

Strategic Plan 2026-2031

Our vision / Whenua ora, tangata ora

Communities and environments are healthy, sustainable, and resilient.

Our Mission

Improving wellbeing and building capability through our research, teaching, and partnerships.

Me pēnei ka taea

A vibrant research culture;

Interdisciplinary and innovative;

fostering and sharing new knowledge and ideas;

incorporating multi-cultural knowledge;

demonstrating leadership;

inspiring change.

Ngā pou

Our strategic goals

1. Whakatipu mana tangata | grow inspirational people

1.1 Expand the frontiers of sustainability research

- Advance academic leadership in our current areas of research and seek to develop new focus areas in topics critical for a sustainable and resilient future.
- Develop and champion innovative sustainability solutions, including those developed with mātauranga and other Indigenous knowledge systems.
- Engage in dialogue with relevant partners, communities and agencies to co-design research that is useful, useable, and used.
- Foster novel interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, and post-disciplinary approaches.

1.2 Support Indigenous research excellence

- Enhance the Centre's capacity and capability to undertake Māori, Pacific and Moriori research.
- Deliver innovations led from Māori and Indigenous research and based on Te Ao Māori principles.
- Expand and deepen research collaborations and partnerships with Māori and Pacific communities.

1.3 Catalyse change for a sustainable future

- Maintain our highly respected position as a source of research-informed solutions and advice on sustainability issues.
- Produce locally relevant and internationally significant research findings and outcomes.
- Stimulate conversations, learnings, collaborations and actions with partners and end users.
- Generate global influence through our international relationships and networks, and through the flows of our research.

1.4 Communicate for impact

- Publish research findings in leading international and relevant domestic journals, prioritizing open access outputs.
- Share our research knowledge and findings to influence public discourses, via policy briefs, digital media, opinion pieces, film, videos, podcasts, and government submissions to influence decision-making and promote sustainable policy and practice.

- Partner with design specialists to create innovative communication outputs using human-centred design approaches.
- Support and empower our research end users to achieve their desired sustainability and resilience outcomes.

2. Whāngaihia kia toa | nurture our people to become strong and resilient

2.1 Sustain and evolve the Centre's unique research culture

- Maintain the practices and traditions that foster inclusivity, friendliness, and support, through manaakitanga and whānaungatanga within the Centre and with our research partners.
- Welcome and learn from the intergenerational wisdom of our taura (staff), hoa mahi (colleagues), kaumatua and kuia (elders), and emeritus/emerita professors, and visitors from across Aotearoa and the rest of the world.

2.2 Support new and emerging researchers

- Nurture our postgraduate students and post-doctoral fellows to become future sustainability leaders who are equipped to affect positive change in the world.
- Pursue new partnerships and funding sources to support postgraduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and community-based researchers.
- Encourage under-represented student groups into postgraduate programmes at the Centre, including Māori, Pacific, disabled, students with children, first-in-family, and refugees. Our goal is to create a safe and supportive research environment, where all individuals can thrive.
- Host visiting international students, summer scholarship students, and interns to give opportunities for them to experience an interdisciplinary research environment.

3. Whakapakari te katoa | co-operate, strengthen all as one

3.1 Strengthen our relationships within the University

- Contribute to the School of Geography and other departments through research collaborations, service, co-supervision, and research-led teaching.
- Support the Te Uru Sustainability Grand Challenge to improve connectivity and advance sustainability-related research and collaboration for greater impact.
- Increase our network of research affiliates and continue to host academics on Research and Study Leave to infuse the Centre with new ideas.
- Pursue opportunities for Centre staff to contribute to relevant University decision-making forums and committees.

3.2 Strengthen our local and national relationships

- Develop new collaborations with Te Runanga o Ngāi Tahu, Papatipu Runaka, Mataawaka

and other Māori agencies and hāpori to support indigenous aspirations for research and capability-building.

