Ako Aotearoa Research and Innovation Agenda Workplan 2025: Contestable Funding Round

Ako

AOTEAROA

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Ako Aotearoa Research and Innovation Plan and Work Programme

Introduction

This plan articulates how the Ako Aotearoa Research and Innovation Agenda (AARIA) is to be operationalised. This programme of work builds from the research programme Ako Aotearoa has had in place since its inception and serves as part of the organisation's wider remit to support tertiary teaching and learning.

National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence Fund's Policy Goals and other published policies set Ako Aotearoa up as a change agent in the tertiary education space. Ako Aotearoa aims to catalyse systems-level change within the tertiary education sector, with the goal of advancing more equitable learner outcomes. invite proposals for innovative, ako-centred research projects that explore potential solutions and enhance support mechanisms for ākonga and kaiako, as well as teaching and learning strategies that contribute to the following objectives:

— facilitate system-wide change across the tertiary education sector that enables a more responsive, flexible, and innovative system to meet the diverse needs of learners and communities. Proposals should contribute to transformational change that supports greater collaboration, adaptability, and alignment with the Tertiary Education Strategy (TES) objectives, ensuring the system works for all New Zealanders.
— ensure equitable outcomes for Māori, Pacific, neurodiverse, and disabled ākonga.
— response to pressing global and local issues such as technological advances (eg: artificial intelligence); online learning; and the needs of learners from low socio-economic and low-income backgrounds.
— improve systems and processes to support best practice tertiary education that focus on whole of organisational leadership and change to deliver the outcomes above, including organisational culture and design, the utilisation of data to support planning and action and review, and the connection between the organisation and its wider partners (such as iwi, industry and community).

One of the ways to achieve the objectives and be a change agent is through a programme of research and innovation that can inform the ways in which tertiary education is conducted. While Ako Aotearoa has a considerable body of research already, it is timely for a future-focussed coherent approach to a research programme. This has Ako Aotearoa working in collaborative ways with vocational and foundation level researchers and educators to develop new knowledge to inform improved ways of teaching and learning in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Research and Innovation

… are iterative processes. While the words are presented as nouns, it might be better to think about them as verbs to convey what people are doing - finding out new things (researching) and trying out new things (innovating). The process of trying out new things and considering whether they work, how and why, in turn generates new knowledge.

The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) (2019, p. 17)[1] describes research as "the generation, gathering or organisation of knowledge … includ[ing] the distinctive 'ways of knowing' that make up Mātauranga Māori, as well as the many different knowledge systems that collectively form global research practice." MBIE goes on to describe innovation as "the process of doing something new. An innovation may be a new or improved product, process, or function" which can lead to new or better ways of doing things with the value of it coming from using and implementing new ideas. Further to this idea MBIE (2019, p. 18) considers innovation from two perspectives – innovation at the frontier which is about introducing new products or ways of doing things; and innovation *behind* the frontier which is, "about adopting ways of doing things that are new to an organisation but are already known to others."

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[1] Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment. (2019). *New Zealand's research, science & innovation strategy: draft for consultation.* Author.

Why research and innovation are important for tertiary educators and ākonga

Research contributes in several ways to educator practice. For example, it underpins professional values, knowledge, and skills; improves theory and practice understanding; helps to explore solutions to issues; and gives educators an informed voice to talk about their practice within their organisations and more widely in their profession.[2]

Research is key to informing the evidence base for the practice of ako. Benseman (2013, p.2) notes that "*research-informed teaching* … consciously draws on systematic inquiry into the teaching and learning process itself".[3] Innovation supports ako by trying out new or different ways of working with ākonga in the Aotearoa context. Researching and innovating in Aotearoa New Zealand contribute to achieving equitable outcomes for all ākonga, but particularly for Māori, Pacific and those who are neurodiverse or have disabilities.

Aims of the research and innovation agenda

Ako Aotearoa's research and innovation programme has three aims:
— to support the tertiary education system and contribute to better tertiary teaching and subsequently better learning outcomes for ākonga
— to share research and innovation findings in ways that support teaching and learning / education and training, as well as supporting the interests of any collaborating organisations / entities
— to provide opportunities for collaborative work and networking.

