



**MINISTRY OF BUSINESS,
INNOVATION & EMPLOYMENT**
HĪKINA WHAKATUTUKI



Terms of Reference

Prime Minister's Science Prizes

June 2026

Purpose

These Terms of Reference (ToR) refresh the settings and eligibility criteria for the Prime Minister's Science Prizes (Prizes) *and create a new prize for science innovation*.

Context

This annual Prize programme aims to raise the profile and prestige of Science, Innovation and Technology (SI&T) in New Zealand by:

- Awarding prizes to New Zealand scientists, innovators, students and educators.
- Recognising, celebrating and promoting the achievements of Prize recipients.
- Highlighting the impact SI&T has on New Zealanders' lives.
- Attracting young people to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM).

General Terms of Reference

The following ToR are common across all Prizes. Specific details for each of the Prizes are provided later in the document.

Objectives

The Prime Minister's Science Prizes aim to:

- Raise the profile, prestige, and public understanding of science in New Zealand by recognising and celebrating scientific excellence across the S&T system, from students and teachers, to emerging and established researchers and innovators.
- Encourage transformative scientific discoveries and achievements that deliver significant economic, health, social and environmental benefits to New Zealand and internationally.
- Foster strong science communication and public engagement.
- Inspiring more young people and communities to participate and pursue STEM.

Prize values

Prize values are set at a level to meaningfully contribute to future research programmes, the professional development of prize winners and their teams, and for the Future Scientist Award, the Prize winner's tertiary education fees.

There are six Prizes aimed at various career stages and levels of impact:

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| • Prime Minister's Science Prize | \$500,000 |
| • Prime Minister's Emerging Scientist Prize | \$200,000 |
| • Prime Minister's Innovation Prize | \$150,000 |
| • Prime Minister's Science Teacher Prize | \$150,000 |
| • Prime Minister's Science Communication Prize | \$75,000 |
| • Prime Minister's Future Scientist Prize | \$50,000 |

Funding

The Prizes are administered by the Royal Society Te Apārangi (the Society) on behalf of the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) and funded through Vote: Business, Science and Innovation - Talent and Science Promotion.

Definitions

Science is the systematic creation of knowledge through observation, experimentation, and analysis within the fields of natural, physical, mathematical, information, applied, engineering, technological, health and social sciences, as well as multidisciplinary research.

Innovation refers to the development of new or significantly improved products, services, processes, that create economic or societal value.

Technology refers to the practical application of scientific knowledge—the tools, systems, methods, and processes humans create to solve problems, accomplish tasks, or extend our capabilities.

General criteria and applicant eligibility

The Prizes are open to either individuals or teams as specified in the Prize eligibility. For a team entry, one person must be designated as the 'Team Representative'. The Team Representative or individual applicant must be currently domiciled in New Zealand, and, if relevant, be active in their field of science. The Team Representative or individual winner will need to be prepared to be the public face of the achievement. This will include receiving the Prize and speaking with the media and may include other promotional activities.

Re-application by individuals or teams from previous years is permitted as long as the eligibility criteria continue to be met. However, past winners of a specific Prize will not be eligible to enter a second time for that same Prize.

Eligibility and selection criteria will be determined by MBIE in conjunction with the Society. MBIE may adjust these from time to time to increase the Prizes' effectiveness. The Society will publish these criteria at the start of each funding round.

Selection process

- The selection process will be determined by MBIE in conjunction with the Society. The selection process will be published by the Society when the Prizes open for applications.
- Assessments may include an interview of short-listed applicants (and key personnel if the application is from a team). A site visit may be included if relevant.
- The Society will provide a long list and a short list to the Minister of SI&T.
- The final decision will be made by the Minister of SI&T.

Reporting, monitoring and evaluation

The Society will report to MBIE on the Prizes annually. The reporting will include information on the applications, administration of the Prizes, and any suggested changes to improve their effectiveness.

Evaluations will be carried out by MBIE from time to time to ensure the objective is being met. In response to those evaluations, MBIE, in consultation with the Society, may update these ToR.

Prime Minister's Science Prize: Te Puiaki Pūtaiao Matua a Te Pirimia

This Prize is for an outstanding scientist, or team, which have delivered a transformative scientific advance with significant and demonstrable economic, health, social or environmental benefits in New Zealand and/or internationally.

Value

- \$500,000 (GST zero rated), comprising:
 - \$100,000 as an unrestricted award to the winning scientist or team and
 - \$400,000 as a grant for their ongoing research

Eligibility

- Individuals or teams are invited to apply for this Prize.
- Either the individual or team representative must be a permanent resident or citizen of New Zealand.
- The majority of the work under consideration must have taken place in New Zealand.

