Aotearoa, CoREs) have ‘on ramps’ to allow researchers and communities with diverse perspectives to ‘come on board’. While the aim of the NSCs (to enhance collaboration) is admirable, in practice, the strong reliance on networking associated with assembling a bid for all long-term funding opportunities makes it hard for fresh thinking from “outside” of traditional RSI structures to break in. While bids that have cast a wide net to ensure that diverse perspectives are included exist in the current RSI ecosystem, unfortunately not all bids fall under this category, and can perpetuate the benefits of belonging to an “old boys’ club”.

STRENGTHENING WHAKAWHANAUNGATANGA

Returning to the issue of “placing people” in RSI, we also need to make sure that students have the ability to match their skills and passions to downstream careers in the RSI sector. One way to achieve this would be to mandate internships for students with other entities in the RSi sector (e.g. private industry, CRIs, local government, iwi, central government) and/or placement at regional hubs. The co-location of government agencies, universities, and wānanga at regional hubs could potentially follow the model of shared campuses of government agencies and universities in the United States. This regional hub model is likely to facilitate benefit return and knowledge return to communities, but in addition, this needs to be explicitly required by all funding streams.

ENSURING SENIOR RESEARCHERS HOLD RELATIONSHIPS

Ideally relationships with Māori and other communities involved in ‘benefit return’ need to be held by supervisors rather than students or fixed-term workers (to whom these relationships can then be extended). This is because if the supervisors have not cultivated these relationships – the students/fixed-term workers are left in the position of developing these relationships instead of doing their science, which then comes at a professional cost to them (in terms of fewer publications). Because publications are what are rewarded in the current system, this rewards bad behaviour (from a Te Tiriti standpoint), in that the science is prioritized over relationship building.

HE PAKU MIHI

Finally, I’d like to extend a thanks to the folks collating these submissions and to MBIE for starting this conversation. I’m excited to see where we might go in the future where we emphasize protecting and growing the most important thing in our RSI sector: the people!