

## **Introduction**

1. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft *Tertiary Education Strategy 2014-2019*.
2. Ako Aotearoa: The National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence is an independent organisation funded by the government and contributions from the tertiary education sector, to support the best possible outcomes for tertiary learners. Our focus lies across the entire tertiary education system, from postgraduate research degrees to fundamental skills and ‘second-chance’ learning. Our mission is not simply to support the best possible ‘teaching’, but to enable practitioners and organisations to create the best possible *outcomes* for learners. This includes providing professional development, funding use-focused research, and providing strategic leadership on issues related to tertiary teaching and learning.
3. As Ako Aotearoa’s role is to promote good quality teaching outcomes for tertiary learners, our comments on the draft strategy relate primarily to those that intersect with teaching and learning. However, we also touch on some other relevant points when appropriate.

## **General Comments**

4. In broad terms, Ako Aotearoa welcomes the strong theme throughout this draft strategy of increasing engagement between the tertiary education system and wider New Zealand society. A good quality tertiary system is one that is linked with a range of industry, community, and other partners, and both responds to their current needs and drives their future development.<sup>1</sup>

### ***The context of tertiary education is ill-defined***

5. Having said this, we have strong concerns with the way vocational education is framed as being at a level below higher education (p20). While much vocational education is at levels 3 to 6, much ‘higher’ education is vocationally-focused.<sup>2</sup> One of the drivers for work on *Vocational Pathways* has been to enhance the status of vocational subjects in schools. The opening sub-section on ‘Delivering the Strategy’ can easily be read as undermining this objective.
6. Given this context, the table on p21 creates a considerable ambiguity around the role of ITPs. There needs to be an explicit recognition that a third of the work undertaken by ITPs is degree-level higher education with a vocational focus.

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<sup>1</sup> This is often referred to as a ‘skills ecosystem’; see, for example Buchanan *et al.* (2001) *Beyond flexibility: skills and work in the future*; Finegold (1999) *Creating self-sustaining, high-skill ecosystems*; Hall and Lansbury (2006) *Skills in Australia: Towards workforce development and sustainable skill ecosystems*.

<sup>2</sup> It should also be noted that some vocational education takes place at level 2.

7. Similarly, the draft strategy does not recognise the role that many PTEs play in degree-level education, and underplays the role of Adult and Community Education providers in achieving good quality outcomes for learners, including supporting lifelong education pathways and linking education to community wellbeing and development.
8. Also with regard to context, while the 'International Context' section (p3) identifies technological change as a critical consideration for tertiary education providers, there is no statement of strategic intent in this area. As technological infrastructure is an integral component of learning infrastructure, this will be a strategic priority for most, if not all, TEOs. It is therefore important that the government has an explicit position on supporting both the availability of high quality ICT, and effective use of it to enhance outcomes for learners. This includes cooperation between TEOs to develop shared systems and digital resources.
9. This is one dimension of the draft strategy seeming to have a strong focus on the 'present' rather than considering the strategic development of the tertiary education system. For example, there is active debate between TEOs, employers and government about future skills required in an innovative and entrepreneurial economy, but the draft strategy mentions this only obliquely (by referring to 'long term skill needs'). Similarly, 'Innovation' is discussed only in the context of applying and commercialising research to support economic growth. There is little emphasis on encouraging innovation across the tertiary system as a whole (for example, innovative modes of delivery or collaborative arrangements).

#### **Reduced focus on learners**

10. In broad terms, we support the stated intention that this strategy will focus on outcomes from tertiary education. We are, however, concerned that this has apparently led to a reduced prominence of learners in the strategy. The fundamental characteristic of a high-quality, high-performing tertiary education system is that it enables all learners to meet their aspirations. As it stands, however, the dominant indicators of success related to learners are employment outcomes and increased literacy and numeracy.<sup>3</sup>
11. This relatively narrow focus on employment outcomes ignores the point that different learners require more than simply 'a job' from their education. Thinking strategically about investment in tertiary education should be based on information about outcomes, but these must be more sophisticated than simple income premia or placement rates. Investment decisions need to include a focus on other types of outcomes: progression to higher study, increases in overall wellbeing etc. Key to this is ensuring that programmes and qualifications are linked to clearly-defined purposes, and evaluated in terms of those purposes and the outcomes that learners are seeking.
12. For example, the only discussion of better-informed student decision-making sits under the *Delivering Skills for Industry* priority, and consists of students – amongst others – making greater use of employment outcome information. A positive outcome for a learner, however, is making use of a variety of information to understand what career path best suits them. This certainly includes employment

