

Te Ara Paerangi - Future Pathways submission of the Wellington Post-Doctoral Society (7th March 2022)

We are writing on behalf of the 54 members of the Wellington Post-Doctoral Society at Victoria University of Wellington.

Thank you for taking the time to read our submission. We focus on precarity as this is our lived reality.

We wholeheartedly agree that our research workforce is the centre of a connected, resilient and adaptable research system. The research system attracts excellent talent and highly skilled researchers, but currently does not offer attractive careers and career pathways to retain us. As the stories of precarity below demonstrate, the attractiveness of a research career in New Zealand that demands we live short-term fixed contract to short-term fixed contract is waning. The competitive academic system demands so much from us without enough job and financial security to encourage us to stay.

At what cost should a research career come? As you will read below, the negative impacts of our lives are too many to list here but have far reaching effects on our health, wellbeing and relationships. Family planning might be proposed or decided against as precarious employment in academia is more difficult with caregiver responsibility and without financial support of a stable income. As well, we know that the precarity affects non-Pākehā, disabled and women more.^{1,2} We see burnout, disillusionment, overworking, and mental health issues among our post-doctoral colleagues.

Research ideas that will change our sector and New Zealand and lead to new innovations are mostly likely coming from our upcoming early career workforce. Unique skill sets can be retained and further developed (e.g. Mātauranga Māori, native fauna and flora knowledge) to be able to address our rapidly changing future.

The research system does not support the development of independent research projects by early career researchers in non-permanent positions as grants rarely cover a full salary. This means cobbling together a job from several grants. Thus, we advocate for sufficiently funded grants to support researchers to have the time, security, and stability to develop independent research projects with more productive research focused outputs. This will not only look after the people at the centre of the research system, it will enable a system that is able to be more resilient and adaptable.

Alternatively, a base grant that meant the significant cost of overheads would be able to be spent on covering salaries. A base grant would mean our work and contributions to the research sector and New Zealand is able to be more highly valued and accurately costed for in terms of time.

¹ Brower A, James A (2020) Research performance and age explain less than half of the gender pay gap in New Zealand universities. *PLoS ONE* 15(1): e0226392. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0226392>

² Naepi S, McAllister TG, Thomsen P, et al. The Pakaru 'Pipeline': Māori and Pasifika Pathways within the Academy. *New Zeal Annu Rev Educ.* 2019;24:142-159.

In response to **TE HUNGA MAHI RANGAHAU WORKFORCE** we asked early career researcher throughout various institutes at Victoria University of Wellington to answer the following questions:

- How long have you been on fixed-term contracts post-PhD?
- How many contracts have you had since completing your PhD?
- How many organisations (e.g. CRI, university) have you worked for?
- What impact does precarity have on your life?
- What impact would a base grant have on you as an early career researcher in a precarious career?
- Why did you decide to work in New Zealand?
- What has been your overall experiences as an ECR in New Zealand and how has this impacted your career choices?

1. I graduated with a PhD in 2020 and have been on two (one-year-long) fixed term contracts since then working for a university. The precarity greatly impacts my life, as it places limitations on obtaining/servicing a mortgage and influences family planning (i.e. if having a child is feasible/affordable, given the uncertainty of employment, maternity/paternity leave, etc.). A base grant would make a substantial difference, imparting much-needed stability in my personal, as well as professional, life. I decided to work in NZ because of situation in my personal life. Without this situation, I would seek stable employment elsewhere. I've been fortunate in that I greatly enjoy my research, but the instability of employment is very stressful. I also feel that I must compromise if I want stability. - I can find a stable job in a non-research area, but I would not be as satisfied with or passionate about the work.

2. 6.5 years on fixed-term contracts. Two casual contracts, on fixed term contract with one extension. Worked for one CRI and for VUW. Precarity has no effect on my life. I don't know any different. I don't know what a base grant is. My contract is well paid but everything gets eaten up by the living costs in NZ and Wellington in particular. There is no chance to settle here for good. Corona sealed the lid on that plan.

3. Completed PhD 2018, graduated 2019. Have only worked for VUW since (both within the school where I did my PhD and in other roles across the university), and would estimate 13 different fixed-term contacts ranging from a couple of weeks (e.g. ad hoc marking) to current 2-year postdoc position (funded by an external organisation). The precarity of this kind of work is stressful and makes you feel unsettled (in both the anxiety sense and the having a home base sense). It makes it difficult to imagine what kind of career you're going to have, and also difficult to prove (safe) earnings to the bank, e.g. for a mortgage. You always have to be saving all your money for a potential period of unemployment between contracts. Basically it sucks. A base grant would remove so much of this uncertainty and anxiety and open up space to be able to think clearly about the future, and not always be scrambling for the next grant to simply keep yourself employed. I want to stay in NZ, and in Wellington specifically, which severely limits permanent career options in my area. The precarity of a fixed-term contract life means that I am strongly considering leaving the university at the end of my current contract.

4. Since I graduated from my PhD, I have been on multiple fixed-term contracts: first research assistant for 6 months, then post-doctoral fellow for two years, then three times six months as a research assistant on a time sheet contract. All in the same lab. Although I enjoy the flexibility of not working full time and not having fixed hours, it's only because I have little responsibilities

outside of work (no family, no mortgage, etc). If I had the wish of building such a life, I would probably not be working at university.

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5. I have been on fixed-term contracts since graduating from my PhD in 2019. During this time, I have worked for two universities in New Zealand. While I have enjoyed the opportunities that working at different universities (e.g. access to lab equipment, co-workers), the precarity has a negative effect on me. I find it very hard to plan for the future (e.g. buying a house) not knowing where I will be in a few years time. It is especially depressing to see house prices spiral out of control and friends buying houses. At times, I feel like I have made a mistake choosing a research career and that I am being left behind because of it. If more secure employment was available I would be able to participate in life milestones available to other people. I chose to stay in New Zealand post-PhD because it was something I am comfortable with. Moving overseas would be a considerable upheaval for similar precarious conditions. I have found working as an ECR rewarding, but I am keeping an eye open for opportunities outside the sector because the precarity is hard to tolerate.

 6. I am in my first fixed term contract since completing my PhD Working for 2 organisations. The uncertainty surrounding how long I will work in my current position for, and where I will work next and for how long has a negative impact on my mental health, my relationship with my partner and with friends, and my long-term housing and financial security (buying vs renting etc). I am a NZ citizen and decided to work here after my PhD because of COVID-19 limitations.

 7. This is my first post-doc position on a 3 years fixed term contract. The precarity prevents my and my partner to make long-term decisions and commitments. Difficult to gauge whether we should try and get residency, think about having a family. It feels powerless to have to rely on senior academic staff to make decisions about budgeting and to whom allocating the FTEs. Having control over part of or a full grant would be useful. I decided to come to New Zealand for the country and because the research centre is excellent. I find the restrictions difficult to live with (borders closure with covid, the fact that non-residents can not buy a house or even apply for some of the grants). The housing crisis is a big issue, given the fact that most of the ECR are in a position in their lives where they want to buy a house, start a family, ... which imply a certain level of certainty we do not get from a 2 or 3 years fixed term contract.

 8. I come to NZ in 2016 for my first Postdoc at VUW. My first Postdoc contract was for 2,5 years. I was lucky enough to get a second postdoc contract right after that in the same group for 3 years. Last year I was very lucky and got awarded a Fellowship in 2021, which will cover my salary for the next 2 years. I am still associated with VUW. During this time, I am hoping to get more grants and/or a permanent position. I had two children during my postdoc time, which meant returning quickly after maternity leave because I was only on fixed term contracts and I wanted to perform and get things done so I would get a follow up contract. Working in NZ as a postdoc with a family has been good on one hand because the life-work balance is great, on the other hand, funding is very limited, so you need to perform very good in order to succeed.

 9. I finished my PhD in 2020 and have already had six fixed-term research contracts at one institution. I am currently employed across five contracts, all of which I am the principal or a co-investigator on. I have turned down another job in government for now, but I will not stay on short-term contracts past the end of 2023. I am constantly worried about how long I will have employment for. It feels like I'm on a hamster wheel, forever trying to apply for new funding, while completing the current research as well as finishing off projects that have finished but there wasn't enough time to write up (often in our own time). The FTE cover by grants is never enough

to cover our workload not to mention all the extra things we do for free to augment our career, give back to our communities and the public.

My annual pay rates vary by 15k, I don't know my annual salary across complex FTE arrangements with differing start dates. As well I have had months of unpaid work waiting for grants to start. The research system is too complex, disjointed and slow when new contracts come in or we have to work illegally without contracts because the timelines demand it.

This precarity has impacted all aspects of my personal life - when to have another child with differing grant/research deadlines, will I be entitled to university paid parental leave (I wasn't the first time) and what happens to my projects, not to mention if we can afford it as my income is the more stable of myself and my partner's. Housing is another major issue for us and my job insecurity makes it very difficult to get a mortgage and to afford the repayments.

I don't want to move overseas for a short-term research contract or even a permanent position. I want to stay in NZ as my whānau is here and I care deeply about New Zealand. I don't want to research elsewhere but the opportunities for permanent jobs here are so limited. How long do we wait around for a permanent job to come along? I think about quitting daily and know many colleagues do too.

Despite being more successful in research grants than I have time to work on, VUW won't appoint research-only staff. A base grant will hopefully help to change some of the difficulties we face but the institutions need to see us as valued members of our schools, divisions, and institutions and to value our contribution appropriately.

10. I came to NZ to take a postdoctoral position. I've been on fixed-term contracts for nearly nine years across 3-4 contracts at the same university. I spend an enormous amount of time applying for grants and jobs and sometimes have difficulty allocating the amount of time my actual job requires. A base grant would have saved me a lot of stress and allowed me to focus on my research. A related issue is housing. Without the stability of longer-term contracts, it is difficult to get approval for a home loan, assuming one can afford it on an academic's salary. As my current position expires, and with reduced academic hiring in NZ, I'm unsure of my next steps.

11. I have been on fixed-term positions since 2011. My first contract was a postdoc at a different University between 2011-2013. Second postdoc fixed-term contract overseas from 2014-2016. Then, back in NZ. I worked part-time from mid 2016-2017 at a museum. Next contract part-time at VUW from 2017-2018. Then, another fixed-term contract at VUW from 2018-2019. Currently on a 3-year contract at VUW from end 2019 until end 2022. Having a family and living on fixed-term contracts is very tough. I have no intention of becoming a Professor and there are no permanent positions (or they are very rare) for researchers just doing research without teaching in NZ. I would be extremely happy with a part-time research-only position. I'm already applying for grants because if my contract finishes at the end of 2022 and I haven't found a new job it will impact my family life, my personal wellbeing and our finances. Living on a contract is a thought constantly on my mind, very stressful. I absolutely love working in Aotearoa, people are great, my boss allows for tons of flexibility, very family-oriented, just nice people. High quality research, and the working conditions are fabulous with a wonderful backyard to explore.

12. Fixed-term contracts post-PhD: 5.5 years Number of contracts: 3 Number of organisations: 2 What impact does precarity have on your life: stress, overworked, working very long hours, undervalued, poor pay, difficult to plan for the future, huge pressure to win grants - I spend all of 2021 writing grants impacting publications and other research outputs. What impact would a

base grant have on you as an early career researcher in a precarious career: take the pressure off, keep research going while writing grants, feel slightly more valued. Why did you decide to work in New Zealand: Be close to family, work with leading researchers in my field. What has been your overall experiences as an ECR in New Zealand and how has this impacted your career choices: largely great because I have a supportive manager, but low salary, not enough research funding for postdocs, not enough professional development for postdocs. Despite this, I haven't changed my career goals and still aiming for a career in academia/research with a permanent position.

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13. I have been a postdoc for about 6 years, that has involved 3 fixed term contracts working at a university.

On the basis of our experiences, we recommend work in the following areas would help early career researchers to address precarity.

In addition to the following recommendations we urge MBIE to review the wider research system and institutions in the context of its racist, sexist, ableist foundations and the ongoing effects that advantage certain groups over others. Putting in place accountability measures would ensure the strategies that have been put in place are having the desired effect and the rate at which change is occurring.

A strong research workforce requires workers that feel committed to their mahi in ways that short-term fixed contracts do not permit or encourage. There is a very strong need for MBIE to pull all available levers to incentivise **permanent career pathways**. Clear actions that would address precarity include:

- Clear pathway to permanent research-intensive positions from fixed-term contracts (steps, milestones and guidelines – across all universities and CRIs). We note that University of Auckland has recently released a pathway for senior research fellows.³ However, there are not enough grants to cover 80% of salary over 5 years for ECRs, especially in the humanities so these criteria may only work for certain research disciplines. In particular we advocate for positions to be created to redress the inequities of precarity – namely for non-Pākehā, people with disabilities and women.
- Abolish the institutional culture of exploitation: Establish a long-term plan that reviews every person hired on a fixed-term contract to see if there's ongoing work with the goal of becoming permanent position (e.g. as the Cawthron Institute informally has). There's some risk on taking on permanent staff as we may not be successful in every funding application but imagine what amazing mahi we could do if we had a stronger sense of connection to where we work, more job security, more personal investment. If businesses can offer permanent contracts, why not universities?
- Shared permanent positions between institutes (e.g. university and CRIs) that would help with the connectivity and shared costs for employers.
- Actively supporting recruitment to increase diversity within senior leadership positions to guarantee career progression for non-Pākehā and females.
- Close the legal loophole where we have contracts essentially rolled over but because they're tied to a specific fund, we are not entitled for permanent appointment.

