Professional learning and development in Aotearoa New Zealand's tertiary education sector

September 2025

A strategic review by Ako Aotearoa –
Summary for Tertiary Education Organisations

Report prepared for Ako Aotearoa by
Dr Linda Keesing-Styles and Jane Terrell

Ako
AOTEAROA

Foreword

Tēnā koutou katoa

In the latter half of 2024 Ako Aotearoa initiated a strategic review of professional learning and development (PLD) provision and needs in the tertiary education sector. The core purpose was to review the existing Ako Aotearoa PLD programmes and provision and, by mid-2025, develop a new delivery model that more closely matched the immediate needs and priorities of our very diverse tertiary education landscape. It was our ambition that a new model would be more targeted, efficient, flexible, and accessible, and would result in increased participation to improve experiences and outcomes for ākonga across the sector.

At Ako Aotearoa, we were very aware that, while many of our offerings were well regarded and utilised, our existing provision was not sufficiently current, targeted, or visible to many in the sector. Commissioning a strategic, independent review, based on the needs of the sector, led to the completion of a comprehensive report provided in August 2025.

In May 2025, the government announced the defunding of Ako Aotearoa. It would have been tempting to cease work on this project. However, the value of the emerging report, the status of PLD for kaiako across diverse contexts and organisations, and the critical importance of capability development in the tertiary sector, confirmed the need to complete this very timely work.

The full report provided to Ako Aotearoa is a comprehensive coverage of the sector voice relating to capability development needs, aspirations, and barriers. It also contains a summary of contemporary literature on best practice in the provision of PLD and an overview of how other organisations, national and international, currently approach kaiako capability development in tertiary education.

We are very grateful to Dr Linda Keesing-Styles and Jane Terrell for undertaking this work and providing the sector with clear, current information on the status of PLD and the urgent need to attend to issues of capability development. Their report to us was unflinching in identifying what is not working and what needs to happen to make PLD more aligned with the needs of ākonga, kaiako, tertiary education organisations, and the organisations that employ tertiary education graduates.

Thanks also go to the participants in the focus groups, interviews, and survey who provided detailed and invaluable feedback on the existing status of PLD and indications of what new approaches might be needed.

The attached report is a summary of the key findings of the review and TEOs are encouraged to consider its contents and recommendations. A copy will be provided also to the Tertiary Education Commission.

Ngā mihi

Corrina Gestro-Best
Director, Ako Aotearoa

Executive Summary

This report from Ako Aotearoa provides a sector-level summary of professional learning and development (PLD) needs, challenges, and opportunities for tertiary education organisations (TEOs) in Aotearoa New Zealand. It draws on a consultation process involving 20 organisations through interviews and focus groups, followed by a sector-wide survey of 57 individuals representing 41 selected TEOs including universities, ngā whare wānanga, ITPs, PTEs, GTEs, ITOs, ACE, a WDC and a CoVE (a 60% response rate). A further review of contemporary literature about tertiary PLD, and comparable national and international organisations providing PLD, informed the findings.

The consultation identified nine pressing PLD needs for kaiako. Of these, three were consistently rated as currently most critical:

— **AI integration and ethical use** – identified by 67% of survey respondents as the top priority.

— **Assessment and learning design** – ranked in the top three by 51% of respondents.

— **Culturally responsive and inclusive teaching** – ranked in the top three by 40% of respondents.

Barriers to PLD provision and uptake are significant:

— **Workload and time** were cited as the most limiting factor by 86% of respondents.

— **Insufficient in-house PLD capacity** was reported by 63% of respondents.

— **Inadequate funding for participation** was noted by 56%.

Future possibilities for PLD provision include:

— **Targeting** PLD more specifically to audience and sub-sector needs

— Focusing on the development of more collaborative, self-sustaining **communities of practice**

— **Brokering** sector experts to provide targeted PLD

— **Curating** information on key sector needs including one-stop webpages

The withdrawal of government funding for Ako Aotearoa leaves a major gap in coordinated national PLD support. TEOs now hold primary responsibility for advancing educator capability, notwithstanding most organisations reporting they are under-resourced to do so.

