

University Advisory Group submission from the Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington Te Hiwa Leadership Team

Introduction

We welcome an examination by the University Advisory Group (UAG) that focuses on enabling the university sector to deliver its core functions to the greatest possible extent within the higher education system. Despite resource limitations, as a sector we are performing extremely well, with all our universities ranked within the top 3% globally. We deliver quality education to students in their locations, we have positive outcomes for our students across a range of metrics, our research is high quality and impactful, and we are trusted and respected partners locally and internationally.

The functions of universities are critical for a healthy, open society and growth of a knowledge economy. While we are performing well, we recognise the sector can improve and needs to be dynamic to respond to a rapidly changing environment. We urge the UAG to direct their attention to the areas that need reform and improvement to enable and incentivise system-level change – the current funding model and the strategic intent and direction for higher education are key among these.

Our submission provides a high-level response to the UAG questions. We would value further discussion to elaborate on these important topics. We recognise and acknowledge that the issues we are facing as a sector are similar to those in other jurisdictions. We hope that the UAG takes a broad view of the higher education system to ensure that any changes are designed to incentivise collaboration and pathways for students, enable agility and responsiveness, and appropriately support the breadth of functions that are required to deliver sustainable tertiary education outcomes that are critical for the future of Aotearoa New Zealand.

1. What should be the primary functions of universities for a contemporary world?

The primary function of universities is to facilitate the creation of advanced knowledge and generation of understanding. This occurs through all the core activities of universities: teaching, research, knowledge transfer and community engagement.

Education is key in creating a healthy, open society. The university sector has a key role in the development of people to support a knowledge economy and individual growth and life-long learning; the creation and dissemination of quality information to counter the proliferation of mis- and dis-information; the fostering of deep international connections enabling us to access knowledge and talent and to engage different views and perspectives; and playing the role of society's critic and conscience for the promotion of public good. These functions are all critical for addressing economic, social, environmental, and cultural challenges facing the contemporary world now and into the future. Our role is more than mechanistic training; education creates the shapers of society and the different parts of the wider education system deliver and grow people and knowledge in different ways.

2. What should be the long-term shape of the university sector in New Zealand so that it meets these primary roles?

As discussed in the Universities New Zealand submission, we have a highly effective and relatively efficient university system that delivers locally, nationally, and internationally.

Universities have a significant role to play in the continuing development of the knowledge economy, particularly if, as a country, we want to increase the levels of degree and postgraduate (research) qualifications to align to OECD averages.

While we welcome the opportunity to discuss the long-term shape of the sector as there is a need for greater clarity across the whole tertiary sector and the interface with secondary education, we want to ensure that the distinctive role of universities is not lost through the narrowing of what we do best – which is undertake a holistic package of teaching, research and knowledge transfer.

We believe that the distinctive role that universities have in the higher education system is the deepening of knowledge through teaching and research offered at the highest levels. It is at the intersection of different disciplines where so many of our advances have and will continue to come from. While there is opportunity for further specialisation within the system, too narrow an approach risks losing the benefits of multi-disciplinarity. In addition, universities are the primary source of humanities, arts, social studies and law (non-STEM) teaching and research for Aotearoa New Zealand. It is essential to maintain these important disciplines to ensure breadth and enrich the multi-disciplinary quality of research and education. Geographical distribution of our universities is also important, to ensure equity of access to high quality degree and post-graduate education. These factors are important in our success as a sector.

Going forward, the principles we believe should shape the university sector to deliver on our primary roles are:

- Accessibility for a diverse range of individuals seeking higher education.
- Relevance to the needs of Aotearoa New Zealand and its place in the world.
- Agility to respond to, and keep pace with, a changing world.
- Resilience across the higher education and research systems.
- Future focused.
- Indigeneity.
- Collaboration with others locally, nationally, and globally.
- System-level comprehensiveness across knowledge areas that facilitates multi-disciplinarity.

In addition, the university sector needs to be structured with the capacity to attract high-quality staff and students in a global market.

3. What are the barriers (excluding fiscal) that limit the universities from operating efficiently and effectively for the benefit of New Zealand?

