



Applied Linguistics in Aotearoa New Zealand

*Ko te rōpū rapu reo o Aotearoa:
Kua kī te kete, he nui ngā hua*

Language and languages matter, yeah right

Later this week, professional and academic staff at Victoria University/Te Herenga Waka will see details of a proposal to disestablish up to 260 positions. This follows the University of Otago's decision earlier this month to cut or downsize programmes, resulting in large-scale redundancies. Similar processes are underway at Massey University / Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa.

As universities are facing unprecedented budget deficits, they are having to make difficult decisions. Unfortunately, as so often in the past, humanities subjects will be seriously impacted by these. We should be deeply concerned about the irretrievable loss of knowledge and expertise across a number of disciplines, in particular those concerned with those fundamental to our human experience: language and languages.

Following hot on the heels of cutting or reducing language subjects and culture studies at Otago University, there is an imminent threat to the Linguistics and Applied Language Studies programme at Te Herenga Waka/Victoria University of Wellington which, inevitably, will extend to other Universities.

This defies common sense at a time when global security is at risk and policy analysts, translators, cultural and linguistic advisors, communication specialists are needed more than ever. Linguistics is a highly interdisciplinary field which equips researchers and practitioners with the knowledge and expertise needed in such roles, ranging from analytical skills such as pattern recognition to understanding bi/multilingualism and critical intercultural awareness. Linguists are involved in language policy and planning and often work closely with government organisations, ranging from Whaikaha to the Ministry for Ethnic Communities, the Human Rights Commission, Te Taura Whiri i te reo Māori, the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, and the Ministry of Education.

Linguists with an applied or practical focus specialise in teaching and learning of other languages. Their research and teaching assists adults who struggle to read, supports sign language interpretation during national disasters or helps solve criminal cases through forensic linguistics expertise. Some linguists are involved in English language teacher education in the Asia Pacific region, while others have their focus closer to home by supporting the revitalisation of te reo Māori (a government priority). Yet others work with community organisations to support the language needs of migrant and refugee communities or provide professional services such as speech language therapy or translation and interpretation.

This broad range of specialisations reflects the career options open to linguistics graduates and explains why they are sought after in non-linguistic professions as well. Not surprisingly, in recent protests at Otago and Victoria students have expressed their anger over the "[stealing](#)" from their future. Linguists make [key contributions to our society](#) and with the prospect of cuts to our universities' linguistics programmes, it is not only staff and students there who will be adversely affected.

[The Education and Training Act 2020](#) specifies that a university is characterised by a "wide diversity of teaching and research", while the [Tertiary Education Commission's key goals](#) include "an adaptable tertiary education system that serves the needs of New Zealand now and in the future". Maintaining the full range of disciplines is key to achieving these goals, not least in the interest of protecting our international reputation and the interests of students –buzz words in the government's response to the [2017 Productivity Commission](#) report recommendations for a new tertiary funding model. Now, therefore, is not the time to slash essential teaching and research programmes. We need a long-term vision that recognises the inherent value of our disciplines, including linguistics, rather than going down a path of [destroying our universities](#).