The recommendations at the end of this report provide guidance for organisational leaders seeking to address these challenges.

Introduction and context

Professional learning and development (PLD) is central to maintaining teaching excellence, equity of learner outcomes, and future readiness in the tertiary sector. PLD enables educators to adapt to new technologies, respond to learner diversity, and sustain culturally responsive and inclusive practices.

This project was commissioned to review PLD needs and provision across the sector. While initially focused on supporting Ako Aotearoa's PLD programme renewal, its findings now hold even greater significance as TEOs must consider how to address PLD needs without national coordination or resourcing.

The project was carried out in three phases:

1. **Sector focus groups and interviews** – engaging with universities, institutes of technology and polytechnics (ITPs), private training establishments (PTEs), ngā whare wānanga, government training enterprises (GTEs), industry training organisations (ITOs), Centres of Vocational Excellence (CoVEs), Workforce Development Councils (WDCs), and Adult and Community Education (ACE).

2. **Sector survey and analysis** – confirming and extending focus group findings.

3. **Researching effective PLD models** – reviewing international and local evidence on what works for successful PLD.

Consultation Process

Phase 1: Focus groups and interviews

Twenty diverse organisations were consulted, providing deep-level insights into organisational capability and educator needs. Participants were largely those who had immediate knowledge of and/or responsibility for kaiako capability development. Participants consistently emphasised a mix of urgent new issues (e.g. AI) and enduring challenges (e.g. assessment and curriculum design).

Phase 2: Survey

Consultation findings were analysed and a sector survey was designed to test the findings of the consultation.

— Invitations sent: 94 individuals representing 82 TEOs.

— Responses: 57 individuals from 41 organisations (60% response rate).

— Representation: Universities, ITPs, PTEs, ngā whare wānanga, GTEs, ITOs, CoVEs, ACE, and WDCs. 7% of respondents identified as Māori; none identified as Pacific.

— Survey covered PLD needs of kaiako, organisational capacity, and future approaches.

Phase 3: Research and benchmarking

— Literature review of effective PLD models emphasised cultural relevance, equity, and long-term engagement.

— Scans of comparable organisations confirmed the importance of nationally coordinated approaches, even if locally delivered.

Findings: PLD needs of kaiako

Nine pressing PLD needs were identified through consultation and affirmed by the survey. These are common across TEO types.

Key Issue	Detail
A. AI integration and ethical use	Urgent need for guidance on teaching, learning, and assessment practices. Strong demand across all TEO types. 67% of respondents rated this as their most critical issue.
B. Assessment and learning design	Demand for more authentic, practice-based, innovative, and feedback-rich approaches. 51% of respondents ranked this in their top three priorities.
C. Culturally responsive and inclusive teaching	Focus on embedding mātauranga Māori, Pacific pedagogies, and practices for international learners. 40% of respondents ranked this in their top three priorities
D. Digital literacy	Support required across a wide range of educator skill levels, from basic to advanced.
E. Evidence-based tips and strategies	Desire for immediately usable practices that improve learner outcomes.
F. Learning and curriculum design	Including constructive alignment and universal design for learning.
G. Managing challenging learner behaviours	Particularly in relation to neurodiversity, mental health, and preparedness.
H. Working with priority learners	Approaches tailored to Māori, Pacific, and international learners.
I. Pastoral care as part of the learning process	Supporting learners holistically.

Across the nine areas, survey agreement levels exceeded 80%, confirming wide recognition of their importance. The chart below (Chart 1) records responses by number showing these levels of agreement. 'Managing challenging learner behaviours', though recording the lowest rate of agreement, was seen as an issue in a wide range of TEO types.

Your colleagues across the tertiary education sector say the topics below are the most pressing PLD needs for kaiako. In your context, do you agree or disagree? Feel free to add comments below.

