

Te Ara Paerangi – Future Pathways

Submission from Department of Public Health, University of Otago, Wellington

Thank you for the opportunity to offer our perspective on the *Te Ara Paerangi – Future Pathways* Green Paper. This discussion paper, and the surrounding consultation, creates an exciting opportunity to consider how we might meaningfully improve the way that research is conducted within New Zealand.

While there are many components within the Green Paper that are worthy of consideration, for the sake of brevity we have focussed our submission on the proposed changes to how research is funded in New Zealand.

Funding Models (Key Questions 8 and 15)

Our Department would like to see an expansion of the concept of a 'base grant' for institutions, as a possible replacement for the current model in which institutional overhead costs are fully-costed within a given research grant. The Green Paper indicates that this base grant could conceivably *'...meet a greater proportion of research costs, including a proportion of, or even full, salaries. This latter option would support the goal of a much stronger approach to the research workforce and provide maximum stability'*. We would like to strongly endorse this latter approach, and propose that these base grants should include funding for researchers who are not core-funded by the University (often referred to as 'soft-funded' researchers). Our rationale for (and perceived benefits of) this proposed expansion are as follows:

- As noted within the Green Paper, *'New Zealand has generally followed the traditional international model where post-doctoral roles are fixed-term positions before progression to permanent senior positions'*, and that *'we are interested in your views on whether this model is working well.'* We would strongly emphasise that the current model is not working well within health research settings (particularly public health). We note that the chasm between PhD and permanent positions within health research is large and growing, to the extent that these staff now represent the majority of researchers within our sector. For example, the majority of the research staff in our Department are not core-funded by the University, and as such rely on project or programme funding from both external and internal sources for their salaries. This issue of precarious funding is a strong source of disquiet and stress for these staff, and as such, many high-value researchers (particularly early- to mid-career) seek stability through permanent, higher-paying positions in either public service (e.g. Ministry of Health, or one of the new agencies such as the Public Health Agency), or the private research consultancy sector. This is an important issue that threatens to destabilise future research infrastructure within health (and likely beyond). We also note that this issue is

particularly prevalent within the Wellington region, where public service and private consultancy positions are abundant.

- We also note that when research leaders are successful in gaining competitive research grants, most universities retain researchers' PBRF funding as well as research overheads. This leaves both emerging and established research groups with few funding reserves to plan ahead and retain key researchers in their group. In our experience, research leaders are increasingly operating in a 'spot market', with short-term incentives and drivers. Consequently, following a research career has become increasingly precarious.
- Expanding the 'base grant' concept to include permanent funding of research-only staff would create the baseline stability required for these researchers to continue pursuing a career in health research. Along with reducing the complications arising from funding, baseline funding would also offer these researchers the 'breathing space' to forge their own research interests and pathways, rather than requiring them (as the current model does) to follow the research interests of senior staff who have had funding success. In other words, baseline funding will likely lead to further diversification of research expertise within the sector – an important consideration given its rapidly-evolving nature.
- We note that providing core funding to researchers is not a new concept. Rather, it is a model used by most successful research organisations globally – enabling these institutions to retain researchers over long periods of time, and allowing for the development and implementation of long-term programmes of work and the dissemination of institutional knowledge between researchers. This model also allows these organisations to be competitive in terms of vying for emerging research talent. We propose that this model could also work well within University settings – particularly in the area of health research, where competition for high-value staff is fierce. For those researchers who are unable to secure the limited number of available tenure-track positions, a career in research is currently unappealing; however, a bold expansion of the base grant concept to include non-core-funded researchers is one means by which we can create a generational change in this regard.
- We note that core-funded positions within a base-grant system need to be provided at all levels of the research career pathway – particularly early and mid-career research-only positions, but also some senior research-only positions are needed. In practice, senior positions tend to be of the 40:40:20 type (40% teaching, 40% research, 20% administration and service). That disadvantages research-only staff who may have had very limited opportunities to gain teaching experience in applying for senior academic positions. We will also need to include data scientists and other technical research positions, who may not advance as independent researchers but rather choose to direct their career toward supporting the success of research groups and institutions.

How do we see this expansion working?

We propose that we move toward a model where permanent research-only positions are viable and common within our Universities and CRIs. This is a substantial change in how research positions are funded within New Zealand, and we have offered some brief suggestions for how this might occur in practice below.

- Achieving this objective will require Universities (and other CRIs) to hire research-only staff on a permanent basis, rather than on short-term contracts (usually 2-3 years in our experience).
- It will also require Universities/CRIs to pay these staff from within core funding, rather than via research projects.
- In order to achieve this outcome, Universities/CRIs will need to include these staff within a base grant application. This will require the Government to make a long-term commitment to the base grant system, in order to provide the funding stability required to enable a shift toward permanent contracts for research-only staff.
- Once funded through the base grant system, researchers are then available to conduct research within their given scope (generally within research groups, collaborations, or similar). Performance reviews would proceed as they currently do within University/CRI systems, with these reviews guiding increases in salary, as well as any need for disciplinary action due to poor performance. As part of this performance review, researchers would be expected to continue to apply for competitive research funding to cover research costs.

We acknowledge that there is much detailed analysis and planning required in order to make a base grant system work in an equitable manner. We particularly note the following:

- Analysis and planning will be needed to ensure that this system does not disadvantage the limited number of Māori researchers operating within Universities – for example, we will need to ensure that a shift to a base grant system does not advantage large research groups (who may have few Māori research staff) over smaller groups who may have more Māori research staff, but less administrative infrastructure and future research funding.
- We acknowledge that if institutions receive a large base grant to fund research staff, then this could conceivably make some research groups or institutions more competitive than other institutions that have not had the same base grant success. Work will be needed to assess how that should be taken into account in costings for grant applications, and in the assessment of research grants by funders.

We would be pleased to discuss any of the points made in this submission in greater detail, including in-person if that is useful.

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