

Aim: world's best pastoral university



GUEST COLUMNISTS
Roger Field and Andrew West (above)

The merger of Lincoln University and AgResearch will create by far the most research intensive university in New Zealand

New Zealand's use of its land and its industries are central to the country's prosperity and well-being. This is a high-technology, industrialised biological economy and the only area of industry where New Zealand is widely recognised as truly world-leading.

Based on its geological history and climate, New Zealand is endowed with a landscape that offers an outstanding natural advantage for energy efficient agriculture, horticulture and viticulture – all of which are in an extraordinary setting that is highly attractive to tourism. Demographic and other trends mean reliable food supply and traceability of consumer products are going to be of paramount importance.

New Zealand must be in a position to seize the opportunity that the future will offer. Scientific, technological and educational underpinnings are the only way that this will occur.

Mediocrity in this area will not suffice and it is now necessary to take bold and innovative steps to ensure success.

An immediate example is the intention to amalgamate AgResearch and Lincoln University.

AgResearch is the largest Crown Research Institute and has more scientists than any other government research organisation. Its mission is to provide science based opportunities and solutions for New Zealand's pastoral sector while ensuring the integrity of its ecosystems. Notably its research extends from discovery to the highly applied.

Lincoln University has remained singularly focused on land based industries with notable strengths and disciplines in agriculture, agribusiness, viticulture, landscape architecture and tourism management while building a strong commerce faculty, which both complements and supports these industries.

Lincoln also has a valuable research component and high calibre educational capability and capacity. Further, it has a long standing and well-deserved reputation.

MERGER FACTS

AGRESEARCH

Total assets: \$246 million
Staff: 1000 fulltime, incl 640 researchers
Campuses: Hamilton (Ruakura), Palmerston North (Grasslands and Hopkirk Research Institute), Christchurch (Lincoln) and Dunedin (Invermay)
Research farms: 15
Research funding: \$15 million (annual)

LINCOLN

Total assets: \$239 million
Staff: 610 including 219 fulltime academics
Students: 3323 (2577 equivalent fulltime)
Campus: Lincoln and several research farms
Research funding: \$17 million (annual)

MERGED ENTITY

Revenue: \$230 million (annual)
Assets: \$485 million
Likely additional revenue: \$50 million (annual)
Cost savings: \$2.5 million (annual)
Merger cost: \$2.5 million

Applied research focus

The new university will concentrate on research, education and extension. It will have an applied research focus specifically to support New Zealand's land-based industries across the value chain.

It is essential that land-based industries receive a continual flow of new science and technology and new graduates from research-led teaching. It is equally important they also continually upgrade their knowledge and skills, so they can apply the new technologies that drive the productivity gain.

In effect, science, technology, knowledge and skills are the essential elements that exploit our comparative advantages.

The land-based industries are this country's most significant industrial base that depends on new science and new technology to thrive.

Notwithstanding the fact that sheep and cattle look pretty much the same year on year, those animals and the pastures that they live on actually embody a steady accumulation of new and more productive farming systems than they did a year earlier.

Moreover, the dairy and meat processing plants operate increasingly sophisticated processing technologies and information systems.

The net result is an annual, average multifactor productivity gain of 2.6% – far above the New Zealand annual average MFP gain of a bit over 1%. We eat, drink and wear it our whole lives.

We propose to amalgamate Lincoln University and AgResearch to improve the flow of research,

technology, education and skills to our most important industries. The whole content of our proposal is to create a new Lincoln University that is entirely dedicated to the land-based, tourism and related industries, and to a lesser extent the horticultural and forestry industries.

By amalgamating, we shall fully combine government research with university education. The new Lincoln University will, for the first time, be able to represent all of New Zealand's various climate and soil regimes through access to AgResearch's farms and campuses. Combined with Lincoln University's existing campus and farms, this access will provide students with a more relevant and applied education.

Moreover, the merger will create by far the most research intensive university in New Zealand. Our aspiration is to become the world's best pastoral land-grant university.

This term "world class" is often used in a rather loose manner. The new university really will be world class and the evidence will be the flow of international research contracts and PhD students and post-doctoral fellows.

The increased capacity created by the merger will enable the new university to increase the supply of undergraduate and postgraduates through improved reach and engagement with urban-based school leavers.

Land-based does not mean rural; the key to New Zealand's prosperity is through extension and connection of land-based industries into the cities, and having increased relevance and a voice in New Zealand's urban centres.

Without land-based industries and export products created from them, one would have to question whether two of the largest ports located in two large cities – Auckland and Lyttelton – could justify survival.

Merging universities and government research institutes is not inventive. England, Wales, Scotland, Denmark and there US have been there before us. The action is merely novel to New Zealand.

AgResearch and Lincoln University staff will benefit from this merger through the enhanced diversity of revenues – from both science and education.

They will also benefit from access to an increased range of research opportunities and more undergraduate and graduate students who tend to infuse laboratories with a new dimension of ideas, energy and enthusiasm.

Our intention is to develop a vibrant, energetic university with a modern governance and management regime that accentuates high research and educational quality. We think that is reasonably straightforward to achieve.

Without doubt, our proposal is audacious. The land-based industries need to perform well for New Zealand to earn its way out of the global recession.

This amalgamation provides a base of support for them to do so. We owe it to New Zealand and the land-based industries are enthusiastic for it to occur.

Professor Roger Field is vice-chancellor of Lincoln College and Dr Andrew West is chief executive of AgResearch

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