

Ako Aotearoa Sector Strategy Co-design - Executive Summary

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Ako Aotearoa Board
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Ako Aotearoa Sector Strategy Co-design

Executive Summary

Common themes and recommendations for tertiary education organisations

Introduction

Ako Aotearoa's Board led a comprehensive sector consultation to inform its strategic plan, focusing on three key areas: **Teaching Excellence, Collaboration, and Thought**

Leadership. The process involved kōrerorero sessions at regional forums, interviews with senior leaders, and a nationwide sector survey. Across these processes, strong alignment emerged around the importance of these three strategic objectives as levers for TEOs to thrive and deliver equitable learner outcomes.

This report is a synthesis of the common issues and themes emerging from these processes. Despite sector upheaval and the government's announcement to end Ako Aotearoa funding, stakeholders consistently emphasised the need for a national body or mechanism to continue advancing these areas. The consultation findings provide guidance for TEO action and a clear signal to the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) of sector-wide priorities.

Common issues and themes across consultation (survey, forums, interviews)

1. Teaching Excellence

- a. **Systemic support and leadership:** Teaching excellence is a whole-of-organisation responsibility. Effective leaders must value, resource, and model high-quality teaching, fostering a culture where teaching is valued alongside research and compliance.
- b. **Learner-centred, culturally responsive practice:** There is strong consensus that teaching excellence must be grounded in learner-centred, inclusive, and culturally responsive approaches. Kaupapa Māori principles and Te Tiriti o Waitangi commitments should be embedded in teaching, leadership, and organisational strategies.
- c. **Resourcing and PLD:** Sustainable investment in professional learning and development (PLD) is a recurring priority (see outcomes of PLD review). Staff need adequate time, funding, and leadership support to develop new pedagogies (such as AI integration, UDL, and equity-focused teaching). Responses highlighted the need for fair employment conditions and the professional recognition of educators.
- d. **Teaching and learning plans:** Recognition and implementation of teaching and learning plans, and the value attached to teaching, vary markedly across subsectors. Many TEOs lack robust plans or misunderstand their purpose, highlighting a need for clearer guidance, exemplars, and national frameworks.
- e. **Barriers:** The key barriers cited include workload pressures, lack of recognition, limited and inconsistent PLD, compliance-driven cultures, and under-resourcing.

2. Collaboration

- a. **Purposeful, inclusive collaboration:** Effective collaboration requires a shared vision, inclusive planning, and strategic leadership. Successful collaboration is built on trust, reduced competition, cross-sector partnerships, and the active inclusion of Māori, Pacific, and priority learner perspectives.
- b. **Structural and systemic barriers:** Competitive funding models, silos between TEOs, IP concerns, and unstable policy environments undermine collaboration. There is a strong call to reduce competition, streamline policies, and invest in structures that make collaboration the norm—not the exception.
- c. **Enablers:** Collaboration flourishes with clear goals, devoted time and resources, shared platforms for resource exchange, strong professional networks, and an explicit mandate from leadership. Dedicated roles or entities to facilitate sector-wide collaboration are viewed as critical.

- d. **Collective professional development:** Opportunities for sector-wide PLD and peer learning communities strengthen collaboration and capability across institutions. Communities of Practice, resource hubs, professional networks, and coordinated convening are consistently valued.

3. Thought Leadership

- a. **Collective and practice-grounded:** Thought leadership is not individual or top-down but collective, context-specific, grounded in teaching practice, and drives tangible change. It must be amplified throughout the organisation and across the sector, not centralised at the top.
- b. **Fearless innovation:** The sector urges for an environment where risk-taking and innovation are supported and rewarded, including in response to technological and societal change (e.g., generative AI, new pedagogical models).
- c. **Evidence-based and inclusive:** Prioritising evidence-based, culturally sustaining, and equity-focused practice is vital. Leaders must be connected to classroom realities and avoid superficial or tokenistic solutions.
- d. **Structural support:** There is a deficit of coordinated sector-wide leadership, with a call for national frameworks, sector advocacy, and recognition of diverse teaching contexts – including formal mechanisms to surface and scale sector-specific innovation.

Consolidated recommendations

Recommendations for all Tertiary Education Organisations

1. Invest in sustainable teaching excellence

- Allocate adequate time, funding, and staffing to support robust, inclusive, and culturally responsive teaching practice.
- Ensure fair employment conditions and recognise teaching as a core professional activity.

2. Strengthen PLD

- Provide consistent, accessible, and context-relevant PLD, with a focus on emerging areas (e.g., AI, Universal Design for Learning, cultural capability, equity) – see PLD review.
- Support staff through structured mentor and induction programmes.

3. Embed cultural responsiveness

- Integrate Kaupapa Māori, Te Tiriti o Waitangi commitments, and Pacific perspectives throughout organisational strategy, leadership, curriculum, and teaching practice.

4. Enable and incentivise sector collaboration

- Minimise structural competition and support shared resource hubs, joint professional networks, and co-design initiatives.
- Create roles or entities dedicated to facilitating collaboration across institutions and with external partners/industry.

5. Foster grounded, courageous thought leadership

- Develop leaders at every level who are attuned to teaching realities, lead innovation, and champion equity and learner success.
- Embed mechanisms for sector-wide voice, advocacy, and collective action.

6. Adopt strategic, evidence-based practice

- Use research, data, and proven models to guide teaching, collaboration, and leadership.
- Regularly review and update teaching and learning plans, focusing on meaningful, measurable outcomes.

Final Recommendations for TEOs, Ako Aotearoa, and TEC

1. **Resourcing and policy:** TEC and TEOs must collaborate to ensure strategic, long-term resourcing for teaching excellence and sector-wide collaboration, including ring-fenced funding for staff PLD and time allocation.
2. **Advocacy and sector voice:** In the absence of centralised, sector-wide leadership (e.g., following Ako Aotearoa defunding), a new or existing entity must take up the role of national advocate and connector, ensuring sector needs and priorities are understood and addressed in government and policy forums.
3. **Frameworks with flexibility:** Co-design national capability frameworks for teaching that provide structure and guidance but enable local adaptation and innovation. Prioritise tools and support for implementation at the organisational level.
4. **Cultural commitments:** Explicitly require and monitor integration of Māori and Pacific approaches throughout teaching, organisational strategy, and collaboration, ensuring this is authentic and not tokenistic.

Guidance for TEC

- Update funding and performance metrics to better reflect teaching quality, collaboration, and learner-centred outcomes – not just compliance or research outputs.
- Prioritise funding and support for collaborative sector platforms, PLD, and innovation, especially those that facilitate Māori and Pacific learner success.
- Ensure sector advocacy and coordination is maintained, supporting entities (or new mechanisms if needed) to champion tertiary teaching and learning.

The consultation demonstrates that teaching excellence, collaboration, and thought leadership remain vital to the health of the tertiary sector. These cannot be left to chance or to isolated institutional initiatives. Sustained leadership, resourcing, and advocacy – whether through Ako Aotearoa or another mechanism – are essential to enable TEOs to thrive and to deliver equitable outcomes for all learners in Aotearoa.

By addressing these systemic, cultural, and resource-focused recommendations, TEOs, Ako Aotearoa, and TEC can cultivate excellence, innovation, and learner success across the tertiary sector in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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