# Science Support staff Submission in response to the MBIE green paper Te Ara Paerangi: Future Pathways

## Introduction

This submission is made on behalf of staff in all science support roles at Confidentiality - 9(2)(ba)(i) It is made by way of a supplementary submission to Confidentiality - 9(2)(ba)(i) submission and has been prepared with the support and endorsement of Confidentiality - 9(2)(ba)(i) Senior Leadership Team.

## Process followed

Staff in all science support roles at Confidentiality - 9(2)(ba)(i) were invited to meetings to explain Te Ara Paerangi and the process of making a submission. Confidentiality - 9(2)(ba)(i) overall submission was also outlined.

Support staff were able to contribute ideas and comments to an online Mural board that covered those aspects of Te Ara Paerangi most pertinent to support staff in the science sector. This document has collected and summarised those individual ideas and comments. Each part of the document refers to one of the key questions posed by Te Ara Paerangi.

## A note on base grant funding

Where "base grant" or "base funding" is mentioned throughout this submission, the following formula should be assumed.

In tandem with Confidentiality - 9(2)(ba)(i) main submission on Te Ara Paerangi, this submission advocates that a base-grant funding model would improve the stability and resilience of research organisations. We are recommending that the base grant extends beyond non-attributable costs and into science salaries, to a maximum of 70% of the organisation's science salaries.

## 8. Do you think a base grant funding model will improve stability and resilience for research organisations, and how should we go about designing and implementing such a funding model?

**SUMMARY**

Overall, our support staff feel that base grant funding (as outlined above) would improve stability and resilience.

All staff including support staff would have more job security.

It would enable expertise to be better retained, lowering staff turnover and associated inefficiencies.

It would help with research planning and implementation.

Competition for funding can be unproductive. Base funding may improve cooperation.

It would assist long-term time-dependent environmental projects to be run and maintained.

Some fundamental research needs ongoing underlying support, which base funding would provide.

It would enable better long-term relationship building, especially with iwi, who would benefit from being able to be included earlier in the development of research projects. It is difficult to engage them at the proposal stage when there is so much uncertainty as to whether or not work will go ahead.

**Comments from staff**

If the base funding helps retain research staff, and helps encourage young people into science, this also means that the support staff have more job security. We will attract and retain good staff and we can be sure that our investment in them via ongoing training winds up benefiting the organisation and NZ. Having staff constantly being moved into different roles or high turnover of staff is an incredible waste of training and experience and has a toll on people's wellbeing. Being able to have a deep understanding of the work you do really improves the quality of work undertaken. Experienced staff know what works and what hasn't over time, so are more likely to be able to suggest and implement good quality changes that benefit organisations.

Yes, because organisations would have a greater proportion of their income guaranteed and for longer periods. This would allow for better planning and improved security for staff.

More stable funding would be better for relationship building and maintenance, especially with iwi. It is difficult to engage them at the proposal stage when there is so much uncertainty whether or not work will go ahead.

Getting the balance of baseline funding correct to minimise unproductive competition, in fact encourage cooperation.

Base funding to remove the need for researchers to 'fund' support/overheads. This is a common comment.

Yes, insecurity of funding (and hence jobs) perversely incentivises selfish behaviour (keep the $ for ourselves), and yet in spite of this many scientists DO collaborate and share (even though in a financial sense it is not in their short-term interest (they can see the bigger picture/long-term benefit)).

It would be great to have some of this money available to resource Māori communities at early stages. I understand they are often not consulted until funding is in place because there is not money to engage them before this. They are partners who need to be involved much earlier in order to direct research areas and inform funding applications. This could be addressed with base grant funding noting that not all projects need Māori involvement, some do, some don't and some need to be Māori led.

Guarantee 70% of staff FTE at the very least. The rest could be competitive.

A fair mix of base funding and competitive funding: incentive to prepare your best bid whilst also giving stability for planning and staffing.

Base-funded salaries have a degree of internal competition of ideas for the operating funding to undertake the work, and to pool cross-organisational resources where needed.

## 9. How do we design collaborative, adaptive and agile research institutions that will serve current and future needs?

**SUMMARY**

This is a very wide-ranging question.

There is some feeling that the way this question is framed suggests that MBIE is discounting current levels of collaboration/working outside of silos and that MBIE considers current research institutes uncollaborative, non-adaptive and non-agile.

