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Press release

SAANZ Statement on the disbanding of the humanities and social sciences panels of the Marsden Fund

The Sociological Association of Aotearoa New Zealand (SAANZ) is deeply concerned by the announcement on the 4th December 2024 by the Hon. Judith Collins (Minister of Science, Innovation and Technology) concerning a ‘refocus’ of Marsden funding.

Our members see this blatant attempt to ‘defund’ the humanities and social sciences as an attack on *all* science and research production in this country, with far-reaching implications for the future of Aotearoa New Zealand as a progressive society, as well as the continued economic viability of our university sector as a credible location for both domestic and international students and researchers.

Last week’s decision signals a regressive and politically-motivated attack on research areas which may be more likely to hold governments (of whatever political stripes) to account. It is worth noting that sociologists are among the first academics to be cancelled by authoritarian regimes; we did not imagine a government in a liberal democracy to be so heavily invested in cancel culture. Sociologists are fundamental to any open society and to the flourishing of liberal democracies as they speak truth to power, note the consequences of political action, predict social futures (saying how the world will be), assess public opinion (saying how people would like it to be), advocate for social justice (saying how the world should be), and identify mechanisms through which a “better country for us all” can be made possible. If you want to produce better policy you need sociologists.

Strong social science input is essential in tackling the defining issues of our age: unprecedented wealth inequalities, global attacks on liberal democracy, and the climate emergency, for instance, are complex problems demanding inter-disciplinary solutions. For example, the latest IPCC Report tells us that the real problems to be tackled in terms of global warming are politics and vested interests. The work ahead entails behaviour change, wholesale resource distribution and system transformation. This is our domain. We regard this Marsden funding withdrawal as an attack on the very foundations of the university, as it will clearly undermine the critic and conscience role of the university, which is one of its core functions.

SAANZ is also greatly concerned by the effect this announcement will have on the future credibility of the university system in this country. Weakening research activities in the humanities and social sciences will likely see our universities fall down the global league tables, with knock-on effects in reducing potential sources of international funding, as well as revenue from domestic and international scholars and students who will increasingly perceive our higher education institutions as less credible and ‘developed’ than neighbouring ones, potentially also leading to a ‘brain drain’ of local talent.

Further, SAANZ strongly refutes the insinuation from the Minister of Science, Innovation and Technology that our research does not contribute to the country’s economy. In fact, there are clear links between humanities and social science funding, publications in these fields, contributions to the university ranking systems, and the subsequent enrolment of international fee-paying students. Simply put, if the researcher is publishing, then it will be economically impactful. The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) has recently pointed out that research in these areas contribute to various sectors, including agriculture, disaster resilience, and creative industries. They also note that the arts and creative sector, which relies on insights from humanities and social sciences, is a significant contributor to Aotearoa New Zealand’s GDP, growing faster than the rest of the economy.

Finally, this funding cancellation presents an attack on early career researchers and the higher proportion (compared to STEM subjects) of Māori scholars currently working in the social sciences and humanities. It is challenging to nurture a scholar, and such a significant funding gap may take generations of effort to compensate for the loss of talent.

In support of the many research and science associations which have already spoken out on this issue, SAANZ likewise calls on the government to recognize the value of our work and reverse this dangerous decision.

For further enquires, please contact:

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