



Monday, 29 September 2025

The Honourable Dr Shane Reti
Minister of Science, Innovation and Technology
Parliament Buildings
Wellington 6160

OPEN LETTER

Tēnā koe Minister,

I write in lieu of a meeting, on the basis that your office has been unable to secure a time for us and suggested we write to you instead.

We have heard that you are considering the establishment of a new body to manage all government investments in research for New Zealand. Given our statutory role to provide expert advice to the Government, we must point out the significant risks associated with this approach.

First, creation of a new body would involve substantial costs, including for infrastructure, operational overheads, governance, and staffing. The new body would need to establish robust processes to accept proposals, manage submissions, assess their merits, make decisions according to agreed criteria, award and manage contracts, and monitor quality and deliverables. It would also need to develop relationships with the numerous local and international scientists whose goodwill is essential for reviewing proposals and making recommendations on the most valuable investments.

Further, we observe trust in the government's reforms of the research system more broadly is waning, largely as a consequence of the funding that is being redirected away from research to fund the set-up costs of new organisations such as the Public Research Organisations and the Institute for Advanced Technology. These structures are in themselves not the issue. Rather, as you are aware, in the current fiscal climate the expense required to set up a new entity would attract intense scrutiny, create even more debate in the sector, particularly given the time it may take to begin delivering on its mandate.

Second, the rationale for a single funding body is its potential to provide strategic oversight and coordination. However, this can be achieved in other ways, including through the Prime Minister's Science, Innovation and Technology Advisory Council and through guidance to the relevant delivery mechanisms. As we discussed briefly following your meeting with the Marsden Fund Council, there is no evidence to suggest that the current funding administration and delivery part of the system is broken. To the contrary, it is operating very well, and therefore there is no rationale to support its restructure, especially given the risks associated with further costly changes.

Third, it is vital that any funding body distributing taxpayer money has a reputation for impartiality and independence. If a new body is established that is not independent of government and its officials, there would be questions as to whether there is undue influence over funding decisions for political ends. This would pose a substantial risk to public trust in the entity. It would also further undermine confidence in the future of New Zealand's science sector as a whole.

I have written to you previously about the importance of supporting fundamental, undirected research across the breadth of scholarly endeavour. Our assessment of the costs and opportunity costs of establishing a new entity, without evidence that the current arrangement is not working, together with the inevitable period of disruption during the transition, is that it would further undermine New Zealand's capabilities and credibility in science and research. In this light, we urge you to consider alternative options to avoid the potentially serious risks associated with structural changes where the benefits are uncertain.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss these concerns and some practical options.

Ngā mihi, nā

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jane Harding', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Distinguished Professor Dame Jane Harding DNZM FRACP FRSNZ
President of the Royal Society Te Apārangi