The most significant barrier that limits the efficient and effective operation of universities is the funding model which incentivises zero sum competition and duplication through volume-based funding. While competition can help drive performance, the funding model needs to incentivise competition that inspires people to grow, create and innovate.

An effective funding model would fully support the range of activity that is expected of the university sector. Universities need to deliver across this range; however, the funding model should support a university sector that is comprehensive as a whole, but where individual universities are incentivised to make a distinctive contribution. It would also facilitate effective pathways across the higher education system by incentivising collaboration between universities and ITPs, and support students with the transition between secondary and tertiary education.

Clarity from government around the strategic direction around international student education is another barrier that needs to be considered. We welcome greater coordination from government regarding international education and its function in soft-power diplomacy and connection to workforce and immigration strategies.

Other factors that should also be considered by the review are greater investment, and opportunities to reduce replication of, infrastructure; the level of regulation by government and the ways on improving the speed of quality assurance processes to support agility; the narrow focus on STEM and lack of funding for humanities, arts, social sciences business and law in the research funding system; and ways of recognising the value of education, expertise and evidence-based research within government decision-making.

4. Can the eight universities function better as a holistic system to meet New Zealand's needs? If so, how to establish a more differentiated yet cooperative sector?

Yes, we should function more holistically. While we continue to support the Education and Training Act 2020 in ensuring that academic freedom and the autonomy are preserved and enhanced, the small scale of the sector requires that there be greater cooperation.

We believe that the eight universities can function effectively, act more cooperatively, and have a greater focus on our unique identities. We have noted points around the importance of maintaining multi-disciplinarity and the potential impact of narrowing the offerings provided by universities and we note issues with the current funding model incentivising competition rather than collaboration in this submission. We also note that the Universities New Zealand submission has provided examples of university-wide collaboration. We would welcome greater opportunities to build on these successes.

The current competitive funding model is a significant barrier to achieving this, so we support the development of a new model that incentives rather than tries to regulate cooperation. For example, Universities can be incentivised to develop collaborative models that reduce overall costs to the system for offering low demand programmes that have significant national strategic, cultural, and/or societal benefits. This can be done by increasing funding for courses offered collaboratively across universities, or funding on cost but providing additional funding for universities participating in collaborative arrangements.

5. How research-intensive do New Zealand universities have to be? Do they need to be research intensive in all subjects?

New Zealand universities need to be research intensive, this is one of our distinctive contributions to the higher education system and is a key factor in all eight being ranked in the top three percent of universities world-wide.

It is important that we deliver research informed teaching, this means that all subjects need to be research intensive. The expectation is that the knowledge competencies will deepen the higher the level of study. There is an important perspective that a practitioner of research can provide to their teaching, and this connection to their research is what readily allows our academics to deliver research-informed teaching. Even at the 100 and 200 levels, research practice can support innovation in teaching and can bring an additional level of passion through

the sharing of the depth of knowledge. Teaching and research should not be separated because of the benefits that flow to both students and academics.

Another consideration, which we have touched on, is the significant contribution that humanities, arts, social science, business, and law (non-STEM) research makes to Aotearoa New Zealand and the world. Universities are the primary source of research in Aotearoa New Zealand and the only source of research in these areas. These are a critical part of an international, global network, and our high-ranking subjects are in these areas. The impact if these areas become less research intensive, would be that research is effectively lost from the country. This would have a significant impact on our global reputation and our ability to deliver on the complex challenges faced by the country and the world.

6. What is the appropriate mix of offerings in teaching, research, and knowledge transfer across the system to meet economic, environmental, and social challenges?

The scale of the university sector, and the wider higher education system, makes it difficult to separate teaching, research, and knowledge transfer out from each other. It is extremely important that these are integrated as they are effectively a holistic package that feed into each other to ensure excellence. It is also critical to consider the grand challenges faced by Aotearoa New Zealand – tackling climate change, transitioning to a low carbon economy, dealing with threats to biodiversity, biosecurity, and food safety, developing sustainable cities, improving health and wellbeing, and harnessing technology for cyber security and social good, among others. These challenges must be addressed through long-term, multi-disciplinary approaches where both the science and human dimension are integrated.

