

Universities Symposium

15 May 2024

The Royal Society, Wellington



New Zealand's universities are in crisis. Victoria University of Wellington recently cut some 250 positions, nearly 10% of total staff. Otago is planning to cut 'several hundred' positions, and Massey, 36 roles. AUT was forced to shelve its plan for 170 redundancies by the Employment Court early last year but may try again. Victoria University of Wellington said its cuts were necessary to make up for a \$30 million deficit, while Otago appealed to a \$60 million hole in its budget.

Many factors have contributed to bringing universities to this pass. Government funding has consistently failed to keep pace with inflation. Soaring rents for student accommodation in the major cities and a labour shortage have contributed to suppressing domestic enrolments.

Closing the borders to international students in response to COVID-19 also played a role, as did universities' slowness to re-open their campuses. New Zealand is unusually exposed to the international student market, having the highest number of international students per capita of any nation except Australia.

Is there also a problem with universities' institutional context? Bronwyn Howell and Dave Heatley argue that 'because universities operate in a tightly regulated market, they are unable to respond to market changes as a business normally would.' The Ministry of Education and the TEC dictate the 'price, quality and other attributes of product offerings by universities.' The Committee on University Academic Programmes (CUAP) controls what programmes can be taught.

Administrative bloat imposes another burden. New Zealand universities maintain the highest ratio of non-academic to academic staff in the English-speaking world, as James Kierstead and Michael Johnston showed last year.

The debate over academic freedom continues to rage. Speakers have been deplatformed and universities have not always defended the right of their academics to speak publicly on controversial topics. The nature of research and of research funding is also in doubt, especially with the recent suspension of the PBRF.

Can our universities still be called cultural institutions, especially following the decimation of the humanities at VUW and elsewhere? Should they be content to be glorified vocational training institutions, primarily concerned with preparing students for the job market, or do they still have a wider role to fulfil?

These topics and more will be discussed by our panels, and we are looking forward to hearing your views on them.

8.45am **Arrival/registration**

9.00am **Introductory remarks by Dr Oliver Hartwich, Executive Director, The New Zealand Initiative**

9.05-9.55am **NZ Universities: The State of Play**

This first panel will take stock of some of the challenges and controversies currently facing New Zealand universities and, we hope, of the possibilities that might be opened up by reform.

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Speakers:

- Mr David Heatley
- Dr. Martien Lubberink (replacing Dist Prof Gaven Martin)
- Prof Natasha Hamilton-Hart
- Chair: Dr Michael Johnston

10.05-10.40am **Hon Dr Deborah Russell, Associate Spokesperson Education (Tertiary), Labour**

As the associate spokesperson for tertiary education, Hon Dr Deborah Russell brings a wealth of experience and expertise to this critical portfolio. Drawing upon her academic background in philosophy and her experience as a policy analyst and lecturer, Russell has been a strong advocate for recognising and celebrating diversity within the tertiary education sector while ensuring that all New Zealanders have access to high-quality education.

10.40-11.00am **Break**

11.00-12.00pm **What is the purpose of universities?**

New Zealand's universities face a range of challenges and there is no consensus on how these challenges will be overcome. Perhaps even more seriously, though, the very purpose of the university is now in dispute.

One traditional role of the university was as a cultural institution, equally attentive to the arts and the humanities on one hand, and to science on the other. Their traditional contribution to explicit professional training was largely restricted to law and medicine. But with the continuing rapid downsizing of humanities programmes, is this still an ideal that New Zealand universities hope to fulfil? Or, if universities are now purely commercial enterprises, should taxpayers be expected to subsidise fields that make no obvious contribution to the economy?

New Zealand universities have also been increasingly attentive to local needs and concerns, whether this takes the form of the history and literature of New Zealand and the broader Pacific, or of scientific investigation into local ecologies. Is there a risk, though, that our institutions of higher learning become too inward-focused, even parochial? And how should we best characterise the relationship between mātauranga Māori (traditional Māori lore) and modern science?

Speakers:

- Em Prof. Peter Walls
- Em Prof. Anne Noble
- Prof. Elizabeth Rata
- Chair: Dr Michael Johnston

12.00-12.40pm **Lunch**

12.40-1.20pm **Hon David Seymour, Associate Education Minister, ACT Party**

As the Associate Minister of Education in the new National-led government and the leader of the ACT Party, Hon David Seymour brings a unique perspective to the challenges facing New Zealand's tertiary education sector. Seymour and the ACT Party have been vocal advocates for increased accountability, transparency, and the protection of free speech in universities and other tertiary institutions.

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1.20-2.20pm **Academic Freedom**

Academic freedom has become a contentious issue in New Zealand universities. Recent events and controversies have sparked heated debates about its boundaries and its contribution to the role of universities in society. The "Listener Letter" controversy, in which a group of academics criticised plans to incorporate mātauranga Māori into the school science curriculum, drew international attention and raised questions about the limits of academic expression.

Stakeholders hold divergent views on how academic freedom should be balanced with other considerations, such as respect for different knowledge systems and the creation of inclusive environments. Some academics and free speech advocates argue that the ability to question ideas and express unpopular opinions is essential for the advancement of knowledge. Others contend that academic freedom does not give academics licence to express views that others may think are disrespectful or harmful.

Proposed changes to the Education and Training Act that would require tertiary institutions to commit to a free speech policy have further fuelled the debate. This discussion will explore the current challenges to academic freedom in New Zealand universities, the perspectives of various stakeholders, and potential policy changes on the future of academic expression and inquiry.

Speakers:

- Dr James Kierstead
- Dr Sandra Grey
- Prof. Kendall Clements
- Jonathan Ayling
- Chair: Dr Michael Johnston

2.20-2.45pm **Break**

2.45-3.15pm **A Conversation with Distinguished Professor Peter Schwerdtfeger**

Distinguished Professor Peter Schwerdtfeger is a world-renowned theoretical chemist and physicist. His work has earned him numerous accolades, including the prestigious Rutherford Medal, New Zealand's highest honour for scientific achievement.

Beyond his scientific accomplishments, Prof. Schwerdtfeger is known for his outspoken nature and willingness to engage in controversial debates. The interview will explore his views on the importance of maintaining scientific integrity, international connectedness, and the principles of liberal epistemology in New Zealand's academic institutions.

Speakers:

- Dist Prof Peter Schwerdtfeger
- Interviewer: Dr Oliver Hartwich

3.15-4.15pm

Research and research funding

New Zealand's universities play a crucial role in the country's research and innovation ecosystem, contributing significantly to both basic and applied research. Since 2003, research at our universities has been assessed and funding allocated by the PBRF. But with the 2025 PBRF round recently cancelled pending a review by the University Advisory Group, the future of that system is in doubt.

Was the PBRF fit for purpose anyway? If it is retained, would it benefit from reform? And if it is not, what might a new system look like?

In this session, the panel will explore how our universities can best be organised and incentivised to produce world-class research.

Speakers:

- Prof Michele Governale
- Prof Garth Cooper
- Dr Nokuthaba Sibanda
- Chair: Dr Michael Johnston

4.15-4.55pm

Hon. Penny Simonds, Minister of Tertiary Education

As the Minister for Tertiary Education and Skills in the new National-led government, Hon Penny Simmonds faces the task of addressing the unprecedented financial challenges confronting New Zealand's universities. With sector-wide deficits expected in 2023 and 2024, and two universities considered "high-risk" financially, the government must navigate a complex landscape of factors, including funding increases falling behind inflation, declining international student earnings, falling domestic enrolments, and rising costs.

4:55 pm

Dr Michael Johnston to wrap up the day session.

4.55pm-5.05pm

Break

5:05-6:00pm

Keynote Address: Defending the Constitution of Knowledge: Jonathan Rauch on Free Inquiry and Truth-Seeking in Universities

Jonathan Rauch, a renowned author, journalist, and scholar, has dedicated much of his career to defending the principles of free thought, open inquiry, and academic freedom as essential foundations for the pursuit of knowledge and truth. His influential works, such as *Kindly Inquisitors: The New Attacks on Free Thought* and *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*, have established him as a leading voice advocating for universities to remain steadfast in their commitment to these values.

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Speakers:

- Keynote Speaker: Jonathan Rauch
- Intro: Jonathan Ayling

6.00pm

Closing thanks by Dr David Lillis