

16 December 2024

The Rt Hon Christopher Luxon
Prime Minister
Parliament Buildings
Wellington 6160

Open letter on importance of research in the social sciences and humanities

Tēnā koe Prime Minister,

The role of the Royal Society Te Apārangi, as set out in the Royal Society of New Zealand Act, is to advance and promote science, technology, and the humanities, and to provide expert advice on important public issues to the Government and people of New Zealand.

In this capacity, we write regarding the need to ensure ongoing government investment in research in the social sciences and humanities.

The Minister for Science, Innovation, and Technology, Hon Judith Collins KC, has recently issued new directives that target spending within her portfolio to specific sciences. These changes to the terms of the Marsden Fund explicitly exclude research areas in the social sciences and humanities that were previously eligible. The Society will work to implement these changes for the 2025 funding round, under the strategic leadership of the government-appointed Marsden Fund Council.

We understand the Minister's intention and prerogative to use the available levers within the Science, Innovation and Technology portfolio to further the government's agenda for economic growth and productivity, alongside its goals for health and the environment. We also acknowledge that your government is committed to financial prudence in the context of current budgetary challenges. However, we urge you to give serious consideration to alternative investment mechanisms, maybe through other portfolios, that could address the loss of funding for research in the social sciences and humanities (approximately \$16.4 million annually).¹ The risks of failing to invest in these research areas are substantial.

First, research in these disciplines is vital to increasing productivity and commercialising technological advances. Your government has set an ambitious agenda for economic growth. Minister Collins has prioritised research in specific sciences with the aim of generating innovations that support our major industries to increase their productivity. However, many of the challenges to uptake of new technologies for local and export markets are social, economic, cultural, and political. Expertise based on the social sciences and humanities is needed to guide the direction of scientific research to meet the needs of consumers and end-users, and to enable successful commercialisation. This may be particularly true for the development of nascent high-potential sectors such as space science, advanced aviation, biotechnology, quantum physics, and artificial intelligence. Interdisciplinary research will also be needed to ensure that introduction of innovative products does not compromise the social and environmental standards that are central to New Zealand's international brand. Other insights from the social sciences and humanities can be translated directly into benefits in economic sectors such as tourism and international education.

¹ on average over the past 6 years.

Second, research in the social sciences and humanities contributes directly to your government's commitments to improve the lives of New Zealanders by maximising health and wellbeing, boosting employment, advancing educational achievement, and reducing crime. Successful delivery of these benefits for current and future generations depends on policies based on evidence from the social sciences and humanities. It is true that some research in the social sciences and humanities is commissioned by the relevant Ministries to enable implementation and evaluation, and other research is funded from sources such as the private sector and the Tertiary Education Commission. However, this type of research is generally designed to answer specific questions, and therefore tends to result in only incremental benefits. To do more than just slow the negative trends in some of our social and cultural outcomes, continuing investment is needed in fundamental research in the social sciences and humanities that can generate breakthroughs in insights and understanding. Similarly, achieving New Zealand's commitments to global targets on complex challenges such as human rights, development aid, climate change, and environmental sustainability will all require considerable research and expertise in these areas, as will our ability to respond to unknown threats and opportunities in the future.

Third, reduction of funding in the social sciences and humanities is likely to result in the loss of researchers, with a disproportionate impact on women, and on Māori and Pacific researchers.² Evidence suggests that early-career academics are most likely to leave, threatening a critical pipeline of thought-leadership for our country. Since research leadership in the social sciences and humanities makes a significant contribution to the relatively high global ranking of New Zealand's universities and other research institutions, loss of researchers would also compromise the international reputation of our tertiary education sector. In turn, this could reduce our ability to participate in lucrative international research collaborations and to achieve your goal of doubling the value of education exports by 2027.

Many of our country's leading thinkers have presented additional arguments and evidence for the value of the social sciences and humanities: bit.ly/3Vft0zO

We strongly advise you to act decisively to continue investment in fundamental research in the social sciences and humanities. Evidence shows that long-term investment in these areas will be essential to the success of your policies to grow New Zealand's economy through innovation, to ensure the wellbeing of our people and our environment, and to fulfil our multilateral commitments to solving global challenges.

We would welcome the opportunity to elaborate on the evidence supporting this advice.

Ngā mihi, nā



Distinguished Professor Dame Jane Harding DNZM FRACP FRSNZ
President

cc Hon Judith Collins, Minister of Science, Innovation and Technology J.Collins@ministers.govt.nz
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² In aggregate over the past 5 years, 70.0% of researchers on Marsden Fund grants in the social sciences and humanities identified as female, 29.5% as Māori, and 7.4% as Pacific; for research in other disciplines the equivalent proportions were 34.9% female, 3.5% Māori, and 0.3% Pacific (noting that researchers could nominate up to three ethnicities).