Cabinet Paper material
Proactive release

Minister & portfolio	Hon Penny Simmonds Minister for Tertiary Education
Name of package	Tertiary Research Excellence Fund
Date considered	18 May 2026
Date of release	2 June 2026

These documents have been proactively released:

Tertiary Research Excellence Fund
Date considered: 18 May 2026
Author: Office of the Minister for Tertiary Education

Cabinet Economic Policy Committee Minute ECO-26-MIN-0079
Date considered: 13 May 2026
Author: Committee secretary

Cabinet Minute CAB-26-MIN-0169
Date considered: 18 May 2026
Author: Secretary for the Cabinet

Material redacted

Some deletions have been made from the documents in line with withholding grounds under the Official Information Act 1982. Where information has been withheld, no public interest has been identified that would outweigh the reasons for withholding it.

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In Confidence

Office of the Minister for Tertiary Education

Cabinet Economic Policy Committee

Tertiary Research Excellence Fund

Proposal

1 This paper seeks final decisions on the design of the Tertiary Research Excellence Fund (TREF), which will replace the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF).

Relation to government priorities

2 New Zealand's tertiary education system is central to our Government's *Going for Growth* agenda, which informed the new Tertiary Education Strategy and previous Cabinet decisions in response to the University Strategy Group. In particular, it aligns with *Developing talent* and *Innovation, technology and science* pillars of the *Going for Growth* agenda.

Executive Summary

3 On 25 August 2025, Cabinet agreed to replace the compliance heavy Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) with a streamlined, more cost-effective Tertiary Research Excellence Fund (TREF). Cabinet also invited the Minister for Universities, in consultation with the Minister for Vocational Education, to report back in April 2026 on the final design of the TREF to be implemented from 2028, including citation and secondary metrics, and the approach to non-university Tertiary Education Organisations (TEOs) [CAB-25-MIN-0285 refers].

4 I have now made the final decisions on the proposed design of the TREF and seek Cabinet's agreement to the proposed design, components and weightings of those components.

5 The proposed TREF design significantly reduces the administrative burden on TEOs replacing a six-yearly assessment Quality Evaluation process under the PBRF with an annual assessment which will result in significant cost savings for TEOs once established. This annual data collection also gives the Government much greater flexibility to adjust the fund settings to ensure the correct balance of incentives for TEOs each year if desired.

6 The new design supports the critical role of universities in our Science, Innovation and Technology system through the present reforms to the sector that the Minister of Science, Innovation and Technology announced in 2025 by giving a greater focus to the commercialisation and economic value of cutting-edge research and developing our future research workforce. This in turn, aligns with the Government's *Going for Growth* agenda.

7 These changes also align with the Government's overall reforms of the Tertiary Education sector, agreed to by Cabinet in August 2025 [CAB-25-MIN-0285 refers]. It

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gives effect to the Tertiary Education Strategy with a focus on an increase in economic impact and innovation through the new Commercialisation component.

8 The Research Degree Completions and External Research Income components will be retained and strengthened and apply to all types of TEOs. These two components are well-established, robust measures from the PBRF that are already assessed on an annual cycle. The remainder of the TREF will be allocated according to new components that can be updated annually, and which are better aligned with government priorities.

9 The proposed new components and weightings are as follows:

Proposed TREF Component	Tertiary Education Organisation	Proposed Weighting
Research Degree Completions	All	25%
External Research Income		30%
Field-Weighted Citation Measure	Universities only, but polytechnics, Wānanga, and private training establishments able to opt in if they choose	30%
Commercialisation		7.5%
Policy Impact		5%
Research Capacity	Polytechnics, Wānanga, and private training establishments that do not opt in to the above	2.5%

10 This proposal reallocates funding within baselines. It will lead to changes in the funding received by individual TEOs, but I expect this to be manageable through early signalling of the changes.

Background

Cabinet has agreed to replace the Performance-Based Research Fund with the Tertiary Research Excellence Fund

11 Since 2003, the PBRF has supported research-based tertiary providers to deliver the broad research capability and advanced skills needed for a dynamic economy and a healthy society. It complements mission-focussed science and research funds, with universities receiving 97 percent of the PBRF's $315 million annual funding. The balance supports research and research-led teaching in polytechnics, two wānanga and a small number of private training establishments.