Chart 1: Most pressing PLD needs

KEY

A. Using **generative AI** effectively for teaching and/or learning practice including assessment.
B. **Digital literacy** and ways to use it more effectively for learning.
C. Evidence-based **tips and strategies** that can easily be implemented for effective teaching and learning and improved learner outcomes.
D. Developing **cultural capability** and responsiveness and ways to implement it effectively.
E. More effective approaches to **assessment,** including authenticity of learner work, practice-based, innovative, and improved marking and feedback.
F. Learning and curriculum **design** – how to better plan courses and learning events (including constructive alignment and universal design for learning).
G. Managing **challenging learner behaviours** in learning contexts.
H. Working effectively with **priority learners** for improved learning experiences and outcomes.
I. Ways to include **pastoral care** as part of the learning process.

Findings: Organisational capacity and barriers

The consultation highlighted systemic challenges for organisations in providing and supporting PLD:

— **Capacity:** 63% of survey respondents reported insufficient in-house capability to provide PLD. Few organisations retain dedicated teaching and learning support teams.

— **Funding:** 56% indicated inadequate funding for kaiako participation in PLD, though differences by organisation suggest this often reflects prioritisation decisions.

— **Workload/time:** The single most significant barrier, cited by 86% of respondents. Particularly difficult for part-time and contract kaiako, whose PLD is often unfunded.
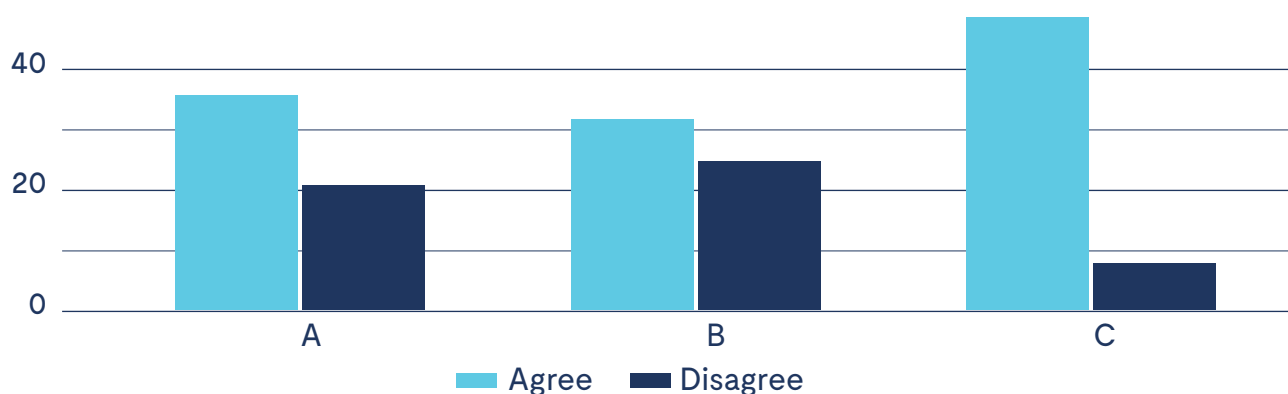

Chart 2: Organisational capacity and barriers for PLD provision

KEY
A. There is inadequate organisational/centralised funding for staff who **provide** PLD opportunities for our kaiako.
B. There is inadequate organisational/department funding for our kaiako to **participate** in PLD.
C. **Workload and/or other time constraints** make it difficult for our kaiako to prioritise for PLD participation.

Respondents in the survey were also asked which of these issues is the ONE challenge that most limits your kaiako participation in PLD. Chart 3 provides the clear responses highlighting the key impact of workload and other time constraints on PLD participation.

KEY

■ There is **inadequate organisational/centralised funding** for staff who provide PLD opportunities for our kaiako.

■ There is **inadequate organisational/department funding** for our kaiako to participate in PLD.

■ **Workload and/or other time constraints** make it difficult for our kaiako to prioritise for PLD participation.
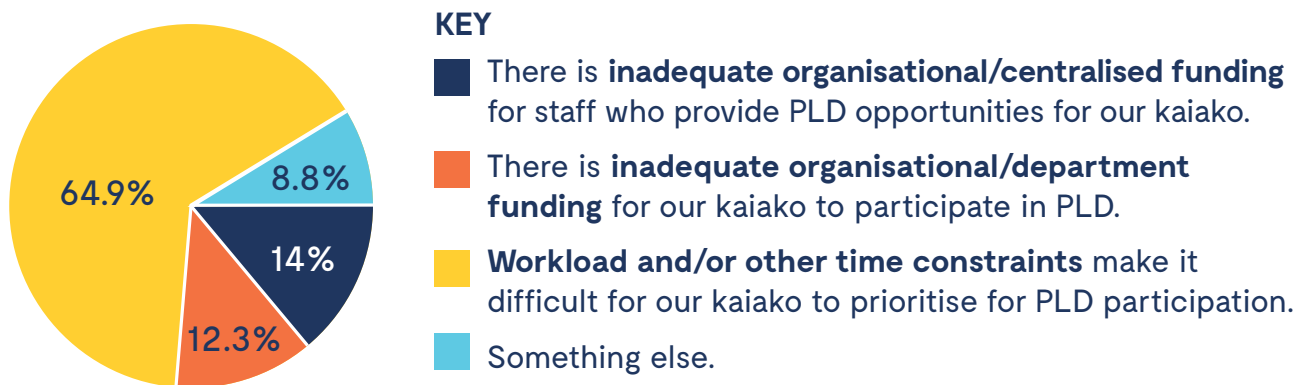
■ Something else.

Chart 3: Main challenge impacting PLD participation

Focus groups confirmed that while some organisations have well-resourced PLD systems, most struggle with fragmented provision and under-investment.

While there are some variations across regions or TEO types, these issues of capacity, capability and time constraints are common across most respondents and organisations.

Findings: Future approaches to PLD

Sector leaders and educators expressed strong support for new approaches to PLD that are more relevant, flexible, and sustainable. These include:

— 91% want PLD tailored to sub-sector needs and educator experience levels.

— 91% support brokerage models where sector experts deliver timely PLD.

— 88% favour linking PLD explicitly to qualifications, recognition, or regulatory requirements.

— 82% support a robust quality assurance framework for PLD.

— In terms of Ako Aotearoa, a subscription system was not strongly favoured.

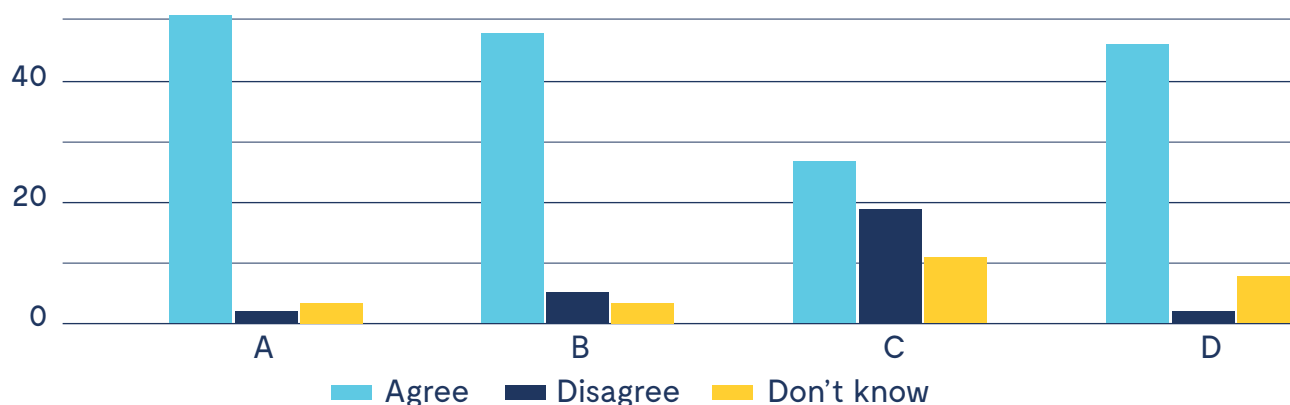The following chart maps some of these key issues.