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<sup>3</sup> The primary exception to this is Māori and Pacific learners, where the draft strategy includes improved qualification completion and progression for both groups of learners, and for Māori learners, study and research opportunities that engage them as Māori. It is worth noting here, that qualification completion rates are better thought of as outputs rather than outcomes.

outcome information, but it also includes developing awareness of their own skills and values, and being able to effectively make decisions on the basis of this.<sup>4</sup>

13. We believe that this lack of focus on learners could be easily remedied through reframing strategic priority 1 as discussed in paragraphs 21 to 23.

### ***The importance of transitions and information***

14. We are also disappointed at the lack of prominence given to issues around 'transition'. Although it is touched on at various points – particularly as an intervention for at risk young people under priority 2 – we believe that ensuring effective transition into and progression through the tertiary education system should be more explicitly highlighted in the strategy. This includes a variety of aspects, such as:
  - Better collaboration and/or integration between tertiary and secondary education sectors.
  - Young people are able to develop effective career management competencies.
  - Ensuring that qualifications and programmes are 'purposeful'.<sup>5</sup>
  - Good systems exist for supporting learners' transition into tertiary education, particularly for those who have little prior educational success.
15. These dimensions are not only relevant for at-risk youth but for all learners, irrespective of their specific pathway or level of study.
16. We also believe that the strategy could be strengthened by discussing the role of appropriate information and data – both collecting the most appropriate data and using it in an appropriate way. This issue is raised with regard to better information about employment outcomes, which we agree is an important area where good data is needed. However, having a good-quality system requires a strong information base across many aspects of tertiary education. These include:
  - Young people's decision-making processes around study and careers.<sup>6</sup>
  - The incentives to engage and/or disengage in tertiary education.
  - Effective systems for evaluating learner outcomes (including but not confined to education outcomes).
  - Better use of data (beyond just employment outcomes) by government and TEOs.
17. Explicitly referring to the pivotal role of *good quality* information that is *used effectively*, would be a strong signal that the government is committed to high quality policy decisions based on robust evidence and analysis. This would also link the strategy more explicitly to NZQA's evaluative *Self-Assessment*-based approach to quality assurance for TEOs.
18. On a more minor issue of presentation, the final bullet point on p6 refers to increasing participation rates of 18 and 19 year old Māori and Pasifika in bachelor's degree study, but no comparative figures are given for the overall population.

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<sup>4</sup> See Careers New Zealand (2012) *Tertiary Student Career Management Competencies*.

<sup>5</sup> See *Lifting Our Game* (EAWG, 2012). Although that report describes purposeful education from the perspective of foundation education, it is a concept relevant to all levels and forms of education.

<sup>6</sup> We note that the report refers to young people making use of *Moving On Up* and *Occupation Outlook Reports* without referring to any evidence around how or whether they actually use such information in practice.

## ***Operationalising the strategy***

19. We appreciate that, as a strategy, this document is not intended to provide a detailed discussion of how priorities can be best operationalised. However, we do note that while a given priority, aim, or success indicator may be appropriate in the abstract, how it is realised in practice can affect whether it is appropriate or not.
20. For example, improved employment outcomes are an indicator of success that we strongly support. However, if this was operationalised as learners simply being in some form of employment irrespective of career prospects, skill level, or the match between qualification and job/industry (the 'rotten jobs' vs 'decent work' concept), this would in practice be a negative result for learners, our education system, and New Zealand's economic and social performance.<sup>7</sup>

## **The Strategic Priorities**

### ***Delivering Skills for Industry***

21. As noted earlier, Ako Aotearoa supports the further development of links between the tertiary education system and the wider world. However, we believe that this priority is framed too narrowly, and should be broadened and reframed to centre on the needs of learners; for example: "*Qualifications provide the skills and knowledge necessary for good quality employment, career and social outcomes*".
22. Such a rephrasing encompasses the link with employment with which the current priority is concerned. Good employment and career outcomes must by definition be based on learners acquiring the competencies (skills, knowledge, and attitudes) that industries and employers require.
23. However, it also a) ensures that the tertiary education strategy is focused on building a system that suits the needs of learners, and b) allows for a wider and more sophisticated range of outcomes that emphasise quality and fit-for-purpose education. Relevant indicators of success for such an outcome could include:
  - There are good employment and progression outcomes for all graduates, including a match between area/level of study and industry/occupation.
  - Tertiary education organisations integrate career development competencies into programmes and student support systems.
  - Tertiary education organisations have strong connections with employers, communities, and the secondary education system.
  - Government investment in education makes use of good information about education quality, including learner outcomes.
  - There is increased production of skills and qualifications in areas of known undersupply or growing need, including employers in Canterbury being able to access and retain skilled, New Zealand-qualified workers to support the rebuild.
24. Although we recognise that it may be seen as beyond the scope of this strategy, we would also note that the draft does not discuss the important role of skills utilisation. The strategy is currently focused on a 'skills stockpiling' approach, but

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<sup>7</sup> For useful discussions of relevant issues see Keep and James (2010) *What incentives to learn at the bottom end of the labour market?*; chapters in Bryson (ed.; 2010) *Beyond Skill: Institutions, organisations and human capability*; and publications from the *Education-Employment Linkages* project (2007-2012).

building productivity also depends on employers' (private, public, and NGO) ability to use those skills to the best end. As Treasury has noted:<sup>8</sup>

The contribution of skills to productivity depends not only on the overall level of educational achievement, but on how the supply of skills is matched to changing demand (through labour market responses, responsive tertiary education and training systems, and migration) **and on firms' ability to effectively utilise workforce skills.** (p2; emphasis added)

Simply increasing a supply of 'warm bodies' when employers do not have the ability to properly make use of the skills they possess (including an understanding of what skills they actually require) will have little impact on New Zealand's economic performance, and effectively reduces the value of both public and private investment in education. It would be helpful for the strategy to recognise this point.

25. We also reiterate our disappointment – expressed in our submission on the Industry Training Review – at the removal of the *Industry Skills Leadership* function from Industry Training Organisations. The intent of this function was specifically to address most of the points raised in this priority, whereas there are now no bodies with a formal role to coordinate the relationship between industries and the tertiary education system.

### ***Getting At-risk Young People into a Career***

26. Ako Aotearoa strongly supports this strategic priority. We particularly support the use of the term 'career' in this priority, as opposed to the term 'job' or 'employment'. Our recent work on foundation education, including *Lifting Our Game* (2012) and *A Foundation for Progression* (forthcoming) has emphasised the point that tertiary education for at-risk young people – and at foundation levels in general – must be part of building a pathway that includes good quality learning and employment outcomes. The concept of a *career* embodies that principle.
27. On that theme, we would recommend rephrasing the first indicator of success for this priority: reducing the number of NEET young people. As touched on in paragraph 20, the point here must not simply be to reduce the size of this group. Such an approach runs the risk of perversely encouraging poor outcomes: young people being moved into 'rotten jobs' or poor-quality courses with few long-term benefits. We consider that this indicator would be better framed around increasing positive outcomes rather than reducing negative statistics. For example:

*An increased proportion of young people not in employment, education or training move successfully into purposeful education and good employment pathways*
28. We also believe that *Better Public Service* target six (55% of 25 to 34-year-olds having a qualification at level 4 or above) is better thought of as a success indicator for a reframed priority 1 rather than this priority. Quite apart from whether or not the 25-34 age group can be thought of as 'young', increasing level 4 attainment is not simply about addressing the needs of at-risk young people but about ensuring that all New Zealanders (and their industries and communities) have access to sufficient skills to support their aspirations. Positioning this priority as only a way of

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<sup>8</sup> MacCormick (2008) *Working Smarter: Driving Productivity Growth Through Skills*. New Zealand Treasury Productivity Paper TPRP 08/06.

addressing at-risk young people devalues these qualifications and their important role in many industries.