It might be useful for MBIE to consider the variety of different collaborative pan-CRI forums that exist already. Our staff suggest considering the merits of what you have before launching into wholesale change, and considering that you may already have collaborative, adaptive and agile research institutions already meeting current and future needs.

Amalgamating services rarely, if ever, delivers anticipated cost savings.

**Comments from staff**

Some suggestions to assist achievement through collaboration across institutions:

Smaller teams can often have a greater connectedness to the "mission" and therefore greater effectiveness.

Make it easier to collaborate across institutions – remove the 'bottom-line'/'legal'/'IP' bureaucracy that stems from the corporate/company structure of CRIs.

Have an independent entity or group of people that works across all research institutes looking for opportunities to link projects and people for better collaboration.

Reduce incentivisation for competition (for funding) if base level of funding is secure, and collaboration (where appropriate) is rewarded. Perhaps with base salary covered, then competition for best ideas/collaborations secures the operational funding to undertake the work.

## 10. How can institutions be designed to better support capability, skills and workforce development?

In line with Confidentiality - 9(2)(ba)(i) overall submission on this green paper, this support submission advocates sharing of systems (how things are done) where possible across the RSI sector rather than sharing of services (who does them or where).

**SUMMARY**

Support staff are a key component of multidisciplinary science teams and should not be overlooked when designing frameworks for the sector.

Support service personnel develop specific RSI knowledge and expertise over time, and are therefore more valuable to the sector than someone with generic functionality expertise.

Business stability helps to retain experienced staff, and hence also provides the platform to enable the sector to plan ahead and invest.

It is important for the sector to invest properly in the skillsets outside core research that are necessary for impact to be achieved.

**Comments from staff on dedicated science admin support**

Staff believe that the Confidentiality - 9(2)(ba)(i) model of assigning dedicated science admin support (the Portfolio Coordinator role) to each science portfolio is a good one. It:

- frees up scientists to do the science.
- leaves the majority of the admin to those with expertise in the area.
- allows for a role with variety, depth & responsibility, which in turn leads to job satisfaction & therefore longevity in the role.
- allows for development of close, trusted working relationships between science & support staff.
- allows support staff to develop an understanding of the science within their respective portfolios, leading to an improved ability to help the scientists.

Post-research support capability, which includes project documentation and metadata writing, is often overlooked. After projects officially "end" there is often a lot of support needed and work to do.

**Comments from staff on staff training**

Increase provision of overhead budget for self-training days, for yearly formal training and for maintaining connections, which might include 'donating expertise' to projects e.g. 1-2 days per month minimum depending on role.

Provide more pathways for development and recognition within technical support, and skills, for example a) expand the inter-lab secondment schemes and 'product development' support b) empower technical staff to oversee QA, H&S and deliver training especially to scientists in the field.

**Comments from staff on succession planning and mentoring**

More mentoring and succession planning, to pass skills down from our more experienced staff to new/'up and coming' staff.

More formal succession planning. Removal of temporary contracts.

---

## 11. How should we make decisions on large property and capital investments under a more coordinated approach?

**SUMMARY**

It is important to consider co-location where it works best to achieve science priorities and impact.

We recommend not being constrained to one model or strategy, for example co-location with universities – universities are built to their needs, not necessarily the best needs of RS&I.

Capital investments are central to the future growth of our research capability and need to be purpose-built.

A science panel derived from active researchers/technical staff should be included in the decision-making process for large infrastructure investments. (NB: this happens in the health sector, with clinical staff actively involved from business case onwards).

## 13a. How do we better support knowledge exchange and impact generation?

**SUMMARY**

Comments on this aspect had two main themes:

**Encouraging teamwork**

Every fortnight or month have regular informal catch ups with each relevant team, sharing knowledge and best practices e.g. TechTalk.

Find time for staff to work together on jobs that may not necessarily require two people but allows sharing of skills/learning.

Making use of tools such as Confluence (internal wiki).

**Encouraging data sharing**

Enforce metadata standards – investment in support systems that operate consistently between research organisations and permit open sharing of research metadata.