Chart 4: Future approaches to PLD

KEY
A. Act as a broker to engage sector experts with current expertise to provide timely PLD for key sector needs.
B. Curate information on key sector needs and provide 'one-stop' web pages with links, videos, resources, contacts, etc., for current key sector needs.
C. Consider a subscription approach with a set of high-worth PLD offerings.
D. Implement a robust quality assurance framework, ensuring consistently high standards across all PLD offerings.

Preferred delivery modes emphasise face-to-face and blended formats, valuing depth, interaction, and relational learning. Peer-led, in-house, and context-specific PLD is widely preferred over generic or disconnected offerings.

Final Recommendations for TEOs

The following recommendations are included verbatim from the full report to Ako Aotearoa. They provide a roadmap for tertiary education organisations to address PLD needs in the absence of national funding.

Independent of funding from Ako Aotearoa, these recommendations are designed for TEOs supporting PLD provision, including universities, ngā whare wānanga, ITPs, PTEs and ITOs.

They focus on **practical implementation, organisational priorities,** and **how TEOs can lead and benefit from enhanced PLD.**

1. Focus on priority areas: currently AI, assessment, and cultural capability

These are not just "hot topics" — they're critical capability gaps affecting all parts of teaching and learning. Sector-wide, they were ranked as top needs. In order to improve learner outcomes, and achieve academic integrity and alignment with Te Tiriti o Waitangi and TEC priorities, TEOs could:

— Conduct internal audits of readiness and capability in these three areas

— Integrate these topics into organisational PLD calendars and team goals

— Partner with Māori, Pacific, and disabled learner advocates to embed inclusive approaches

2. Collaborate on a shared PLD ecosystem and resource hub

Most TEOs lack capacity to "do it all" in-house. A shared, open-access resource hub offers tools, exemplars, and community-generated materials to reduce duplication and boost impact. To reduce development workload, provide access to best practice, and facilitate sector collaboration, TEOs could:

— Contribute high-quality, adaptable resources (e.g. assessment templates, video exemplars)

— Nominate staff to participate in co-design or peer review panels

— Access curated tools, communities of practice, and PLD events through a national hub

3. Build internal PLD infrastructure and strategic alignment

Time, staffing, and funding are major barriers, yet effective PLD is key to quality assurance, compliance, and innovation. Prioritising it internally pays dividends. Greater uptake, better staff engagement, and alignment with TEC expectations and quality assurance systems are potential benefits if TEOs:

— Assign responsibility for PLD strategy and delivery to a senior leader

— Create or refresh a PLD framework aligned with teaching and learning goals

— Apply for funding or resource sharing partnerships to scale internal delivery

4. Choose delivery methods that maximise impact

Face-to-face or live online learning is consistently rated as most effective by kaiako. Poor-quality asynchronous content can actually reduce engagement. Deeper learning, better knowledge transfer, and improved team capability could result if TEOs:

— Plan for high-engagement, relational PLD (e.g. workshops, peer discussion, scenario-based practice)

— Use asynchronous options only for basic or foundational content, with clear guidance and high production values

— Support teams to reflect together — not just attend in isolation

5. Tailor PLD to your people — and link to recognition mechanisms

Generic PLD rarely sticks. Tailored content based on role, sector, and career stage improves engagement and performance. Increased relevance, improved staff retention, and clearer career progression are potential benefits if TEOs:

— Profile internal PLD needs by function (e.g. tutors, academic leaders, support staff)

— Tailor delivery using contextualised examples, scenarios, and language

— Align PLD to internal and external recognition mechanisms (e.g. performance development plans, micro-credentials, awards)