Teaching and research are critical to the role of a university. Our ability to transfer knowledge through teaching and research through the development of students and working with communities, government and other stakeholders is increasingly important to enable us to meet the economic, environmental, cultural, and social challenges that we are facing as a country and globally.

7. What are the most appropriate approaches to ensure excellence in teaching, research, knowledge transfer and community engagement?

We have highly effective systems in place to ensure excellence across our functions, as noted in the Universities New Zealand submission.

We are committed to continued excellence in teaching, research, knowledge transfer and community engagement so would support initiatives that create positive incentives. There are various internal and external mechanism and regulations that govern high standards in teaching and research including AQA cycles, different accreditation systems, promotions systems that drive individual performance, among others. It is important that the incentives are driving the right outcomes and behaviours. Regulation and competition can be disincentives for excellence or drive perverse incentives as we have seen with the Performance-Based Research Fund. While PBRF initially drove a significant increase in research intensity, this gain plateaued, and the focus changed to international reputation, and this is a strong driver of our excellence in research. The external processes for quality assurance in research are well established and provide a more consistent and effective level of assurance than the PBRF was able to.

8. How to ensure universities play their role in advancing all segments of New Zealand society without compromising on the goals of excellence?

We are not clear on the intent of this question. Is it addressing the challenge of delivering both breadth as well as depth, addressing equity, or delivering education for other community aims? In any case, it is not clear why there should be a conflict between advancing all segments of Aotearoa New Zealand society and the goals of excellence. Knowledge transfer is a critical part of what we do, and if we are not doing this for all segments of society then we would not be fulfilling our role as a university. Significant potential can be realised by ensuring that all of Aotearoa New Zealand society has the opportunity to access higher education and deepen their knowledge. The goal of advancing knowledge contributes to the overall uplift needed to deliver better societal outcomes and this does not come at the expense of excellence.

9. What is the appropriate size for the domestic student body in the New Zealand universities?

The size of the domestic student body should reflect the demand and needs of our whole society. The continued value we place on higher education as a country is critical to developing a knowledge economy and any individual who wants to be educated should be able to access higher education.

As noted in the Universities New Zealand submission, if the focus of government is to grow the economy through innovation and productivity then there needs to be growth in the degree and postgraduate degree-qualified workforce. To lift the current 25% of people aged 15-24 who enrol in degree level study in New Zealand to the OECD average of 31%, and the 7% of New Zealand's workforce with a postgraduate (research) qualification to the OECD average of 15%, there needs to be investment in the people and organisations to do this.

10. How well are universities performing in the role as critics and consciences of society?

We welcome our role as critic and conscience of society and see this as crucial to the functions of a university. As a sector we are performing relative to opportunity within the dynamics of the current social and political context.

We recognise that there are global issues which see increasing polarisation and mis- and disinformation, which are challenges to the role of critic and conscience. We are committed to fulfilling this role, while recognising there are challenges which can limit the universities' engagement opportunities including the social mandate that allows academics to enact this role from their position of evidence-based expertise; the current funding model; and the perceived value of education, expertise, and evidence-based research within government decision-making.

11. How well are the universities complying with the requirements in the Education and Training Act 2020 with regards to the Treaty/Te Tiriti?

We embrace Te Tiriti o Waitangi as a sector and, like in all spheres, seek to be doing more. Each university is on a different journey which is relative to the opportunities available to them.

At Te Herenga Waka, we embrace Te Tiriti as one of our distinctive qualities. Addressing Te Tiriti strengthens us as a university. We have a Te Tiriti o Waitangi Statute which outlines the principles adopted by our Council to enact the University's obligations that derive from section 281(b) of the Education and Training Act 2020. The principles set out in this Statute, enable us to realise opportunities under Te Tiriti o Waitangi/Treaty of Waitangi to further advance the University and contribute to the betterment of New Zealand society. We have implemented a number of initiatives to better embrace Te Tiriti and welcome the opportunity to share these examples.

Sincerely,

Professor Nic Smith
Vice-Chancellor, Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington