



NZAS alarmed by Cuts to Science at Waikato

New Zealand Association of Scientists Past President Associate Professor Craig Stevens says, “Proposed new cuts to science at the University of Waikato¹, coming on top of voluntary staffing changes in late 2020, are an alarming example of the severity of stress in the nation’s science sector.”

The cuts will disestablish a further 12 positions over the 2020 losses, including senior researchers representing roughly 180 years of experience. This is to reduce a \$1.9 m deficit in a \$19 m budget for the [school](#). This is despite good performance by individual academics in the School bringing in significant research grants and a nearly 7% increase in Science enrolments in the last year.

“Given that this represents a reduction of over 20% capacity, while science student numbers are actually increasing, seems like a poor decision. We worry the scale of these cuts will make it difficult for Waikato Science to be sustainable.

The cuts to so many senior roles is unusual. It will leave the remaining staff with what will likely be crushing workloads and little mentoring. Without a doubt it will reduce the quality of research produced in a department that is well known for its earth, environment, ecology, freshwater and marine research.”

“COVID response has shown the benefits to the nation of a well-functioning science system and a healthy societal respect for evidence, this seems like a damaging and poorly thought-through initiative from one of our major universities.”

¹ Decision Document, Change Proposal for Te Aka Mātuatua – School of Science, 26 March 2021.

Waikato has now unfortunately raced ahead of Massey University² in their efforts to reduce science staffing. “Cuts of this scale threaten New Zealand’s future, because science is fundamental to both the innovative technologies of the future, and to protecting New Zealand’s economy and environment as we work through big issues around how we would like to live our lives such as clean water, health, and climate change.”

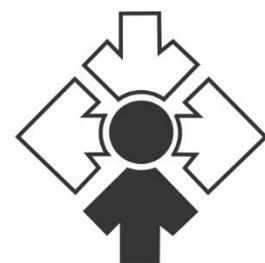
“The university sector is clearly at a cross-roads due to challenges to its recent financial model with its reliance on overseas students. However, our fast growing regions can’t afford to gut science capability and reputation, particularly in environmental areas, at a time when top talent wants to live and work in New Zealand, we’ll risk being left behind intellectually and economically for decades to come.”

In the runup to the last election, the now Associate Minister for Research, Science and Innovation the Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall [said](#)³ her party’s, and the Government’s, policy on science and the pandemic is, “investment, not austerity.”

As we emerge from the pandemic and face challenges with our environment, climate and productive sectors, now is the time to be supporting the science sector, not reducing it.

The NZ Association of Scientists calls on the University of Waikato to consider a reversal of this decision and instead provide leadership for all Universities to look for more constructive solutions that maintain existing skills, projects and teaching that are the basis of a stable, well-governed research system that can address the big challenges we face as a nation.

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The New Zealand
Association of
Scientists

² <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/massey-university-floats-latest-moves-in-science-shake-up/QA45UIQFXQCBGAMXVNUMGPIUF2Y/>

³ <https://scientists.org.nz/news/9210641>