System knowledge needs

The research and innovation programme is underpinned by the recognition that we need to know what it not known across the education system. While each level of the system wants the same outcomes, each level has different knowledge needs in order to understand the extent to which the system is working. From the stakeholder perspective the high (macro) level is interested in:

— the extent to which the objectives of the TES are being met
— the extent to which the Reform of Vocational Education (RoVE) changes are providing a coherent, seamless learning experience
— the links between wellbeing and educational achievement
— how to achieve equitable outcomes for Māori, Pacific, and disabled ākonga.

The intermediary (meso) level is interested in:
— research to support and inform Te Pūkenga's operating model
— the capability needs of those delivering education and training (i.e. educators, advisors, employers), including a benchmark of the current state to inform the future state
— a pedagogy of equity
— using an equity lens to know more about the conditions for learner success related to teaching and learning; assessment; support services; and data and technology.

At the ground (micro) level, (from the Te Rito reports)[4] ākonga want a range of factors that improve their learning experience. For the research and innovation programme this will mean finding out what best contributes to and supports:

— guidance and enrolment into the most appropriate learning pathways
— the provision of holistic learning environments
— whānau connectedness

[2] Gittner, A., & Harrison, C. (2019). How do you develop research-informed practice? *School Science Review*, 100 (73), 60-68.
[3] Benseman, J. (2013). *Research-informed teaching of adults: a worthy alternative to old habits and hearsay?* Unitec ePress Occasional and Discussion Paper Series 2013/2:23. Unitec ePress. https://hdl.handle.net/10652/2612
[4] See https://xn--tepkenga-szb.ac.nz/our-pathway/learner-journey-and-experience/

- — whānaunga and manaakitanga relationships and connections with staff in TEOs (Tertiary Education Organisations) and employers
- — Māori values and principles
- — Mātauranga Māori embedded in learning programmes
- — Pacific knowledge embedded in learning programmes
- — learning that is flexible, learner-centred, technology-enabled, leveraging the best of digital, recognising prior learning, and aligned to on-the-job tasks
- — skilled and culturally competent educators
- — assessment opportunities that meet their needs
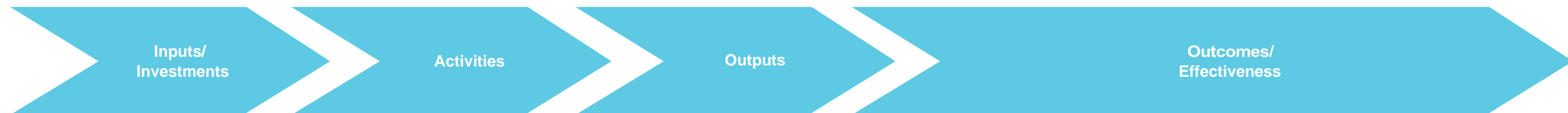- — their voices to be heard.

Programme logic

The programme logic on the following page has been developed to gauge how the research and innovation programme is intended to work, along with the intended outcomes. It serves as a way of summarising the key aspects of the research and innovation programme and is the mechanism for informing monitoring and evaluation tools. The programme logic is informed by the AARIA; Alkema (2012)[5]; and Keesing-Styles (2017)[6].

The scope of work is reliant on Ako Aotearoa having staff with the capacity and capability to support researching educators along with the provision of tools and resources to support research applications (where applicable), research design, and ongoing research methods and practice.

There is also a need to be mindful that making changes to educational practice takes time, and professional learning and support as educators rethink, adapt to and adopt new research-informed ways of working.