Selection criteria

Adjudication for the prize will be based on the extent to which a transformative scientific discovery or achievement has led to significant and demonstrable economic, health, social or environmental benefits in New Zealand and/or internationally.

This may be evidenced by:

- Successful development and deployment of new or improved research methods, products, processes, or services (including public services).
- Major changes to practice in an important professional community or an industrial, business, infrastructural or service sector, at least at a national level.
- Major changes in relevant public policy and/or government investment or operational strategy (for example, in health, social policy, environmental protection, conservation, or emergency management).
- Significant advances in the development or application of knowledge systems, including Mātauranga Māori, that have strengthened research, enabled effective translation, or improved the effectiveness of science, innovation and technology.
- Significant and sustained capital investment by industry, technology-transfer partners, or end-users, licensing of intellectual property, and/or formation of spin-out or start-up companies.
- A high level of recognition through peer-reviewed processes, for example through international awards or publications in leading journals.

Applications must include statements from at least three professional, internationally credible referees. They should also submit a proposal for investment of the Prize in their ongoing research (predominantly within New Zealand).

Prime Minister's Emerging Scientist Prize: Te Puiaki Kaipūtaiao Maea

This Prize is to recognise and support an emerging early-career scientist who has demonstrated research excellence and made a significant and recent contribution to their scientific field, with potential to generate economic, health, social or environmental benefits for New Zealand.

Value

- \$200,000 (GST zero rated), comprising:
 - \$50,000 as an unrestricted award to the emerging scientist and
 - \$150,000 for continuation of their Prize-winning research.

Eligibility

- Individuals are invited to apply for this Prize if they have received their PhD within six years of their application (excluding career breaks such as parental leave as determined by the Society).
- The applicant must be a resident, permanent resident or citizen of New Zealand, currently domiciled in New Zealand.
- The majority of the work under consideration must have taken place in New Zealand.
- The winner is expected to remain active in research in New Zealand for at least the following year of receiving the prize.

Selection criteria

The Prize will be adjudicated based on evidence of the following criteria:

- The applicant is an outstanding scholar who demonstrates excellence in their field.
- The research is leading-edge in that it has generated or has the potential to generate valuable new knowledge within their academic discipline.
- The applicant has the potential to progress their career and become a future research leader.
- The applicant demonstrates the ability to communicate their research clearly and effectively.

Applications must include statements from at least two internationally credible referees. They should also submit a proposal for investment of the Prize money in their ongoing research (predominantly within New Zealand).

Prime Minister's Innovation Prize: Te Puiaki Auaha

This Prize is for an innovator or team for translation of scientific knowledge into products, services or processes that have either delivered, or have demonstrable potential to deliver, substantial and transformative economic, social and/or environmental benefits.

Value

\$150,000 (GST zero rated), comprising:

- \$50,000 as an unrestricted award for the innovator or team and
- \$100,000 for their ongoing research, development, and/or support for scale-up and growth.

Eligibility

- Individuals or teams are invited to apply for this Prize.
- Either the individual or team representative must be a resident, permanent resident or citizen of New Zealand, currently domiciled in New Zealand.
- The majority of the work under consideration must have taken place in New Zealand.

Selection criteria

Adjudication will be based on evidence of innovative translation of scientific knowledge into a product, service or process that has demonstrated, or has credible potential to deliver, substantial transformative impact as a novel or materially improved solution to a real-world problem. This recognises that some innovations, particularly in technology-enabled fields, emerge rapidly and show exceptional promise before their full impacts can be realised.

Applicants should present evidence so that their achievements can be assessed against the following criteria:

- Proven impact, such as intellectual property (e.g. pending and/or approved patents), licensing agreements, capital investment by industry or technology-transfer partners, establishment of spin-out or start-up ventures, commercial uptake, sales, deployment, or adoption, particularly in New Zealand.
- Breakthrough potential, demonstrated through a step-change or first-of-kind innovation with a clear pathway to scale, adoption, or market entry.
- Strong record of peer-reviewed publications, collaborative research partnerships, or equivalent scholarly recognition demonstrating excellence and originality of the science.
- Validated prototypes, pilots, regulatory or standards progress, strategic partnerships, or strong signals of demand or uptake that demonstrate the credibility and feasibility of impact.
- Applications must include statements from at least two internationally credible referees. They must also submit a proposal for investment of the Prize money in their ongoing research, development, scale-up, or growth (predominantly within New Zealand) for at least one year following the presentation of the Prize.

Prime Minister's Science Teacher Prize: Te Puiaki Kaiwhakaako Pūtaiao

The Prize is for an outstanding and inspirational teacher of science, mathematics, and/or technology in a primary, intermediate or secondary school, or of pūtaiao, hangarau, or pāngarau in a kura kaupapa Māori.

