

## **Response to Te Ara Paerangi - Future Pathways: Voicing international PhD students' and early career researchers' perspectives**

By the end of 2020, nearly half, 49%, of Aotearoa New Zealand's doctoral students were international<sup>1</sup>. International PhD students and early career researchers (ECRs) have a long history of involvement with the New Zealand research environment. We – a group of international researchers – want to recognise the contributions of international PhD students and ECRs to New Zealand research. This submission is dedicated to voicing the international students' and ECRs' perspectives. We want to ensure, through this submission, that the research pathways in New Zealand recognise the role of international postgraduate students and ECRs and consider them for future planning.

Inputs for this submission were collected through an online questionnaire and two online discussions, which involved 19 international researchers (8 PhD students and 11 ECRs) currently residing in New Zealand. We are only a small group, but we hope to provide a submission reflective of international students' and ECRs' perspectives. This submission responds to selected key questions raised in the Te Ara Paerangi - Future Pathways Green Paper that are particularly relevant for international students and ECRs.

### **Summary of recommendations:**

- Maintain international competitiveness to recruit and retain international PhD students and ECRs.
- Provide structures for learning to help international PhD students and ECRs understand Te Tiriti and learn how to conduct research in New Zealand with respect to Māori and Treaty Partners.
- Institutions should provide support to international PhD students and ECRs appropriate to their unique context in New Zealand to ensure that they thrive during their studies and beyond.
- Sustainably support international PhD students towards joining the research workforce in New Zealand for the long term.
- The funding mechanism should be inclusive to international PhD students and ECRs.

### **What principles could be used to determine the scope and focus of research Priorities?**

The principles that determine the research Priorities should focus on the strengths of Aotearoa New Zealand research that makes it competitive in the international field.

We encourage the research Priorities design to include international ECRs' perspectives. Identifying principles that determine the research Priorities requires us to investigate the strengths of New Zealand research. For this submission, we asked the international researchers: "What strengths make New Zealand attractive?" New Zealand research has a reputation for having a collaborative environment and being connected globally. International ECRs describe the New Zealand research environment as supportive, open, less hierarchical, a diverse research community, and with experts reputed in fields. Research Priorities should align with these principles to remain competitive on the world stage.

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<sup>1</sup> Education Counts (2021). Tertiary Participation – provider-based enrolments.  
<https://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/tertiary-participation>

## How should we engage with Māori and Treaty Partners?

One of the recognised strengths of New Zealand research is the inclusion of Mātauranga Māori, which is a unique feature of New Zealand.

As international researchers, we support Te Tiriti, Mātauranga Māori, and Māori aspirations. We also recognise that there is a steep learning curve for international arrivals to learn about New Zealand's biculturalism:

*The integration of te ao Māori/Mātauranga Māori is a huge positive in New Zealand science, but does create a very steep learning curve for international arrivals. Particularly when applying for research funding when Vision Mātauranga is, [as it should be], given a large amount of weight.*

In many cases, this learning is not easily accessible to international PhD students and ECRs:

*At the [University], they have interesting programs on learning more about Māori (e.g. language courses), but most of them are for New Zealand residents only, which I find very disappointing.*

International researchers want to engage with Māori but need support to do so. Designing programmes would be helpful for international PhD students and ECRs to understand Te Tiriti and learn how to conduct research in New Zealand with respect to Māori and Treaty Partners.

### **Role of institutions in workforce development: How can institutions be designed to better support capability, skill and workforce development?**

Universities, CRIs, and other research institutions have a duty of care to their staff and students to enable them to give effect to research Priorities.

For Universities, the duty of care includes ensuring that international PhD students are supported throughout their studies and can transition to a career in New Zealand. Universities should provide support structures for international PhD students to integrate into New Zealand society. We highlight the need for pastoral care for the students, especially during crises like the COVID19 pandemic.

Fair scholarship funding was identified as an opportunity to better support capability, skill, and workforce development. Students reported experiencing financial hardship due to the high costs of living in New Zealand and the low stipends that the Universities set. This is an issue experienced by both international and domestic PhD students and ECRs, as indicated by a PhD student:

*[The] stipend amount should be increased for the PhD students. I got to know that the people from New Zealand (home country) are struggling with financial [issues] due to less stipend. If so, the authorities should [also] know how hard that will be for the international students.*

Thus, we contend that institutions can better support the workforce by providing fair scholarships and stipends that (at the minimum) match the high costs of living in New Zealand.

Institutions, along with Immigration New Zealand, also need to review the status of international PhD students as equivalent to their domestic counterparts. The institutions need to review whether the visa status of PhD students is enabling or hindering them from contributing to New Zealand research. Currently, the visa status of an international PhD student is the same as an undergraduate student, despite PhD students carrying responsibilities and workloads beyond that of an undergraduate. The general student visa status hinders international PhD students from having access to privileges their domestic counterparts may have. One international PhD student provides an example here:

*Although I appreciate the fact that international [PhD] students pay domestic tuition fees, I think that the requirements related to the “domestic status” are not always suitable, e.g. if an international student wants to suspend their research for parental leave, time overseas, or because of (mental) health issues they can only do so for three months (otherwise they will lose their student visa), which seems very stressful.*

New Zealand spends a considerable amount to attract, fund, and train international PhD students. If the international PhD students cannot thrive in their studies and join the workforce, this will be a significant research investment loss for New Zealand. Institutions should collaborate in building programmes (e.g. partnerships between Universities and CRIs) to transition PhD students from their completion to their entry to the research job market and beyond.

International PhD students and ECRs also reported feeling seen as “outsiders” and have experienced racism and stigma as international students/ECRs within their research community. We argue that it is within the duty of care of Universities, CRIs, and other research institutions to build an inclusive and welcoming culture within the workplace.

### **How should we include workforce considerations in the design of research Priorities?**

One of the assets of New Zealand science is its research workforce, which in Universities is mainly driven by PhD students. The research Priorities should be designed to maximise and retain this workforce sustainably. This entails providing career pathways for all PhD students, including international students. The following excerpt is one example among many international PhD students and ECRs who are struggling to secure their career path in New Zealand:

*Currently, all of the fellowships offered by the Royal Society are only eligible for New Zealand citizens or those with a residence visa. Given the well-documented issues with Immigration [New Zealand] and residenc[y] visas, this has been a huge barrier to international ECRs who want to stay in New Zealand and continue to contribute.*

Research Priorities should include workforce considerations ensuring all New Zealand researchers (citizens and residents) **AND** New Zealand-trained students and researchers (those who are not citizens and residents) have similar opportunities for career progress in New Zealand to minimise brain drain.

### **Better designed funding mechanisms: How do we design new funding mechanisms that strongly focus on workforce outcomes?**

Funding mechanisms should be inclusive of international students and ECRs, which comprises a large portion of New Zealand’s research workforce. Providing inclusive funding mechanisms for international PhD students and ECRs to mitigate brain drain in New Zealand can look like:

- Changing the eligibility requirements for fellowships to either remove visa requirements altogether or change to reflect how long the applicant has been in the country;
- Changing the funding focus to one that tries to entice people to stay and work in New Zealand;
- Providing a more straightforward path to residency by allowing years spent as a PhD student in New Zealand to count towards residency requirements;
- Showing greater appreciation towards the work a PhD student does for New Zealand through financial awards, grants, or incentives, and other means; and/or,
- Differentiating PhD student visas from other student visas to truly reflect our status and contributions to the country.