6. Build and sustain peer-led learning networks

Kaiako prefer learning from trusted colleagues. Peer mentoring, communities of practice, and knowledge-sharing events are low-cost, high-impact options. Stronger staff culture, distributed leadership, and sustained development over time are potential benefits if TEOs:

— Set up or support team-based mentoring and peer coaching

— Recognise PLD leaders and "champions" internally

— Embed reflective practice and inquiry into regular teaching team meetings

7. Make PLD visible, strategic, and high value

Staff uptake is often low due to lack of visibility, poor communication, or doubts about value. Clarity, relevance and impact tracking matter. Higher uptake, improved staff satisfaction, more return on PLD investment are potential benefits if TEOs:

— Communicate PLD opportunities clearly and early, linked to team and programme goals

— Ensure each offering includes intended outcomes, audience, and practical applications

— Review and evaluate PLD sessions for relevance, effectiveness and impact on learner outcomes

Case Study

The following Case Study of recent Ako Aotearoa practice powerfully illustrates the efficacy of these recommendations for TEOs, and one way in which they can be used as a road map for future PLD:

Case Study illustrating Recommendations for TEOs

Ako Aotearoa responded promptly to Sector Survey findings we presented in March 2025 revealing a strong call for PLD around AI (see Findings). Acting rapidly with **focus on this priority area** (Recommendation 1), in April 2025 funding for a six-day project over three weeks was provided. This enabled expert contractors Graeme Smith and Chris Smiley to create a **shared, open-access resource hub** (Recommendation 2), in the form of an Ako Aotearoa-hosted AI landing page, web resources and a custom GPT tool.

We **collaborated** with a wide range of sector experts (Recommendations 2 and 6) and then collated and curated recommended websites, accessible scholarly articles and other credible resources, developed public-facing PDF resources, and designed a sector-facing custom GPT titled "AIHOA". These were hosted in an easily accessible one-stop Ako Aotearoa webpage.

The webpage was launched on 18 June in an **interactive, one hour lunchtime online seminar** (Recommendation 4), billed as the "Launch of AI-powered support for tertiary educators". Over 300 tertiary educators registered, and close to 200 attended – representing the entire range of TEOs.

Evaluations (Recommendation 7) indicated over 90% affirmation of the seminar as encouraging and relevant, firm intention to use the resources, and confidence to take the next steps in the GenAI journey.

Typical comments included:
— "I feel much more informed about the potential of using AI to support ākonga and kaiako in our Aotearoa context" (ITP)
— "A NZ education specific AI tool is just what the sector needed – congratulations" (WDC)
— "This is exactly the innovation and forward thinking we need in tertiary education" (ITP)

And useful suggestions for future such PLD were garnered, including:
— "I see strong value in offering such sessions to support less experienced educators (and) suggest considering the inclusion of more advanced-level workshops in future … co-facilitated by educators with deeper expertise in AI. This could cater to a broader range of participants and help build capability across different experience levels." (ITP) (Recommendation 6)

Conclusion

The consultation process has provided clear evidence of the professional learning and development needs currently facing Aotearoa's tertiary education sector. The most pressing issues – AI, assessment, and cultural capability – reflect both global trends and local imperatives for equity and excellence.

With the withdrawal of government funding for Ako Aotearoa, TEOs now hold primary responsibility for addressing these needs. Strong leadership, collaboration, and investment in educator capability are essential to ensure the sector can adapt to rapid technological change, support diverse learners, and sustain high-quality teaching and learning.

In summary, effective PLD is a strategic lever for learner success, equity, innovation, and staff wellbeing.

The recommendations outlined in this report provide a roadmap for organisations to strengthen PLD provision, prioritise equity and responsiveness, and position their educators – and learners – for success.

Effective PLD is not just about teaching improvement — **it's a strategic lever for learner success, equity, innovation, and staff wellbeing.** TEOs can lead by:

— Aligning PLD to institutional strategy
— Building relational and reflective cultures
— Contributing to and benefiting from sector-wide infrastructure