### ***Boosting Achievement of Māori and Pasifika***

29. In general, we strongly support this priority area. Our tertiary education system (at the level of practitioners, TEOs, and government agencies) must strive to achieve education parity for all, and the strategy should clearly articulate this. The need for our system to better support Māori and Pacific learners in this regard is extensively-documented and does not need to be recapped here.
30. We do have some reservations about the use of the term 'boosting'. This does not carry the appropriate connotations of creating inclusive opportunities and support necessary to enhance success for Māori and Pacific learners.
31. We also have very strong reservations about the decision to amalgamate addressing Māori and Pacific learners' needs within one single priority area. It is important to recognise that Māori and Pacific learners come from different contexts, experience education in different ways, and the system will need to address their needs in different ways.
32. One aspect that is missing from this section relates to supporting Māori and Pacific educators in the tertiary education system. All educators – not simply those working specifically in a Māori or Pacific context – must take responsibility for effectively supporting Māori and Pacific learners. However, there is evidence that having staff with whom Māori learners and learners from Pacific backgrounds can identify – and who conversely have cultural backgrounds allowing them to relate particularly well to their learners – is highly effective at creating a more encouraging and engaging learning environment.
33. Supporting Māori and Pacific educators starts with understanding the ethnic identification of the New Zealand tertiary education workforce, and working toward demographic parity of Māori and Pacific staff across all sectors. However, it also includes understanding how the experiences of and organisational expectations on these staff members differ from others,<sup>9</sup> and what this means for attracting, retaining, and developing Pacific and Māori staff.

### ***Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy***

34. We strongly support this priority area. There is a well-established need to improve literacy and numeracy in New Zealand, and this does not need to be reviewed in this submission.

### ***Strengthening research-based institutions***

35. As noted earlier, our focus is primarily on teaching rather than research-related priorities. We do, however, support the increased focus on translational research in this priority area, and the increased use of internships and postgraduate research that is linked to external priorities – although we would note that this should not be confined to industry priorities, and include community and government priorities as well.

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<sup>9</sup> For example, TEOs may expect Māori staff to play a particularly strong role in developing and following appropriate tikanga, developing links with iwi and other Māori stakeholders, providing pastoral care for Māori students etc.

36. With regard to this point, we would note that internships are not the only model of learning that includes non-‘traditional’ elements of classroom and fieldwork-based learning. We would recommend that where it is discussed in text, this reference be broadened and refer to ‘work-integrated and service learning’.
37. We would also note that the indicator of success “There is increased production of skills and qualifications in areas of known undersupply or growing need” does not relate to this priority, but rather to priority 1 – especially if priority 1 is reframed as we suggest. This is particularly the case given that it is a relevant indicator for all parts of the tertiary system rather than simply research-based institutions, and that the most effective method for addressing this indicator will be to engage with learner decision-making (thereby affecting enrolment patterns).

### ***Growing International Linkages***

38. We note that – although it is referred to in text – the indicators of success for this priority area do not address ensuring that international students in New Zealand have a high-quality educational experience. This must be a key part of enhancing international linkages from both ethical and ‘brand-management’ perspectives.

### **Conclusion**

39. In conclusion, Ako Aotearoa would like to reiterate our strong support for priorities 2 through 4, and for the underlying theme of building better links between the tertiary education system and wider New Zealand communities and industries. Our primary recommendations for change are to:
  - Reframe priority 1 so that it is based on meeting the needs of learners.
  - Review how vocational education is placed in relation to higher education.
  - Make the theme of good-quality transitions significantly more prominent.
  - Rephrase and reconsider the amalgamation of enhancing Māori and Pasifika achievement into a single priority.
40. We look forward to the progress of this draft, and are happy to offer any further support or advice that would be of use.

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