



Press Release from the President of the New Zealand Institute of Physics (NZIP)
Dr Natalie Plank

After the announcement of the new “Digital Plus” strategy by Massey University earlier this year and release of a related Discussion Document outlining a “future academic plan” for sciences at Massey on Monday the 24th of February, it is timely for the NZIP to explain its position.

The proposal to remove the Bachelor of Science from Massey’s Albany campus, and to completely remove the Physics major in the BSc and MSc at all Massey campuses, represents a grave blow to physics in New Zealand. The removal of offerings heralds the loss of academic staff and science infrastructure at a nationally significant level.

Professor Shaun Hendy, a Massey University physics graduate, now Director of a Centre of Research Excellence at the University of Auckland, says that “if this plan goes ahead, it will be the biggest blow to the New Zealand science community in a generation”. Hendy notes that physicists like the late Sir Paul Callaghan helped put Massey on the map with their interdisciplinary approach to science. “Sir Paul’s work at Massey touched on everything from the fundamental physics of the atomic nucleus to the elastic properties of cheese,” says Hendy. “It is so disappointing to see this legacy squandered.”

The proposed restructuring at Massey University impacts on more than 800 Science students on the Albany campus alone and has caused anxiety among students who worry about being able to complete their qualification or having to transfer to another campus. We are concerned to hear that staff and students are stressed and struggling to cope with the uncertainty surrounding the process.

We are worried by hearing that the new Digital Plus strategy was developed by senior management excluding relevant university bodies and announced prior to consultation with the Academic Board. No iwi or mana whenua consultation appears to have taken place either. By releasing the discussion document on the first day of lectures, with a tight three week deadline for feedback, senior management has virtually eliminated any opportunity for a robust process including meaningful consultation with staff and students.

The NZIP recognizes the mandate of universities to financially sustain their operations and spend public funds and subsidies wisely. Yet the proposed changes seem more likely to reduce teaching income, drive up the costs of digital infrastructure, and lower the standards of education when face-to-face offerings with research active staff and hands-on practicals are replaced by digital offerings served remotely.

The NZIP is particularly concerned about the loss of access to STEM education in the Northland region, which Massey’s Albany campus has been servicing, and the associated equity issues. The loss of study options in both the Auckland North and the Manawatu regions creates further financial pressure on students who will no longer be able to live at home during tertiary studies but will have to move to the location of one of the remaining four out of eight New Zealand Universities to still offer a Physics degree.

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