12 Significant gains in research quality followed the PBRF's introduction, but improvements appear to have subsequently slowed. The Quality Evaluation process has served its original purpose and is now unduly time-consuming and costly. Each Quality Evaluation round imposes significant compliance costs across the system; one estimate put the cost to the universities at $40 million per round. This significant cost is one reason the Quality Evaluation took place on average every six years, which resulted in the data used in each assessment becoming out-of-date. In short, it has become a distraction from research-focussed organisations' core role of producing high-quality, impactful research.

13 Therefore, on 25 August 2025, Cabinet agreed to replace the PBRF with a streamlined, more cost-effective TREF [CAB-25-MIN-0285 refers]. The key change would be the replacement of the peer-review based Quality Evaluation component with a number of new performance-based components, centred on a citation-based

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quality measure. The existing Research Degree Completions and External Research Income components would be retained and strengthened.

14 Cabinet also agreed that modifications to this approach would be considered for non-university TEOs. This new approach differs in that the PBRF had three measures that worked across all tertiary education providers, whereas the TREF will operate differently depending on if a TEO is a university, or a Polytechnic, Wānanga, or private training establishment.

15 The TREF has a stronger focus on research impact which better reflects government priorities (as set out in the Tertiary Education Strategy). It promotes stronger links between the research sector and end-users, with an increased focus on research outputs with commercial and social impacts that directly contribute to growing the New Zealand economy.

16 These changes are part of a broader shift to strengthen the performance of New Zealand's tertiary education system, building on the new Tertiary Education Strategy that places greater emphasis on economic impact and innovation. The proposed TREF design also supports the critical role of universities in our Science, Innovation and Technology system. It supports the present reforms to the sector the Minister of Science, Innovation and Technology announced in 2025, giving a greater focus to the commercialisation and economic value of cutting-edge research and developing our future research workforce. This, in turn, aligns with the Government's *Going for Growth* agenda.

17 The TREF will complement the creation of a strategy-driven science system by providing a simpler, more transparent mechanism for incentivising and rewarding research performance across the tertiary education system. The TREF would primarily rely on external datasets rather than reporting by providers, significantly reducing compliance costs, and enabling all measures to be updated annually.

18 Cabinet invited the Minister for Universities, in consultation with the Minister for Vocational Education, to report back to Cabinet by April 2026 on the Phase Two of the final design of the TREF to be implemented from 2026, including citation and secondary components, and the approach to non-university TEOs.

Phase One of the transition to the Tertiary Research Excellence Fund is now complete

19 Cabinet also agreed that Phase One of the transition to the TREF in 2027 would include increasing the priority on user-led research within the External Research Income component and introducing strengthened research requirements for investment plans of providers seeking PBRF funding. I intend to review the impact of this in 12 months.

20 I have confirmed the detailed settings for Phase One of the TREF, including increasing the weighting put on contract research that meets the needs of end-users relative to contestable research that tends to be investigator-led. These decisions were communicated to the sector in late 2025 and have come into effect this year.

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Proposed design of the Tertiary Research Excellence Fund

21 Building on Cabinet's decisions, the Minister for Universities directed officials to engage with sector and external experts in the development of the final design of the TREF. This has included testing a range of options for the design of new components to ensure that they will incentivise and recognise performance, while reducing compliance costs and complexity, particularly for researchers. In addition to sector feedback, a Technical Advisory Group advised on the design of metrics to replace the Quality Evaluation for universities.