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[5] Alkema, A. (2012). *Creating sustainable change to improve outcomes for tertiary learners: a framework for thinking about projects in tertiary education.* Ako Aotearoa. Retrieved July 28, 2023 at https://ako.ac.nz/knowledge-centre/creating-sustainable-change-to-improve-outcomes-for-tertiary-learners/

[6] Keesing-Styles, L. (2017). *Contributing to better tertiary teaching and learning outcomes – the summary: a summary of two reports on the impact of Ako Aotearoa's co-funded projects.* Ako Aotearoa. Retrieved July 28, 2023 at https://ako.ac.nz/knowledge-centre/synthesis-reports/contributing-to-better-tertiary-teaching-and-learning-outcomes/

Inputs/Investments → Activities → Outputs → Outcomes/Effectiveness

Activities: Efficiency

Outputs: Relevance and Equity

Outcomes/Effectiveness: Short-Term | Medium-Term | Longer-Term

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Inputs/Investments

Strategic and operational direction set by:
– Tertiary Education Strategy (TES), including the TES priorities e.g., great education opportunities and outcomes within reach of every learner
– Ako Aotearoa's strategic agenda
– Ako Aotearoa's three-year business plan

Resourcing
– Funding from TEC
– Funding from Tertiary Education Organisations (TEOs)
– Ako Aotearoa staff

Activities — Efficiency

Within Ako Aotearoa
– Planning and project management
– Commissioning research and innovation projects
– Partnering with other organisations on research projects
– Support for research projects
– Dissemination of findings
– Impact evaluation

With TEOs
– Promotion, advice and support related to funding and funding applications
– Provision of support related to research practice
– Quality assurance of research and innovation projects

With educators
– advice and support around research methodologies, including Kaupapa Māori and Pacific methodologies

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Outputs — Relevance and Equity

Within Ako Aotearoa
– AARIA plan and work programme
– Application processes
– Research outputs (e.g., reports, guides, videos)
– Research Community of Practice (CoP)

TEOs have access to
– Information e.g., funding
– Resources to support funding applications and research and innovation projects
– Research outputs (e.g., reports, guides, videos)

Educators have access to
– Research CoP
– PLD opportunities
– Research resources
– Research outputs (e.g., reports, guides, videos)

Outcomes/Effectiveness — Short-Term

TEOs
– Know about and use Ako Aotearoa funding for research
– Identify research and innovation activities required to improve policy, practice, and outcomes for ākonga
– Support research and innovation across their organisation

Project Teams and Educators
– Learn about research practice through PLD opportunities
– Understand how to conduct authentic, culturally appropriate research
– Know about culturally appropriate teaching, learning and support practices

Ākonga
– Receive research-informed teaching, learning and support
– Have a voice in the research process
– Are retained and have an improved/ innovative learning experience
– Māori, Pacific, and those with neurodiversity or disabilities are on the pathway to educational parity
– Aspire to further study and/or employment

Outcomes/Effectiveness — Medium-Term

TEOs
– Share research and innovation across their organisation and with others
– Support PLD opportunities for staff
– Implement research findings

Project Teams and Educators
– Value research resources and participate in PLD and CoPs
– Conduct authentic, culturally appropriate research
– Use research to inform culturally appropriate teaching, learning and support practices

Ākonga
– Receive research-informed teaching, learning and support
– Are listened to in the research process
– Are working towards course and / qualification completion
– Māori, Pacific, and those with neurodiversity or disabilities are on the pathway to educational parity
– Aspire to further study and/or employment

Outcomes/Effectiveness — Longer-Term

TEOs
– Prioritise research PLD opportunities for staff
– Use research to inform policies / organisational change / teaching practice

Project Teams and Educators
– Proactively use research to inform teaching, learning and support practices
– Embed and innovate from research-informed, culturally appropriate teaching, learning and support practices

Ākonga
– Receive research-informed teaching, learning and support
– Are heeded in the research process
– Māori, Pacific, and those with neurodiversity or disabilities achieve educational parity
– Move on to future study and/or employment

Dependencies/Assumptions: Funding, active engagement by TEOs; capability and capacity of leaders and educators; capability and capacity of Ako Aotearoa staff to support the research programme; ākonga, agency, engagement and participation

Work programme: workstreams and phases

The work programme has been divided into workstreams and phases that contain several activities. While responsibility for the work sits with the Programme Manager, Research and Innovation, it is anticipated that the work will be shared across Ako Aotearoa staff, especially in relation to Workstream One.

