

FLEXIBLE CONTRACTING OF RESEARCH

Doing science differently



The BioHeritage NSC mission is to reverse the decline of New Zealand’s biological heritage, through a national partnership to deliver a step change in research innovation, globally leading technologies, and community and sector action. To escalate progress towards achieving this mission, BioHeritage led the design of large research programmes that underpinned each of BioHeritage’s strategic outcomes.

Highly collaborative research programmes involving a wide variety of “researchers” (including Māori partners, researchers, stakeholders, Government agencies, NGOs, community groups and end-users), and the inherent unknowns of doing research (especially environmental research), is not well served by traditional, transactional, and relatively inflexible contracting models usually used to contract research in Aotearoa. These typically involve detailed tables of milestones extending to the contract end, often years into the future. As part of their commitment to “doing science differently”, BioHeritage chose instead to implement a more flexible, relational contracting approach.

CONTRACT APPROACH

Traditional ‘transactional’ contracts seek to include detailed plans to minimise uncertainty and risk. In contrast, relational contracts acknowledge uncertainty. The formal contract is based upon a highly collaborative relationship where parties consciously choose to make social norms contractually binding. Research shows that relational contracts can outperform transactional contracts in terms of costs advantages, time, quality, and innovation. The relational contracting approach also more closely aligned with BioHeritage’s values, particularly *Manaakitanga* – *we build trust and create a place that others want to be part of*.

Leveraging the trust established between BioHeritage, contracting organisations, and the researchers, the legal elements, funding specifications and high-level research priorities, were separated out from more detailed research plans. An accompanying annual workplan (AWP) provided detail on the planned research, team, budget, and milestones. The AWP was reviewed by the BioHeritage leadership team, subject experts and/or international reviewers.

Rather than asking researchers to ‘crystal ball gaze’ and plan in detail for years into the future, researchers were asked to provide detailed plans for the coming 12 months, and a few placeholder milestones for subsequent years to give the anticipated direction of the research.

AT A GLANCE

Research deals with unknowns. Contracts with detailed milestones years into the future risks locking in researchers, and constraining the amount of progress made.

With our flexible approach we empowered researchers to actively plan and manage their research, adapting to new knowledge and external factors.

The research teams updated their AWP annually, adding more detail for the coming year. Typically, this updating was a ‘light-touch’, but it was reviewed annually by BioHeritage leadership and, where changes were significant, by international reviewers.

Wording from our contracts:

*Since details of the Work Plan will not be determined before this contract is signed, the parties agree **that their relationship will be governed by good faith, mutual trust** and confidence and that the Services will be provided in accordance with the BioHeritage Operating Principles and Values...*

*Science seeks to understand the unknown. If researchers could **accurately foresee results and plan meaningful milestones several years into the future, they’re probably not attempting to solve problems we really need the answers to.***



The BioHeritage NSC contract cycle

OUTCOMES

The contracting approach increased trust and empowered researchers to adapt and adjust the trajectory of their research as new knowledge and opportunities arose. It allowed flexibility to bring new researchers with additional skills into the team when they were needed, instead of locking in the same people for the duration of the contract. Rather than working to a plan with detailed critical steps and milestones for several years, the researchers could remain focused and actively plan and adapt to achieve the intended outcomes and impacts.

“The BioHeritage contract model enabled the Eco-index to take an agile approach to its research and product development design. Applied research rarely follows a linear pathway, with avenues of discovery shifting according to trial-and-error learning, new discoveries, and shifting technical, economic, and political contexts.

The Eco-index team relished the opportunity of being able to shift direction as needed based on open and flexible contracting arrangements and excellent feedback processes between the research team and Challenge leadership. This approach enabled us to exceed our original contracted deliverables by some margin as we were not ‘locked’ into ‘dead ends’ that would have otherwise wasted time and resources.”

- John Reid, Co-lead SO1 Eco-Index

IMPLICATIONS/APPLICATIONS

The time invested in socialising the relational contracting model with science organisations and researchers has paid off. The communication and relationships between the research teams and BioHeritage support and leadership is very open and effective. The approach has resulted in fewer contract variations and empowered researchers with the ability to adapt and pivot based on new knowledge or external factors. This flexibility facilitated movement along the innovation pathway toward implementation of research outcomes. A less rigid, more dynamic, contracting approach could be utilised in other research contracts run by MBIE.



For more information see the iPEN webinar given Feb 2024
<https://vimeo.com/showcase/9860294/video/915666902>

Template for Annual Workplan available at <https://doi.org/10.34721/1fk8-8h06>

