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Brittany Bennenbroek - Reflection on internship with OPMCSA

Reflecting on my ten-week work placement and project with Te Pūnaha Matatini (TPM) and the Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor (OPMCSA), I can confidently say that it was a challenging, valuable, and rewarding experience. Not only did I have the opportunity to contribute to the Kindness in Science project, I also gained exposure to the worlds of research and policy, developed a range of skills that will be useful in my future career, and successfully completed the last trimester of my Master of Science in Society (MScSoc) degree. I built strong relationships with key individuals within TPM and the OPMCSA, who provided me with guidance and feedback that helped me to develop my skills and grow as a researcher and communicator, and I produced an output I am proud of, that I hope can help to inform others working in this space.

At the start of the work placement, I agreed on a Negotiated Work Plan Agreement (NWP) with my supervisors, Dr Emma Sharp, Professor Tammy Steeves, and Dr George Slim. After a number of conversations, it was decided that my project would focus on creating a timeline of policy events from within the Science, Research and Innovation sector in Aotearoa New Zealand, reflecting the Kindness in Science approach. The project aim was to conduct research and data analysis to explore the trajectory of policy decisions on the science research landscape and identify levers for effective change.

The NWP provided a strong foundation for the placement and was a valuable reference point for the duration of my time working on my project. As mentioned in my report, my original learning objectives included building connections for successful outcomes, fostering collaboration and improving communication skills, gaining experience in research and policy environments, developing technical skills using new platforms, and building confidence in decision-making and project management. As the project progressed, my learning objectives evolved, and I started to focus more on incorporating the knowledge gained from my MScSoc into the project, and on producing a high-quality output. Through conversations and reflections, it finally became clear that I would be creating three outputs to encompass my work - a visual timeline, a data spreadsheet, and a comprehensive report.

I do believe I was successful in achieving the objectives I set out for myself during my placement. I built strong relationships with my supervisors, which fostered authentic conversations and facilitated fluid and collaborative interactions. This allowed me to gain unique insights into the Science, Research and Innovation sector from those who are active participants within the system, and exposed me to perspectives and understandings that I may not have otherwise encountered. I

was able to develop my project management, research, and analysis skills while working on the project, however, I recognise that I still have room for improvement in terms of my time management and networking abilities. I gained valuable insights into the operations of TPM and the OPMCSA, and developed an understanding of their mission and goals. And, I enhanced both my confidence and competence in facilitating discussions and decision-making regarding my project.

Having had numerous professional roles within a university setting previously, I think my expectations of what the placement would look like aligned fairly closely to my experience. If anything, my previous experiences added to my understanding of both the way the placement functioned and the research I was undertaking, helping me to develop a more nuanced understanding of the science sector. I've seen the way in which large, complex organisations work from an administrative point of view, and it's messy. I've also seen numerous restructures occurring within such an organisation play out first hand. I've observed the communication breakdowns that can occur in these organisations, especially during times of change, and more so when these changes are driven from the top down without enough consideration for what is happening on an operational level. My ability to bring this perspective into my project demonstrates the value of practical experience in shaping an understanding of the world, and I enjoyed being able to incorporate my experience into the work I was doing.

This perspective felt especially fitting for the Kindness in Science project, and especially timely with the release of the Te Ara Paerangi Future Pathways white paper which is looking to restructure the Science, Research and Innovation sector. Kindness in Science aligns deeply with my values and is something I believe can improve the science system, therefore one of my main goals going into this placement was to support the work they are doing.

The data I have collected and the timeline I have produced provides substantial value to both TPM and the OPMCSA, both of whom are interested in and have previously conducted work in the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) space. To my knowledge, a timeline that organises policy events relevant to Kindness in Science within the science research landscape has not been created before, and is therefore a valuable resource that can be used to strengthen the evidence base on the importance of building diverse and inclusive scientific teams in Aotearoa New Zealand. The timeline provides insights into the evolution of the Science, Research, and Innovation sector, and highlights areas where policy decisions may have had unintended consequences. The timeline also provides a foundation for future policy events to be added to, and for future research to build upon, which can further explore the impact of policy decisions on diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice within the sector.

