

# BUILDING NEW ZEALAND'S NEXT GENERATION OF RESEARCHERS

Since it began in September 2000, Motu's mission has been not only to undertake and disseminate high-quality, independent research, but also to develop New Zealand's future researchers and economists, primarily through their research analyst and internship programmes.



## THE BACKGROUND

Since her own career began as a trainee analyst at the New Zealand Treasury in the 1980s, Motu senior fellow Suzi Kerr has admired the mentality of training future leaders that she saw there. When Motu was founded in 2000, she saw that this mentoring of junior staff was as valuable and necessary as ever. Given Kerr's own love of teaching, as well spotting an opportunity to leverage the senior fellows' skills by bringing in staff to assist, a research analyst (RA) programme was a founding mission of the fledgling organisation and Kerr's second employee was a research analyst.

## THE PROJECT

Motu chooses smart and motivated undergraduates, most often with economics degrees (but not exclusively – RAs have had backgrounds in subjects as diverse as meteorology and geography) and offers them salaried positions assisting the senior fellows with research work. While other graduate research positions involve simply fulfilling research tasks for their seniors, Motu RAs are encouraged to develop their own analytical skills, and author papers alongside senior fellows. Current RA Judd Ormsby says Motu stood out over similar positions at the Treasury or the Reserve Bank because of the chance to do joint research with senior fellows. "To work so closely with someone at the same level as a senior



**ISABELLE SIN GRADUATING FROM  
STANFORD UNIVERSITY, 2012**



**SUZI KERR AS A TRAINEE ANALYST  
THE TREASURY, 1987**



*The Motu RA experience is unique because you are part of research that is somewhat academic in nature, but more connected with real economic and public policy questions than most economic research at universities.*

**ISABELLE SIN**

FORMER MOTU RA, NOW MOTU FELLOW

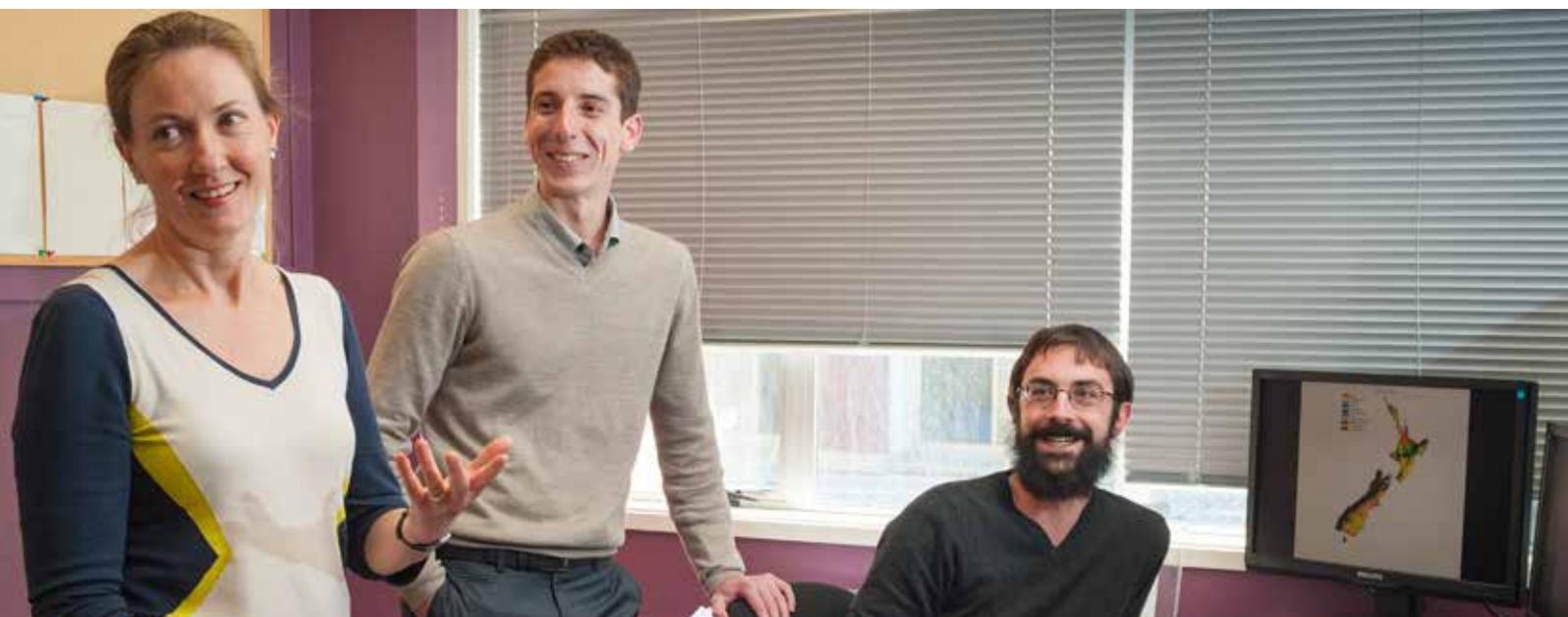
fellow, straight out of university, would be rare in other organisations,” he notes. Eyal Apatov, another RA who came from many years of research roles, agrees: “I decided to work with Motu – even though it meant taking a step down from my previous role – because of their reputation for top-quality research and RA training. I went to Motu because I wanted to learn from the best, even if this meant earning much less for few years.”

The young researchers going through the programme work on a variety of projects, mixing conceptual and empirical work, and alongside all Motu senior fellows. Suzi Kerr notes that this structure makes the programme expensive to run – just as RAs become schooled up in one area of research, they are moved on to another project, in order to broaden their experience. And once the RAs become useful, independent researchers in their own right, they’re encouraged to leave for graduate study or other positions. There’s also the practical cost of sending the RAs to conferences, and other professional development opportunities. But beyond the reward of building New Zealand’s research capacity, more practical benefits to Motu are in abundance: the RAs go on to form part of Motu’s national and international network, becoming useful points of communication at the organisations they move on to. And as Kerr points out, the RAs are in fact a valuable channel for disseminating research: a person who worked directly on a project understands it deeply and can apply it and communicate it more effectively than any number of paper or articles. This is especially relevant given that much of what Motu aims to communicate is not tangible facts, but rather a way of thinking about increasingly complex policy issues.

## THE RESULTS

Since 2000, Motu has contributed to the development of 25 RAs and 34 interns. Four former RAs have since graduated with economics PhDs from top international graduate schools, with another four currently underway. Isabelle Sin, who received her PhD from Stanford in 2012 and has returned to Motu as a fellow, cites her time as a Motu RA as an excellent gateway for grad school: “I worked for people who had been through the system and could help me prepare for it, and of course I learned a pile of research and empirical skills that were very useful in my subsequent study.” She recalls that at her interview, senior fellows Suzi Kerr and Dave Maré told her that even if she didn’t take a position with them, they would do everything they could to help her get into a good grad school. Sin says “that sealed it – I decided these were the kind of people I wanted to work for, and didn’t apply for any other jobs. I was offered the position, and I took it.”

Other former RAs and interns have taken up senior roles at the Treasury, the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment and other government departments. Jason Timmins, one of Motu’s first RAs, is now research director at the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, and says the Motu RA programme is unique: “I don’t think there exists an institution that provides the same development to junior research staff. There is an attitude to do the best work, not just what would please the client.” Timmins says this rigorous approach to applied research has strongly influenced his subsequent career: “I would not have achieved as much as I have without my RA experience. Most importantly, Motu set for me a high bar in terms of what high-quality work looks like.”



SUZI KERR, NATHAN CHAPPELL AND COREY ALLAN

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