University Advisory Group submission for phase 1

PUBLIC HEALTH COMMUNICATION CENTRE AOTEAROA

31 May 2024

We thank the Advisory Group for the opportunity to submit. Our submission focuses specifically on the dissemination of research to the public and policymakers. The Public Health Communication Centre is dedicated to this aspect of research impact, acknowledging its pivotal role in fostering societal progress and informed decision-making.[1] We offer several high-level observations and recommendations for consideration.

Investing in Research Impact

We anticipate an increased emphasis on research 'impact', influenced by international trends such as the UK REF and past reviews of PBRF.[2,3] Public dissemination of research and engagement with policymakers are recognized as key pathways to impact, particularly in areas like public health.[4–6]

Research impact depends on a well-developed 'knowledge translation ecosystem'. It requires many functional and interconnected components, including:

1. Researchers who understand the importance of knowledge translation and give it some priority in their work.
2. Research employers who provide a supportive environment including facilitating their staff to communicate their work and actively removing barriers to them doing that.
3. Research funders who emphasise the importance of evidence translation and build it into their purchasing agreements.
4. Active mainstream media who can assess research outputs critically and contextualise them in ways that are appealing to a diverse audience and also hold policy makers and decision-makers to account for how they seek, assess, and use evidence.
5. An education system that instils relevant skills in generations of young people, including an interest and understanding of evidence and critical skills for distinguishing information from mis/disinformation.
6. A range of specialised organisations that facilitate the knowledge communication and translation process, such as Science Media Centre, Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures and the Public Health Communication Centre.
7. Other specialised organisations that can manage harmful information, reduce public exposure to it, and protect researchers and others who need to communicate their work without fear for their safety.
8. Government oversight of the legal, policy, funding, and institutional environment that can facilitate, maintain, and grow this vibrant 'knowledge translation ecosystem'.

A science system that encourages non-academic impact must acknowledge and accommodate dissemination and knowledge transfer efforts.[5,7] This necessitates investment in funding, training, engagement, and protection for researchers involved in dissemination efforts. Investment is needed to upskill the science community for impact.[2]

Addressing risks

As research becomes more socially and politically relevant, researchers engaging with the public and policymakers may face increased scrutiny and potential targeting.[4,8,9] Therefore, there is a need for robust support mechanisms to protect researchers from abuse and harassment, including training, support networks, and efforts to combat misinformation.[4,10,11]

Given the growing threat of disinformation, universities and research institutions should be positioned as champions in combating it. Recognition of universities as the critic and conscience of society, along with the media's role as the fourth estate, is crucial in this regard.

Support for Mainstream Media

Strengthening the media sector is essential for effective dissemination of scientific research to the public—and policymakers. It also plays a critical role in representing the views of the wider public and holding the science sector to account.[12] Efforts to strengthen the media sector include supporting independent journalism and health and science reporting, and fostering a culture that values evidence-based reporting.[13,14]

In conclusion, we urge the Advisory Group to integrate these recommendations into the future of the New Zealand research system. By fostering a culture that values and supports effective communication and engagement, we can maximize the societal impact of research efforts and drive positive change for New Zealand and beyond.

We are more than happy to elaborate on these points in more detail as the work of the Advisory Group progresses.

Thank you for considering our submission.

Authors: Prof Michael Baker, Dr John Kerr

About the Public Health Communication Centre (PHCC)

The PHCC is an independently funded organisation dedicated to increasing the reach and impact of public health research in Aotearoa New Zealand. It identifies and promotes opportunities to improve public health, equity, and sustainability, and communicates these ideas effectively to the public, media, and decision-makers.

The PHCC is hosted by the Department of Public Health at the University of Otago Wellington. It has a range of public health and science communication experts and an Advisory Board. The Director is Prof Michael Baker.

For more information visit: phcc.org.nz

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