22 The following proposed settings for the TREF will drive an increase in focus on research that leads to commercial and social impact, strengthen incentives for research that will contribute to economic growth and build research capability. The proposed design will be entirely based on annually reported data. This means unlike the previous settings which could only be revisited approximately every six years, adjustments to the weightings can be made annually if desired. Table One below outlines the proposed components and corresponding weightings:

Table One: Proposed TREF components and weightings

TREF Component	PBRF weightings	TREF weightings	Rationale
External Research Income (all participating providers)	20%	25%	Recognises **industry and private sector collaboration**. Increased weighting signals the importance of external funding as a measure of relevance and impact.
Research Degree Completions (all participating providers)	25%	30%	Recognises **research-led teaching** and development of research workforce. Increased weighting signals importance of developing research workforce
Quality Evaluation (replaced)	55%	-	Component is replaced by measures below, which more efficiently measure research quality and impact.
Field-Weighted Citation Measure (universities*)	-	30%	Recognises **research quality, relevance and intensity**. The lower weighting compared to the quality evaluation allows for a broader focus on impact while also rewarding quality and basic research.
Commercialisation component (universities*)	-	7.5%	Recognises **research that leads to commercialisation**. A lower weighting as this is a new component, and robust data is still being developed.
Policy Impact component (universities*)	-	5%	Recognises **research that informs public policy** in New Zealand and internationally. A lower weighting as this is a new component.
Research Capacity Component (polytechnics, Wānanga, and private training establishments*)	-	2.5%	A lower compliance cost measure of providers' **investment in research capacity**, based on committed research time for academic staff. Weighting should provide a small increase on PBRF for these sectors.

* Polytechnics, Wānanga and private training establishments would have the option to opt in to the university metrics instead of the Research Capacity Component

23 These changes will create a funding system that is more transparent, more outcomes-focused, and better supports high-impact research. It will cut administration and

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compliance costs, especially for individual researchers. The new system retains a strong focus on research-led teaching and human capital development, while better supporting engagement with industry and research end-users.

24 These changes will also align with the Government's overall tertiary education reforms, agreed to by Cabinet in August 2025 [CAB-25-MIN-0285 refers]. It gives effect to the Tertiary Education Strategy with a greater focus on economic impact and innovation through the changes to the External Research Income component and the new Commercialisation component. It reduces the administrative burden on academics engaged in research with a shift in focus to institutional research outputs. This will allow academics to devote more time and resource to learners that will improve educational outcomes and research-led teaching.

25 These changes will also align with the broader reforms of the Science, Innovation, and Technology System that the Minister of Science, Innovation and Technology announced in 2025. The TREF will complement these reforms by helping to fund a system that ensures our tertiary research system is globally competitive and incentivises our universities to drive new ideas to market and undertake economically impactful research.

26 Universities currently receive 97 percent of the PBRF, so three of the proposed TREF components have been tailored to the type and scale of research that is undertaken by these TEOs.

27 I propose an alternative Research Capacity component to be applied to polytechnics, Wānanga, and private training establishments. This will provide these TEOs with an alternative to the components for the universities and responds to the different nature of their research outputs (for example, much of it is more applied, and/or used in community or industry contexts, rather than targeting journal publications).

28 The proposed components of the TREF are set out in more detail below.

Field-Weighted Citation Measure component (universities)

29 I propose a Field-Weighted Citation Measure for universities, consistent with the University Advisory Group's advice. It is a well-recognised measure of academic impact that is likely to initially produce broadly similar results to the existing Quality Evaluation at an institutional level, with lower compliance costs and less impact on individual researchers.

30 The Field-Weighted Citation Measure is a new measure for universities that will include the following specific features:

30.1 it will use the Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classification (ANZSRC) Field of Research subject area codes,

30.2 it will be calculated annually and the funding allocation calculated using a three-year weighted average, and

30.3 it will include a mechanism (to be developed) to address the potentially distortionary effects of multi-authored outputs.

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31 I will instruct the Tertiary Education Commission to consider how it can recognise Mātauranga Māori and Pacific research as discrete subject areas in the Field-Weighted Citation Measure.

Policy impact component (universities)

32 I propose a Policy Impact component, to be based on research citations in public policy advice documents in New Zealand and internationally. This will provide an important incentive to pursue research with broad social, economic, environmental and cultural impact. This will act as a counterbalance to the Field-Weighted Citation Measure which will tend to reward more traditional academic outputs.

