



20 October 2019

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NZ Association of Scientists Submission
on the
Management of Change Proposal for the Department of Marine Sciences,
University of Otago¹

This submission is from the New Zealand Association of Scientists (NZAS) and this letter reflects the views of the Association. We are an independent association of researchers who work and advocate for science in New Zealand, increase public awareness of science and expose pseudo-science, debate and influence government science policy, improve working conditions for scientists, including gender and ethnic equality, promote free exchange of knowledge and international cooperation, and encourage excellence in science. The Association membership includes physical, natural, mathematical and social scientists. www.scientists.org.nz

The Proposal outlines a plan to sack three academics from the nation's leading marine science academic entity. The Department conducts research reaching from Antarctica to the west coast fjords, from Otago coasts, to the city harbour.

Exactly how irrelevant is the University of Otago seeking to become?

The critical challenge of our time is the changing climate system and the implications for the generation the UoO is training. Ninety three percent of the heat stored in this changing climate is in the ocean, and much of it in the Southern Ocean – just on the UoO doorstep. The sea levels are rising, marine heatwaves are occurring and ocean circulation is changing. A significant proportion of the carbon absorption by the planetary system is going into the ocean too. The

¹ Management of Change Proposal for the Department of Marine Sciences, University of Otago. 4 Oct. 2019.

changing heat and carbon is affecting the acidity of the oceans. The ocean is also a receptacle for river-borne pollution through poorly regulated farming practise. The marine environment is looking more and more likely to provide future solutions for food and energy. The marine environment is also a major interface between western science and Mātauranga Māori. That the UoO would seek to reduce this field of research is damaging for the nation.

Does the University understand its own reason for existing?

The University of Otago frames itself as a leading research institute - and it needs to be in order to operate. Section 162(4) of the Education Act 1989 says a university is “primarily concerned with more advanced learning, research and teaching are closely interdependent and most of their teaching is done by people who are active in advancing knowledge and they are a repository of knowledge and expertise.” Thus, the university needs to employ high quality researchers working in NZ-relevant areas. This underpins *Excellence* and *Impact*. Evidence of this is found in the investment by the University in a large research office to support acquiring new funds. You can’t get much more NZ-relevant than the ocean.

Are Connections being taken for granted?

The UoO webpage has as its tagline “The University of Otago is ranked in the top 1% of universities in the world”. If one digs down into this – the leading driver of this rating is “international faculty”[1]. The department you are targeting comprises largely of people from internationally renowned institutes. These people *make* the university internationally relevant and better still, the nature of marine science is that they also make the oceans around NZ and Otago internationally-relevant. This is exactly what MBIE are targeting as they introduce a new research success metric around “connections”[2]. The University is seeking to undermine its own success story.

Why is the University is seeking to dismantle a nationally critical and unique capacity?

Nowhere in the consultation document is it recognised what will actually be lost. Marine sciences in NZ are woefully under-supported, in part for exactly the reasons motivating the Review. But this doesn’t mean the country doesn’t need this research and training capacity – the opposite if anything. Nowhere is this made clearer than in the very recent MfE report *Our Marine Environment 2019*² which catalogues the challenges we face with regard to the ocean that surrounds us. It includes data and an image from the Munida Transect that is made possible by the Marine Sciences Department.

There are a number of unique threads to the Department’s present work and identity and their geographic focus is unique and supports the region. For example, a critical feature of the Aotearoa New Zealand science sector is the connection to Māori. The marine environment is a major interface between western science and Mātauranga Māori - a challenging research area and one the Department excels in. Does the University have buy-in from Iwi to reduce research on the ocean?

² <https://www.mfe.govt.nz/publications/environmental-reporting/our-marine-environment-2019>

There must be a way for the University to stay relevant AND balance the books?

We recognise that the University has to balance the books and marine science is an expensive undertaking. Operating vessels and marine laboratories is expensive. MBIE has made decisions over the last decade to open-up research funding for nationally critical capability and capacity to the University sector. There are many good reasons for this. It creates a vulnerability however. Good management at the University-wide level would recognise the vital role of the field and the key element it plays in the University and for the nation as a whole. By making capability-damaging decisions the University puts this support at risk. Clearly the Department has cross-over points - why are capacity/capability/reputation cost-sharing pathways involving academic groups in Geology, Geography, Maths, Physics, Communication, Business not being explored? The Association asks you to find a way to lead the nation's ideas as we face the coming challenges.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Craig Stevens', written in a cursive style.

Craig Stevens (Past-President) on behalf of the NZAS Council

[1] <https://www.topuniversities.com/universities/university-otago>

[2] <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/dmsdocument/6935-new-zealands-research-science-and-innovation-strategy-draft-for-consultation>