My placement aligned closely with the MScSoc degree, as it allowed me to deepen my understanding of contemporary scientific issues and draw from diverse fields to gain a broader and more nuanced perspective on science. While it was challenging at times navigating the expectations of two different organisations, I specifically chose to complete a placement within these organisations to enhance my knowledge and skills in the area of science communication and its relation to society, which is a key aspect of the MScSoc degree. The MScSoc programme is designed to provide students with a cross-disciplinary understanding of how science and society are interconnected, and how different forms of knowledge, including mātauranga Māori and other Indigenous knowledge, influence scientific decision-making. It was an extremely valuable learning experience working within a translational space where I was able to apply the knowledge and skills I gained during my studies to real-world situations.

In particular, the work by Douglas (2009) resonated often, as I was exposed to the many different worldviews, values, and lived experiences that were expressed in the submissions following the Te Ara Paerangi Future Pathways green paper, which reiterated that science is always political and embedded within the society from which it is created. I was also able to apply my learnings about the importance of reflexivity and positionality within research, knowing that my subjective experience played significantly into the role I was playing and the research I was conducting. In terms of research methods, the MScSoc helped me to understand the importance of taking a collaborative approach with my work and engaging with stakeholders throughout the project. It also taught me the value of engaging with experts to gain a better understanding of a topic, and validated this as a method within research. Additionally, I was able to apply concepts that I learnt in regards to storytelling, design, and writing for different audiences, to create an engaging final product.

Writing a report outlining my placement and project also allowed me to develop my skill in writing for different audiences and communicating complex ideas in a way that is accessible to a broader audience. However, I found the experience of navigating what a report should look like when it is going to be shared with multiple parties to be extremely challenging. I struggled to complete the report for a long time due to feeling unsure of how to approach it, and I realise that gaining clarification earlier in my journey would have been beneficial. While there are several strengths of the final placement report, including my clear understanding of my positionality and the role of my host organisations, one weakness is the lack of discussion around the limitations of the research methodology. This could have been improved through a more critical reflection on the research process I undertook. Another is my conciseness. While being “wordy” can be a strength when it comes to something like a reflection, it can often hinder my ability to convey information in a clear

and concise way. Going forward, I plan to work on strengthening my writing skills, especially in terms of effectively articulating complex ideas and arguments.

Future improvements for the work could include the inclusion of more diverse perspectives in the analysis, and a broader range of sources, particularly when it comes to speaking about the experiences of others and complexity theory.

This work placement and project has been a transformative experience for me. It has pushed me out of my comfort zone and challenged me to think critically about the role of science in society. The project presented several challenges, including a steep learning curve, time constraints, and extenuating circumstances that impacted my experience. However, I overcame these challenges with open and authentic conversations, gathering information and feedback from those with expertise and experience in these fields. During my research, I gained a deeper understanding of the ways in which policy may try to bandage a problem, rather than try to understand where the problem is stemming from, which can lead to unsuccessful attempts to improve a system. This reiterated the important work Kindness in Science is doing in applying complexity theory to try and untangle some of the interrelated issues and find the correct levers to pull for effective change. My placement also reiterated the importance of having science communicators who have an understanding of knowledge production and science's place within society to fill translational gaps, such as the one found between science and policy.

In conclusion, through my work placement and project, I gained valuable hands-on experience conducting research for an organisation and exploring the policy landscape surrounding the Science, Research and Innovation sector. I also had the opportunity to develop my professional skillset, and gain a better understanding of what work in these spaces would look like. While I do wish it had of been smoother sailing the last few months, looking back on my journey, I am proud of how much I have grown and learned. As I move forward, I am excited to apply these new perspectives and skills in whatever path I choose to pursue. I am grateful for the supportive community of peers and supervisors that made this experience so meaningful, and I am confident that the lessons I have learned will stay with me for a lifetime. I hope to continue fostering the relationships I have formed, and look forward to working alongside those who were involved in my project again in the future.

References

Douglas, H. (2009). *Science, policy, and the value-free ideal*. University of Pittsburgh Press.