Commercialisation component (universities)

33 In alignment with the Government's *Going for Growth* agenda, I also propose a new Commercialisation component to complement the Field-Weighted Citation Measure. This will incentivise activity leading to research commercialisation.

34 I will determine the final design of the TREF Commercialisation Component, following further advice from officials. It will be informed by the Commercialisation Outcomes Measurement Framework developed by the Ministry for Business, Innovation, and Employment.

Research Capacity component (polytechnics, Wānanga, and private training establishments)

35 The new TREF will continue to support polytechnics, Wānanga and private training establishments that engage in research. While these providers receive only 3.5 percent of PBRF funding, this funding is important to support their statutory research functions and the requirement for degree-level and postgraduate teaching to be research-led.

36 Because of the small scale and strongly applied nature of research in the polytechnics, Wānanga, and private training establishments, the Field-Weighted Citation Measure, Policy Impact, and Commercialisation components are less effective tools for measuring their research outputs and would significantly disadvantage such institutions.

37 While I have explored alternative quality measures for these subsectors, available approaches are either not sufficiently robust or would have a disproportionate compliance cost for the level of funding involved. Therefore, I propose to allocate 2.5 percent of TREF to participating polytechnics, Wānanga and private training establishments on the basis of a Research Capacity measure (based on contracted or committed research time allocated to academic staff).

38 The Research Capacity measure would act as a proxy for research activity and incentivise growth in research capability, recognising the need for these providers to deliver research-led teaching at a degree level and the important role that they play in applied research and knowledge transfer. In order to be eligible for this funding, providers would need to satisfy the Tertiary Education Commission that they have a robust plan for their research activity as part of the Investment Plan process; however I will review the impact of this in 12 months.

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39 I propose the Research Capacity component will be applied to polytechnics, Wānanga, and private training establishments along with the Research Degree Completions and External Research Income components.

40 These organisations could choose to opt in to the 'university' components (the Field-Weighted Citation Measure and the two impact components) instead of the Research Capacity measure, subject to meeting operational requirements. It is unlikely that there will be uptake of opportunity to opt-in (due to the better-tailored nature of the Research Capacity component), but I consider it necessary to allow them to do so should they prefer to be assessed on the same basis as universities.

External Research Income

41 The External Research Income component would continue to apply to all participating TEOs. This allocates funding based on settings for the External Research Income component approved in Phase One of the TREF work.

42 I propose to increase the External Research Income weighting from its current 20 percent under the PBRF to 25 percent under the TREF to further incentivise external research income from all sources and grow total research income.

Research Degree Completions component

43 Cabinet agreed that Research Degree Completions would be retained as one of the components of the TREF. It measures the number of research degree completions (typically master's by research and doctoral completions) attributable to each provider. Research Degree Completions are a proxy for the strength of a provider's research training environment and contributions to the research workforce, and for universities, underscores the Education and Training Act 2020 requirement to provide research-led teaching.

44 I propose to increase the weighting of this component from 25 percent under PBRF to 30 percent under the TREF. This component is well-understood, internationally comparable, and has wide sector support.

45 I also propose to adjust the subject area weightings within this component to counterbalance the known coverage limitations of the Field-Weighted Citation Measure in some areas such as Arts, Culture and Humanities subjects. Increasing the overall component weighting will mean that any new subject area weightings will be sufficiently impactful.

46 I seek Cabinet's delegated authority to determine the details of weightings within this component, based on further advice in mid-2026.

Impacts

47 As with any change to a funding system, there will be increases in funding for some TEOs and decreases for others. Some of this change is simply due to the long time between Quality Evaluations for the PBRF – the current allocations are based on 2018 results, and we would expect shifts in funding even if the PBRF had continued unchanged. The TREF design will also better recognise those universities that have a strong focus on research commercialisation, incentivising support for Technology

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Transfer Offices to advance commercially viable research into the market. The specific impacts will also depend on the operational design of the fund and on the behavioural response of providers to the new incentives.

48 The proposed 2.5 percent allocation to the Research Capacity component would result in a small increase in the total proportion of funding going to these providers (from around 3.5 percent of total funding to around 4 percent), although the impact at a provider level will vary depending on provider performance. This allows for the fact that additional non-university providers are likely to choose to participate in TREF due to lower compliance costs.

