

## ECR Forum response to the changes to the Marsden Fund

The Royal Society Te Apārangi Early Career Researcher (ECR) forum is a group of researchers within ten years of achieving their highest research qualification and navigating careers within the research sector. The recent announcement to exclude funding for humanities and social sciences under the Marsden Fund, while requiring every project to describe its potential to generate economic, environmental, or health benefit for Aotearoa is a significant shift in the research funding direction in Aotearoa, New Zealand. It raises critical concerns for Early Career Researchers (ECRs) and the future of interdisciplinary research.

Many of the most pressing issues Aotearoa New Zealand faces require multiple knowledge systems, not just those that are often associated with a narrow definition of “core science”, and realising real impact through physics, chemistry, maths, engineering, and biomedical sciences often requires social sciences and humanities. Research addressing key issues (e.g., barriers to vaccine uptake, climate change adaptation, and disinformation) will be put at risk with the disestablishment of the humanities and social sciences panels. Māori and Pasifika researchers will be disproportionately impacted as their work often spans now disestablished disciplines and/or focuses on long-term systemic solutions to pressing issues rather than short-term benefit.

A healthy and thriving society is about more than simply GDP and long-term societal benefits stem from diverse research areas, including humanities and social sciences. The new requirement that 50% of grants must focus on economic benefits reflects a very short-term perspective, which will restrict curiosity-driven research that often leads to transformative breakthroughs, some of which realise economic benefit down the line. Research funding from the Marsden Fund drives innovation, which is critical for sustainable economic growth. A focus on short-term GDP gains contradicts efforts to transition Aotearoa New Zealand into a knowledge economy.

The Marsden Fund is a crucial funding pathway for ECRs and there are limited alternatives available. The announcement of the changes were made only two and a half months – inclusive of the Christmas-New Year break – before expressions of interest are typically due for the Marsden Fund. Preparation for the applications starts as early as late August to ensure quality applications are created and there will likely have been significant time already “sunk” into now ineligible applications. The delay of the 2025 funding round and the exclusion of humanities and social sciences will disrupt research plans and career trajectories, risking exacerbating inequities in the research ecosystem, particularly for researchers in precarious roles. These changes are likely to cause a brain drain as researchers seek opportunities overseas due to reduced support and risks limiting ECRs’ ability to explore high-risk, high-reward ideas that sit at the intersection of multiple disciplines.

We advocate for a balanced approach to valuing long-term, investigator-led research across disciplines, including humanities and social sciences, and emphasise the role of diversity in thought and inquiry for innovation and societal well-being. Social science and humanities scholars need to be given a chance to lead research projects, not just serve as add-ons to STEM-led research projects. We encourage the government to engage directly with ECRs and the broader research community to understand the impacts of these changes. Ultimately, the Marsden Fund should be preserved as a driver of excellence and innovation, supporting transformative curiosity-driven research for the benefit of all New Zealanders.

*If you are an Early Career Researcher with specific concerns or suggestions on how to respond to these decisions, please feel free to get in touch with the ECR Forum Committee: [rsnzecrforum@gmail.com](mailto:rsnzecrforum@gmail.com) and sign up for our listserv.*