Workstream One: Implementing and Supporting Ako Aotearoa 2025 Funding Priorities

This workstream has three phases. The first deals with deciding on the research priorities, followed by getting projects underway and then supporting teams as they progress through their research and innovation projects in 2025.

Phase One: Determining the 2025 research and innovation projects (November 2024)

In July 2023, the Programme Manager, Research and Innovation has created an internal advisory group called AARIA Programme Team (APT) including:
— A representative of Māori
— A representative of Pacific
— A representative from the Sectors Services Managers
— A representative from the Manako Programme
— A representative of Research Impacts and Dissemination
— A representative of Quality Teaching
— Programme Manager, Research and Innovation (Chair)

Ako Aotearoa staff have suggested a list of potential research and innovation topics as a way to get a programme of research and innovation immediately underway. Based on the topics, TES, the Board's instruction, and suggestions from strategic partners in the tertiary sector, the APT proposed "broader priorities" and "targeted priorities" for 2025 AARIA research and innovation projects (**AARIA Priorities Guide 2025**, attached at the end of this document).

"Broader priorities" are high-level funding priorities that bring together the strategic aims of Ako Aotearoa. "Targeted priorities" identify specific areas of research, learning, and teaching provision that we want to see growth or change in. These priorities are more specific and focus on what provision we are seeking in 2025. The selected priorities will go for external sign off by the Board.

Phase Two: Getting the research and innovation programme underway (March 2025)
An open, contestable approach will be adopted to initiate research projects, aiming to engage a broader range of stakeholders, foster a competitive funding environment, and attract new participants for action research and innovation projects. TEO will submit research plans, which will undergo a rigorous evaluation process by the AARIA Review Panel, comprising APT members and external research experts. The evaluation will utilise a scoring sheet with over 30 criteria to ensure objective, unbiased results and select the most outstanding research proposals.

To identify outstanding research plans received from the contestable round, a three-stage process will be used. This process is review, shortlist, and a panel to make the final decisions. The people involved in this process will have relevant educational and cultural expertise.

Stage 1 - Review
— Each application will go to three reviewers who will score on the criteria and provide overall comments. Reviewers will be from the APT and independent subject experts who have relevant research expertise.

Stage 2 - Shortlist
— The average of the three reviewer scores for each application will be calculated, and a ranked list will be created based on these averages, from highest to lowest. The APT will review this list and shortlist the top ten applications.

Stage 3 – Panel
— A ten-person panel, including the APT members and independent subject experts, will meet to discuss and review the shortlists to recommend the applications for AARIA Fund. The meetings will be in two or three online sessions. The first meeting will discuss the initial shortlist, the process, and any initial questions. The second, and if needed, a third meeting will identify and recommend the applications for AARIA Fund.
— The panel will read the reviewer comments and all the shortlisted nominations. They could read some non-shortlisted nominations too. Each member of the panel will present an outline to the rest of the panel on the applications and recommend if they should be funded by AARIA. There will be three nominations that each pair will present to the Panel. From this process a list of outstanding applications will emerge that will be finalised with further discussion.
— The number of outstanding applications will fit within the fund of $400,000. We anticipate this would result in approximately five new research projects.

Phase Three: Supporting the research and innovation projects (August 2025)
Once projects are up and running, which may take some input or support from Ako Aotearoa staff in terms of design and methodologies, there is an expectation of milestone reporting by teams for quality assurance purposes. This will be combined with regular conversations with Ako Aotearoa staff on progress and research practice.

Risks and mitigation for Workstream One

Risk One

The use of the contestable approach through a call for proposals rather than the commissioning approach will come as a surprise to the sector.

Mitigation One
Communications to the sector about AARIA along with the rationale for the approach. The contestable round will reach wider stakeholders and provide greater flexibility. Contestable approach is generally more competitive. Therefore, Ako Aotearoa can focus on excellence, transformational research with potential for immediate impact on the sector. Ako Aotearoa also hope to commission research through contacts of the wider Ako Aotearoa team has with strategic partners and to build from previous research projects.