---

## 14. How should we include workforce considerations in the design of national research priorities?

**SUMMARY**

Much of the feedback on this question consists of suggestions for how support roles could be integrated more fully into science teams. There is broad support for building/maintaining multi-disciplinary teams in which each team member values the contributions to the shared goals.

**Comments from staff**

Support roles could be more diverse – including targeted 'science support' – such as statistics, bioinformatics. These pathways exist successfully elsewhere, and could be adopted within the RSI system.

Integrating some support roles more closely into science teams/programmes, so that support staff are upskilled and can add greater value.

In our organisation, support role assignments to project leaders seem to be working well, and are appreciated by Project Leaders.

Observing a greater level of external expectations, e.g. legislative, compliance, reporting. 'Support' roles often provide the buffer/shelter from the researchers to enable them focus on research.

Ensure stability is a consideration; job uncertainty will not attract people into science/science organisations. Regularly having to essentially reapply for your job (as a scientist) has got to be pretty demoralising and ultimately frustrating. Support roles depend on the success of the scientists – so stability is interlinked to an extent.

Support services/processes continually need to be reflected on and refined, so that we are adding value to the scientists/supporting them to work efficiently. Over time if we do not reflect we can add layer upon layer of compliance/bureaucracy.

Alleviate external administrative burdens as much as possible.

Ensure a defined 'minimum capability' is maintained of skills in science support to help stop 'inadvertent' or short-term thinking, that leads to roles being disestablished that benefit from long-term experience and knowledge /connections within specialist areas

## 15. What impact would a base grant have on the research workforce?

**SUMMARY**

Wide-ranging positive outcomes are foreseen if a base grant is introduced.

**Comments from staff on increasing productivity**

It would reduce unproductive internal and external competition - which generally no-one enjoys.

Allow people to focus more on skill development than on raising money.

So much time is spent bidding for funds that have a low chance of success, e.g. MBIE programme bids <20% chance. Better to have a base grant then the research as a conversion iterative-based process, e.g. more like MPI's SFFF.

**Comments from staff on improving morale**

I think it could improve the culture somewhat. Currently, I often hear resentment from scientists that there are too many 'non-scientists' and they resent having to raise the money to pay for them (and high overheads etc.) This is not great for those of us who are the overheads (it is demoralising).

Hopefully maintain a core of support and technical staff instead of cutting them to the bone.

**Comments from staff on career stability**

It will reduce the precarity of a 'successful continuous research career' – currently this is reliant on the whims of the highly competitive funding system – this hurts terribly for recruiting talent, as soon as you come through the door you have to justify your existence!

Allow our staff to develop skills over time instead of 'chopping and changing' between roles for different projects = more skilled staff who are with an organisation for longer.

Greater job security. More stable staff base, less time teaching new staff and more upskilled/experienced staff in the long run.

**Other staff comments**

It would allow for early engagement with Māori communities and could potentially reduce competition between research organisations.

---

## 16. How do we design new funding mechanisms that strongly focus on workforce outcomes?

**SUMMARY**

Staff comments broadly support a base-funding model:

High overheads are a big problem for being competitive with universities etc. Overheads are even inconsistent between CRIs. If support staff were covered by a base grant our research overheads could decrease.

Base funding at least gives people the chance to see science as an actual career. It is really hard to attract young people of any kind into a profession with zero income stability.

Identify areas across the RS&I sector that require a joined up approach and have a central fund for this, e.g. Māori/Pasifika representation.

## 17. How do we support sustainable, efficient and enabling investment in research infrastructure?

**SUMMARY**

Infrastructure includes property, equipment (labs, IT), and collections and databases.

Our overall submission advocates sharing of systems (how things are done) where possible across the RSI sector rather than sharing of services (who does them or where).

**Comments from staff on IT systems**

Possibly the need for a coordinated cross-agency support for the design of research systems and the support they require (such as a single agency wide IT support service rather than relying on multiple profit-focused external businesses.

Any thoughts of sharing IT infrastructure across organisations would require a huge re-architecture for possibly very little gain.

**Other staff comments**

'Value for money' is no doubt the key. Infrastructure -> big $$ in general. Sharing/cooperating with other organisations where possible on purchase of/accessing infrastructure/services?

Benchmarking against international institutions should provide a continuously shifting baseline for infrastructure development.

This is a potential issue with cutting overheads that pay for this stuff.