- Develop and strengthen relationships with partners and end-users nationally (iwi, communities, councils, businesses, local and central governments) and co-develop new research proposals.
- Develop and maintain collaborations with aligned research organisations and programmes, Māori research organisations, Public Research Organisations (PROs), sector-specific and industry-specific relationships, and government sectors.

3.3 Strengthen our international reach

- Strategically invite and host international visitors, including thought-leaders, leading academics, postgraduate students, and others to engage with the Centre.
- Secure funded international fellowships for Centre staff to undertake international visits.
- Expand our participation in internationally funded projects, including Horizon Europe or Asia Pacific funding.
- Strengthen our relationships with leading international research networks.

4. Whanake whakamua | Grow and move onwards

4.1 Develop our research capability

- Ensure the Centre has sufficiently skilled professional staff to effectively support the development and delivery of its activities.
- Develop clear processes for bringing new staff to the Centre, including strategic funding for Postdoctoral fellows and new research fellows.
- Provide support to staff and students in building their capacity and understanding of Te Ao Māori.
- Include budget provisions for increasing research staff in proposals to gradually increase staff numbers at the Centre.
- Broaden the expertise of our researchers and research associates to encompass diverse fields of research.
- Create opportunities for relevant academic staff from other departments to become more integrally involved in the Centre, including co-supervision, co-developing research proposals and hosting them during Research and Study Leave.
- Seek to supervise postgraduate students whose topics and skills align with the Centre's strategic goals.

4.2 Improve our financial resilience

- Maintain and grow external research funding with a portfolio of short- and long-term projects.
- Advocate for more equitable financial arrangements for Research Centres, including fair contribution margins and more stable base funding.
- Secure long-term external funding for strategic initiatives including targeted academic positions, fellowships, and postgraduate scholarships.
- Contribute to research-informed teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

- Ensure sufficient and accurate financial advice is available for the Centre based on clear visibility of our financial performance as an independent cost centre.

4.3 Operate effectively and strategically

- Produce an annual report that captures research income and staffing, to provide consistent records of Centre research funding and staffing.
- Maintain a regular schedule of management and Tuakana staff meetings for academic and professional staff.
- Continue to explore leadership models that best support the Centre's strategic goals.
- Develop leadership potential of our staff through representation on committees (within the School of Geography, and wider University).
- Ensure professional and research staff are well supported and have access to professional development.

About the Centre for Sustainability Research

Ka Rakahau o Te Ao Tūroa

The Centre for Sustainability Research was established in 2001 and has developed a reputation for interdisciplinary human-environment research that supports sustainability and societal resilience. Our early focus on food, agriculture and the environment has evolved towards innovative and intersectional research across kaitiakitanga, climate change mitigation and adaptation, natural hazards and disaster risk reduction, resilient communities, sustainable energy, biodiversity, and ecology, just transitions, food and agriculture, and risk communication. Our staff include full-time and part-time researchers, professional staff, postgraduate students, and emeritus professors. We frequently host local, domestic, and international interns, students, visiting scholars, and academics.

We aspire to explore the intersections of climate adaptation, earth systems and achieving a low-carbon, sustainable future. Together with our partners, we will grow awareness and research capability at this intersection, with a particular focus on how to enhance the sustainability and resilience of iwi, communities, systems, and governance structures to guide NZ safely into the future.

The rationale for the Centre is that human demands are exceeding environmental capacities, and that the wellbeing of current and future generations of humans and non-human species are seriously threatened. Human society is increasingly exposed to natural hazards, including from earth system processes and climate change. Significant changes are required to systems of production and consumption, and in human expectations, practices, and relationships with the environment.

Our research seeks solutions to these issues through world-leading social, empirical, technical, mātauranga and local/experiential research. Our extensive network of iwi, local and national partners ensure our research is grounded in local contexts, and translatable for national and international impact.