Risk Two
Ako Aotearoa will receive too many proposals from the sector and may be unable to assess them within the proposed timeframe.

Mitigation Two

Applicant's eligibility will be narrowed to TEO employees only. TEO is defined by Tertiary Education Commission [LINK]. Sole traders, independent research contractors, and other groups who do not belong to a TEO is unable to apply for the contestable round.

Research and related activities are required to completely focus on tertiary education. Proposals targeting on the compulsory sector (eg: secondary schools) are not eligible.
Changes to the internal selection process: 1. Each proposal will go to three reviewers (down from seven compared to 2023 AARIA Round) who will score on the criteria and provide overall comments. 2. After the initial review, ten applications will be shortlisted for the final seven-person panel meeting (previously, there was no shortlisting process).

Risk Three

The perception that selected projects have been determined by Ako Aotearoa with little or no consultation with the sector.

Mitigation Three

Projects will be signed off by an independent group: the Board. The rationale for each of the proposed projects align with the TES.

Workstream Two: Operationalising AARIA

The second work stream takes a more strategic approach than Workstream One and looks to what operationalising the AARIA will look like for 2025.

Phase One: Establishing the AARIA processes and messaging (June 2025)

There are several activities required to set up the ways in which the research and innovation agenda will work. This will set the ways of working and help tell the story about where Ako Aotearoa is heading with the work. The following activities are proposed for 2025:

— Finding out (through desktop research, conversations, kōrero, talanoa) what teaching and learning research is currently underway in subsidiaries of TEOs.
— Testing the extent to which the research priorities set down in AARIA are the "right" priorities
— Establishing the gaps and opportunities that exist for the future work programme
— Determining the budget and processes to be used for commissioning research or innovation proposals or for contestable methodologies
— Reviewing the current tools, e.g., funding procedures and guidelines (2019); milestones reporting templates (2023); research dissemination templates (2023); monitoring and evaluation tools (2023)

Phase Two: Designing the research and innovation programme (July 2025)

This phase sees the design of the research and innovation programme for 2025 and moving it into the business-as-usual state. The activities in Phase One of this workstream and the research projects in Workstream One, will contribute to the thinking and design.

The overall mix will be determined by:
— the findings from Phase One
— the AARIA aim of supporting the tertiary education system and contributing to better tertiary teaching and subsequently better learning outcomes for ākonga/students
— taking note of the TES priorities
— taking note of educator capability and the ways in research and innovation support and develop this
— taking note of the need for equitable outcomes for ākonga who are Māori, Pacific, neurodiverse or have disabilities.

This work will be undertaken in consultation with the sector through a series of hui. The intention is to build from established relationships and develop new ones in order to look for partnership approaches that lead to collaborative research and innovation opportunities. Potential organisations include:
— Te Pūkenga who have a network of researchers interested in looking closely at the ākonga success factors
— Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga (NPM) and building on the MoU, particularly in relation to their theme Mauri Ora (human flourishing)
— Iwi Māori who are post-treaty settlement and have an education and training strategy
— Te Taumata Aronui and the three wānanga
— the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER),
— the New Zealand Work Research Institute (NZWRI)
— iwi-based research organisations, for example Waikato-Tainui College for Research and Development.
— Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVES) - ConCoVE in the construction sector, and Food and Fibre in the primary sector and the Workforce Development Councils (WDCs).

Risk and mitigation for Workstream
Two Risk One
The ongoing restructuring process of Te Pūkenga and WDCs has created uncertainty in vocational tertiary organisations. There may be little appetite for conversations about potential research. In addition, partnership organisations may see little value in what AARIA has to offer them and their work programmes.

Mitigation One
Press forward with the planned hui for those who are interested and promote the idea of a coherent programme of research in the teaching and learning space. With the "Broader Priorities" in Funding Priorities, especially "Auaha (Innovation)", AARIA work will directly contribute to Te Pūkenga restructuring process, and improve Ako Aotearoa's strategic relationship with Te Pūkenga.