Value

- \$150,000 (GST zero rated), comprising:
 - \$50,000 as an unrestricted award for the teacher and
 - \$100,000 for ongoing improvements to teaching of relevant science learning areas at their school.

Eligibility

Individuals are invited to apply for this Prize if they:

- Are a qualified and registered teacher currently employed in a permanent capacity in a New Zealand-registered school.
- Teach school-age children (in primary, intermediate, composite, or secondary schools).
- Have been in the same role for at least 12 months prior to their application.
- Are a resident, permanent resident or citizen of New Zealand, currently domiciled in New Zealand.
- Have at least five years of teaching experience in New Zealand, in relevant learning areas (science, mathematics, technology, pūtaiao, hangarau, or pāngarau).

Selection criteria

Adjudication will be based on evidence of significant achievements in science education within five years of the date of application. Each application will be assessed in the context in which the applicant is teaching (e.g. relative to the opportunities reasonably available to a primary, intermediate or secondary teacher).

Applicants should present evidence so that their work can be assessed against the following criteria:

- Improved outcomes for students in relevant learning areas, including progress to further study or careers.
- Promotion of awareness, engagement, and appreciation of relevant learning areas to students, the wider school, and the broader community.
- Influence on the school's delivery of, and engagement with, science education (e.g. support for colleagues, participating with scientists, and creating opportunities for community involvement).

Applications must include at least one statement of support from a senior leader from the school or kura kaupapa Māori. Applicants should also submit a proposal for investment of the Prize money to further improve the teaching of relevant learning areas in their school.

Prime Minister's Science Communication Prize: Te Puiaki Whakapā Pūtaiao

This Prize is to acknowledge individuals who can demonstrate passion and aptitude for communicating complex scientific or technological information and engaging a diverse range of audiences to inform public debate on issues that matter for New Zealand.

Value

- \$75,000 (GST zero rated), comprising:
 - \$20,000 as an unrestricted award to the winning scientist and
 - \$55,000 for their ongoing work in science communication and relevant professional development

Eligibility

- Individuals are invited to apply for this Prize if they are a resident, permanent resident or citizen of New Zealand, currently domiciled in New Zealand.
- The majority of the work under consideration must have taken place in New Zealand.

Selection criteria

The Prize will be adjudicated on the applicant's commitment to and aptitude for science communication and public engagement, with supporting evidence for:

- Clear and accessible communication of complex scientific or technological information over the past three years.
- Strategic use of appropriate channels and methods to engage with diverse audiences, including creative and original approaches such as use of visual or multimedia elements, where applicable, without sacrificing accuracy or rigour.
- Relevance and real-world impact, demonstrated by provision of evidence or analysis to inform public debate on issues that matter for New Zealand.
- Changes in understanding or awareness among target audiences, or
- plans to further or change their communication of science in the future based on response to feedback or data on understanding or awareness.

Applications must include statements from at least two supporting referees. Applicants should also submit a proposal for investing the Prize money in their science communication activities (predominantly within New Zealand) or relevant professional development.

Prime Minister's Future Scientist Prize: Te Puiaki Kaipūtaiao Anamata

This prize is for an outstanding senior secondary school student who has achieved excellence through a project related to STEM subjects.

Value

- Up to \$50,000 (GST zero rated) to support the winner's tertiary education in New Zealand: 50% on announcement and 50% at the start of the following year.

Eligibility

Students are invited to apply for this Prize if they:

- are either a Year 12 or Year 13 student (or equivalent).
- are studying in New Zealand and have had a minimum of three years secondary schooling in New Zealand.
- are eligible and intend to enrol at a New Zealand tertiary institution.

Selection criteria

Applicants should present a project related to natural, physical, mathematical, information, applied, engineering, technological, or other sciences. The project will be assessed against the following criteria:

- High quality literature review and objective-setting (demonstrating understanding of relevant background, identifying a clear research question or problem, and defining measurable objectives grounded in evidence).
- Sound design and planning of the investigative process (proposing appropriate methods, and identifying variables, controls, equipment, and limitations).
- Thorough execution of the experimental or investigative process (following the planned methodology or justifying deviations and systematically collecting and recording accurate data).
- Correct analysis and interpretation of data and results (identifying patterns, trends, or anomalies in the data, and interpreting results critically).
- Quality of conclusions (relating findings back to the original objectives or hypothesis, and reflecting on potential applications, wider significance, or directions for further work).

Applications must include statements from at least one referee, such as a teacher or school leader or a judge of a science and technology fair. Applicants should also submit a statement about how they would use the Prize money towards tertiary study in New Zealand.