³ <https://www.auckland.ac.nz/en/about-us/about-the-university/policy-hub/people-culture/recruitment-appointment-induction/permanent-appointment-senior-research-fellow-srf-guidelines.html>

The funding system needs to support both capacity and capability of the workforce and this includes spare capacity to help us be agile. We suggest the following are prioritised in terms of **funding schemes**:

- Increase the number of post-doctoral fellowships to develop independent research projects. However this solution must not only postpone the issue of precarity, as discussed above.
- Increase the size of the funding pool to match international levels.
- Removal (or at least limiting amount of overheads (e.g. 30% of salary)) on grant applications for post-doctoral researcher to create more and longer contracts.
- Top up/add FTE into post-doctoral salaries to have capacity to do additional work (e.g. peer review, keynotes, post-graduate supervision, professional development courses, technically upskilling etc). Currently the general expectation is that we can and will do this work for free in our 'spare time' because it's in our best interest to build our CVs and say yes to everything at this stage in our career.
- Review the funding structure to use all levers available to government i.e. overheads rate, EFTS funding (especially the STEM vs humanities rates), PBRF, salary scales, stipends, PhD completion payments with respect to how these incentivize the oversupply of PhDs when few permanent positions exist in the research sector.
- A quota of PBRF income directly and transparently linked to individual early career researcher or a fund that supports all early career researchers (e.g. salary and research costs).
- Formalising and expediting the application to grants and funds: having a national portal for all grants that we can submit to every year. A more uniform process that has common formats for shared information and additional sections that would align the application to each funding scheme would reduce unnecessary admin and free up much needed time for research. We recognize that each funder has its own priority for funding but some consideration could be given to how we can streamline the process. We recommend you investigate rolling submissions and lottery possibilities for funding schemes. A single system would mean a simpler contracting process.
- Set Key performance indicators to speed up the funding application and contracting process so we aren't left unpaid waiting for new grants to start.
- Remove dates from CV and only state the number of years of study/research and no justification on the reason for leave. This would help to remove the bias toward (most often) women who have taken parental leave or the stigma of unemployment or mental health leave. What applicants do in their free time or during their leave should be irrelevant to a research funding application.
- Place a requirement on funders to take steps to address bias in application process for disadvantaged groups e.g. train assessors to raise their awareness of bias, and report on what is assessed to ensure bias is addressed.

To help institutions meet their professional, moral and societal duty to staff well-being, thereby supporting the research system, we encourage MBIE to consider implementing the following **employer obligations**:

- Mandatory reporting on the gender and ethnicity pay gap for all institutions.
- Mandatory professional development as part of employment e.g. project management skills.
- Mandatory cultural competency and cultural safety training.
- Clear and transparent communication about staff benefits, discounts and resources as often this is covered during orientation events for new staff but no to little information is provided to postdoctoral researchers.

- A clear pathway to residency and support from the universities/CRIs because some grants are only open to residents/citizens.
- Equal access to internal grants for all ECRs and resources than permanent staff.
- Guidance and support of ECRs on independent research projects without permanent positions. There is little to no information available when starting your own research grant (budgeting, management etc.). Normally you rely on information from people you know and often being uninformed is a disadvantage (e.g. salary negotiations, entitlements, internal procedures).
- All ECRs can be the primary supervisors of Master and PhD students as long as the contract covers the timeframe and the supervision training has been supported.

Research precarity makes for difficult family and personal situations as described by the people who answered our survey. In order to support the future and sustainability of the emerging research workforce, we offer the following recommendations to assist with **family/personal considerations**:

- Help to buy a house: can the university provide zero or low interest loans for staff to buy a house, as other universities do? Can buildings be rented out to staff at lower rates? As noted above, the housing crisis in Wellington is a decisive aspect of choosing to leave or stay in academia and a widely talked about topic in meetings among ECRs colleagues. Some are considering leaving academia based on only this aspect because the work conditions are untenable.
- Parental leave: extension of the contract by the time taken off for parental leave.
- Acknowledge the lasting impacts of parental/other leave and caregiving duties e.g. fewer publications the following year(s), unable to take on additional responsibilities, lack of conference presentations. Address this by inclusion of staff on parental leave as co-investigators and co-authors without expecting new parents to work while on leave.
- University support for parents: subsidised childcare (on site), rooms for breastfeeding/pumping, babysitting services (as some universities offer to permanent staff, but extended to all staff).⁴

Thank you for taking our concerns into consideration and see the possibilities for working in different, more sustainable and ethical ways. We are committed the staying in the research sector as long as we are able to have meaningful, sufficiently supported careers.

Dr Alexandra Gossart, Dr Maren Preuss and Dr Jessica Young on behalf of the Wellington Post-Doctoral Society at Victoria University of Wellington.

⁴ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/what-parents-need-succeed-academia-and-how-universities-can-help?fbclid=IwAR1HJGe0z3XoDzyOenA0pSUnZ2IENPqli6zRPrm62pBIJSi2Gw8VtDb3dU0>