49 Overall, I am confident that the impacts of the TREF changes will be manageable for providers while still incentivising the types of change that we are looking to drive in the system. The changes will also reduce significantly high reported compliance costs associated with each quality evaluation round under the previous system. Officials will closely monitor the impacts of the funding changes as they are implemented.

50 I am conscious of the impacts for TEOs at a subject-level, particularly around subjects that are less commercially focussed, such as arts and humanities and Mātauranga Māori. I have sought to achieve a balance of the desired outcomes of the proposed TREF while incentivising continued research in these areas.

Implementation

51 Following Cabinet's agreement to the overall design of the TREF, I propose to make some more detailed design decisions (including selecting Commercialisation component measures, and weightings within the Research Degree Completions component). The complete design will be reflected in a draft funding determination for consultation with the sector in mid-2026 and finalisation by September 2026.

52 The Tertiary Education Commission will implement the TREF, including developing new reporting tools for TEOs and the procurement of data sets to inform the new components.

53 The implementation process for each of the new components will be different, depending on whether they rely on provider reporting or external datasets. Where additional data is to be reported to the Tertiary Education Commission, this will be based on 2027 activity to be reported to the Tertiary Education Commission in 2028. The first allocation of funding under the new TREF will be in 2029, although the sector is expected to start responding to incentives as soon as the design is complete, so that they are well-positioned for the new funding allocations in 2029.

54 I expect that the TREF will be reviewed by 2031 to ensure that it is having the desired positive impacts on the Tertiary Education sector, and to identify opportunities to further improve the system.

Cost-of-living Implications

55 These proposals have no immediate or direct cost-of-living implications.

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Financial Implications

56 This paper's proposal has no direct financial implications for the government. The TREF will be implemented within existing baselines, with any change to overall funding to be considered in future budgets.

Legislative Implications

57 This paper's proposal has no legislative implications.

Impact Analysis

Regulatory Impact Statement

58 Regulatory Impact Analysis requirements do not apply to this paper's proposal.

Climate Implications of Policy Assessment

59 A Climate Implications of Policy Assessment is not required for this paper's proposal.

Population Implications

60 This paper's proposal does not have any direct population implications, however introducing the new TREF to replace the PBRF will contribute to the overall aim to improve the New Zealand tertiary system for all population groups. This will make it simpler for TEOs to access research funding and increase their research and innovation outputs.

Human Rights

61 This paper's proposal does not have any human rights implications that require analysis of their consistency with the Bill of Rights Act 1990s and the Human Rights Act 1993.

Use of external resources

62 To ensure timely delivery while meeting other work demands, the Ministry of Education engaged external specialist expertise as well as contractors to support the design of the proposed new TREF components.

Consultation

63 The following agencies have been consulted: the Treasury; MBIE; TEC; NZQA; the Department of Conservation; Ministry of Social Development; the Ministries for Pacific Peoples, Disabled People, Women, Ethnic Communities, Māori Development, Culture & Heritage, and Primary Industries. The Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet has been informed.

64 Te Puni Kōkiri recommends the Tertiary Education Commission continues engaging with the Māori and Pacific research communities to develop an approach that appropriately recognises, encourages, and rewards Mātauranga Māori and Pacific research within the TREF and the wider tertiary research funding system.

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Communications

65 Subject to Cabinet agreement, I intend to announce the final TREF design and component weighting decisions in writing to all TEOs that engaged in the design process, ahead of a wider public announcement.

Proactive Release

66 I intend to release this paper within 30 days of it being considered by Cabinet and once the final TREF design and weighting decisions have been publicly announced, subject to any redactions as appropriate under the Official Information Act 1982.