Workstream Three: Supporting the research and innovation programme

Key to a successful research programme is support for organisations and educating researchers. A range of supports are envisaged with activities taking place.

— Day-to-day support that is provided by Ako Aotearoa staff to project teams e.g., design / methodological input (where required); quality assurance through milestone feedback.
— The establishment of an online community of practice for educators who are interested in starting on research or innovation projects.
— The establishment of professional development opportunities for researching educators or educators who are interested in starting on research or innovation projects.
— Resources, e.g., readings, creating sustainable change to improve outcomes for tertiary learners.

In addition, the Impact Evaluation Framework and processes will be reviewed to align them with the AARIA programme logic.

Workstream Four: Promoting research and innovative practice

As noted in the introduction, research is important for getting educators to rethink their practice and explore ways of changing it to better meet ākonga needs. However, exploring innovative ideas, incorporating, and embedding them into practice takes time. As with Workstream Three, these activities will take place from 2025 onwards.

Ako Aotearoa's role in promotion is to make the research available and accessible by building from what is already done. This will happen through socialisation during research and innovation projects, both within organisations and through communities of practice. It will also happen through active dissemination after projects in the form of, for example, reports (short, pithy, plain language), summary reports, fact sheets, webinars, good practice guides (how to put the research into action), videos, and through communities of practice.

Workstream Five: Evaluating Impact

Evaluation of the impact of the research and innovation programme is important to determine the extent to which Ako Aotearoa funded projects are meeting the knowledge needs of the sector and achieving the outcomes set out in the programme logic. However, there is a need to be mindful that educational innovation takes time to translate to practice and subsequently to outcomes for ākonga.

Ako Aotearoa has a well-established impact evaluation process based around four rubrics: reach; impact on learners; impact on teaching professionals; and impact on the external environment and stakeholders. These will be reviewed as part of Workstream Three. The framework will continue to be used to inform conversations with project teams (during and after projects). The data gathered will be used to inform the extent to which we can say that research and innovation funding is impacting on sector knowledge and practice.

Ako Aotearoa Research and Innovation Agenda (AARIA) Priorities Guide 2025

November 2024

The AARIA Programme Team would like to propose the "broader priorities" and "targeted priorities" as below. "Broader priorities" are high-level funding priorities that bring together the strategic aims of Ako Aotearoa. "Targeted priorities" identify specific areas of research, learning, and teaching provision that we want to see growth or change in. These priorities are more specific and focus on what provision we are seeking in the year ahead.

We expect all applicants to align their research proposals with **all of our four broader priorities**, and **at least with one of our targeted priorities**, which are a key factor in our selection criteria. We encourage combining several targeted priorities into one research project.

We encourage combining several targeted priorities into one research project.

Broader Priorities:

1. **Auaha (Innovation):** Driving system-level transformation in tertiary education with a learner-centred approach, addressing the evolving needs of ākonga and the broader education system. This includes the integration of technological developments (e.g., Artificial Intelligence), innovative and flexible programmes, and support for initiatives such as Te Pūkenga, the Reform of Vocational Education (RoVE), and work-based learning.
2. **Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Treaty of Waitangi):** Honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi through tertiary education, including Te Reo provision, Kaupapa Māori education, Mātauranga Māori provision.
3. **Ōritetanga (Equity):** Achieving system-wide equity for all ākonga, including Māori, Pacific, neurodiverse, disabled, youth, and learners from low-income backgrounds.
4. **Hua Akoranga (Learner Outcomes):** Education and training that delivers for all learners, including supporting work readiness of all learners, online and distance learning options meets the needs of all learners, providing learning opportunities for people who wish to change careers.

Targeted Priorities:

Categories	Targeted Priorities
Education	Neurodiversity
	Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Treaty of Waitangi)
	Mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge)
	Pacific Cultures
	Leadership of Teaching
Technology	Artificial Intelligence
	Information Technology