Te puāwaitanga | What we do

As an externally funded Research Centre, we seek opportunities to inform, shape, and influence positive changes at many levels. Within the Centre, we build capacity and

capability amongst our postgraduate students and staff and produce high impact theoretical and applied research. Within the University, we lead sustainability-related research and collaborations with Otago academics, supported by outstanding professional staff. Regionally, we engage closely with rūnaka, local government, businesses, and NGOs on sustainability issues. Nationally, we influence change through strategic relationships with government, Māori communities and organisations, businesses, NGOs, and sector groups. We share our research outputs through innovative communication and thought leadership to engage and enable Aotearoa New Zealand to become a more sustainable and resilient nation. We seek to be internationally influential through our research excellence and partnerships.

Our primary activity as a Centre is undertaking externally funded research, delivering excellent academic publications, and translating our findings into user-relevant insights. Research staff based at the Centre lead or contribute to bid preparation, research leadership and delivery, and communication of research findings. Many projects emerge from relationships developed with stakeholders such as iwi, communities, councils, businesses, and government agencies and most involve collaborations with other researchers based elsewhere across the University or in research institutions in Aotearoa-New Zealand and internationally.

Our second key focus is on postgraduate students undertaking research degrees in topics aligned with the Centre's mission. We are regularly approached by prospective students and are limited only by the capacity of research staff at the Centre to supervise students.

The Centre is known as a place for connecting people, by hosting meetings and seminars for pan-university groups or linking university and external groups that have common interests. We communicate our research widely and in accessible ways, both through regular seminars and workshops at the Centre, and directly with our stakeholders using a wide variety of communication methods. We also engage with these stakeholders to discover what issues they are concerned about and how we might collaborate to find solutions.

The Centre is internationally known for the quality of its research and research collaborations, and through its alumni network. Our frequent hosting of international visitors is a strength which contributes to the vitality of the Centre, to the University and to the Otago community more widely.

A mātou tikanga | Our culture

Our research staff each have an excellent foundation in a specific discipline or disciplines, and demonstrate thought leadership in local, national, and international discourses.

We are committed to interdisciplinarity and strive to produce both theoretical and applied collaborative research that makes a difference.

We value diversity and are committed to inclusiveness, supporting and encouraging one another and celebrating our successes.

Māori concepts and perspectives are woven into our organisational culture and are central to many of our research programmes. We welcome the insights that come from bringing together diverse ways of understanding the world and we support the development of new and emerging Māori researchers.

The quality of our research is supported by the culture of the Centre as a community of researchers and support staff who are passionate about sustainability, who value openness and are committed to the sharing of ideas. We appreciate the mix of perspectives brought from having people from many countries, disciplines, and cultures. We are a flexible workplace and recognise the wider context of people's lives, including the importance of whānau and families.

As well as our research, we take a lead in stimulating thinking and action on sustainability within the University and in society more widely. We provide opportunities for learning and discussions, we model sustainable behaviour, and we contribute to policy directions, media, and events where sustainability issues are discussed.

Our work is enriched by the genuine committed relationships that have developed with people who have spent time at the Centre as researchers, visitors and students; with other researchers at the Otago campus, elsewhere in Aotearoa New Zealand and globally; and with the communities, iwi, businesses and government agencies with whom we work. These long-term relationships are an important part of our identity.

A muri ake nei | The future

The operating environment for the Centre is evolving. The University of Otago is committed to a sustainability agenda, with the development of Te Uru Sustainability Grand Challenge show-casing sustainability research across the University.

The research funding environment is challenging. However, with the establishment of Research Funding New Zealand, and the re-launch of the Endeavour and Marsden funds scheduled for 2027, we remain optimistic about the future. We will continue to navigate challenges in securing the funding needed to support our researchers, so they can continue to supervise and mentor the next generation of researchers. The difficulties in recruiting and retaining research staff due to the short-term nature of many contracts will continue to challenge us, and we must strive to maintain our welcoming and inclusive research culture that is attractive to others.

With these emerging opportunities we seek to become even better at developing solutions to complex problems, including through applying scientific expertise; Māori knowledge and worldviews; incorporating traditional, practitioner and local knowledge; undertaking interdisciplinary research; incorporating new and emerging perspectives that support just transitions; developing transdisciplinary approaches; working at the nexus of different fields of study; and developing innovations in theory as well as practice.