Recommendations

The Minister for Tertiary Education recommends that the Committee:

1 **note** that on 25 August 2025, Cabinet agreed to replace the Performance-Based Research Fund with a streamlined, more cost-effective Tertiary Research Excellence Fund [CAB-25-MIN-0285 refers];

2 **note** that Phase One of the development of the Tertiary Research Excellence Fund was completed in late 2025;

3 **agree** to the overall design of the Tertiary Research Excellence Fund, including the proposed weightings of the components;

Component	Tertiary Education Organisation	Proposed Weighting
Research Degree Completions	All	25%
External Research Income		30%
Field-Weighted Citation Measure	Universities only, but polytechnics, Wānanga, and private training establishments able to opt in if they choose	30%
Commercialisation		7.5%
Policy Impact		5%
Research Capacity	Polytechnics, Wānanga, and private training establishments that do not opt in to the above measures	2.5%

5 **agree** that polytechnics, Wānanga, and private training establishments will be able to opt-in to the Universities components if they choose to;

6 **agree** that the Minister for Tertiary Education will make detailed decisions on the design and implementation of the Tertiary Research Excellence Fund;

7 **agree** that the Tertiary Research Excellence Fund will be reviewed by 2031 to ensure it is achieving its objectives;

8 **note** that the Minister for Tertiary Education intends to announce the final Tertiary Research Excellence Fund design and component weighting decisions to the participating Tertiary Education Organisations and the wider public; and

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9 **note** that the Minister for Tertiary Education intends to proactively release this Cabinet paper.

Authorised for lodgement

Hon Penny Simmonds

Minister for Tertiary Education

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ECO-26-MIN-0079

Cabinet Economic Policy Committee

Minute of Decision

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Tertiary Research Excellence Fund

Portfolio **Tertiary Education**

On 13 May 2026, the Cabinet Economic Policy Committee:

1 **noted** that in August 2025, the Cabinet Expenditure and Regulatory Review Committee agreed to replace the Performance-Based Research Fund with a streamlined, more cost-effective Tertiary Research Excellence Fund (the Fund) and invited the Minister for Universities to report back on the final design of the Fund to be implemented from 2028, including citation an secondary metrics, and the approach to non-university tertiary education organisations [EXP-25-MIN-0088];

2 **noted** that Phase One of the development of the Fund was completed in late 2025;

3 **agreed** to the overall design of the Fund, including the following proposed weightings of the components:

Component	Tertiary Education Organisation	Proposed Weighting
Research Degree Completions	All	25%
External Research Income		30%
Field-Weighted Citation Measure	Universities only, but polytechnics, Wānanga, and private training establishments able to opt in if they choose	30%
Commercialisation		7.5%
Policy Impact		5%
Research Capacity	Polytechnics, Wānanga, and private training establishments that do not opt in to the above measures	2.5%

4 **agreed** that polytechnics, Wānanga, and private training establishments will be able to opt-in to the Universities components indicated above if they choose to;

5 **authorised** the Minister for Tertiary Education to make detailed decisions on the design and implementation of the Fund;

6 **agreed** that the Fund be reviewed by 2031 to ensure it is achieving its objectives;

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7 **noted** that the Minister for Tertiary Education intends to announce the final Fund design and component weighting decisions to the participating Tertiary Education Organisations and the wider public.

Rachel Clarke
Committee Secretary

Present:
Hon David Seymour
Rt Hon Winston Peters
Hon Nicola Willis (Chair)
Hon Chris Bishop
Hon Brooke van Velden
Hon Shane Jones
Hon Erica Stanford
Hon Louise Upston
Hon Tama Potaka
Hon Chris Penk
Hon Penny Simmonds
Hon Nicola Grigg
Hon Mark Patterson
Hon James Meager
Hon Scott Simpson
Hon Cameron Brewer
Simon Court MP

Officials present from:
Officials Committee for ECO

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CAB-26-MIN-0169

Cabinet

Minute of Decision

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Report of the Cabinet Economic Policy Committee: Period Ended 15 May 2026

On 18 May 2026, Cabinet made the following decisions on the work of the Cabinet Economic Policy Committee for the period ended 15 May 2026:

Out of scope

[redacted]

ECO-26-MIN-0079	**Tertiary Research Excellence Fund** Portfolio: Tertiary Education	CONFIRMED

Diana Hawker
for Secretary of the Cabinet

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