Draft Tertiary Education Strategy

A Consultation Response from ACE Aotearoa

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Ka Mua, Ka Muri

Looking back in order to move forward

A Response to the DRAFT TES from ACE Aotearoa, 30 September 2025

1. Introduction

ACE Aotearoa thanks the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Government's new Tertiary Education Strategy (TES).

ACE Aotearoa sees the new TES as the timely opportunity to consider what we have sought to achieve from previous Tertiary Education strategies over the last twenty years, including related reports and frameworks such as Koia! Koia!, the Māori Tertiary Education Framework, and also reports published by the previous Productivity Commission. As the whakataukī shows us, in order to move forward, Ka Mua, Ka Muri, it is important to consider what we have learned from our past, including that which has been successful, and that which remains outstanding, in order to ensure that we can contribute with greater value to New Zealanders inclusion, prosperity and wellbeing through engagement with the tertiary sector.

Our experience is that the Adult and Community Education (ACE) sector is a critical, albeit somewhat under-recognised partner in the tertiary education system, with a history, since 1895, of engaging with and changing the lives of New Zealanders, including those socially and economically marginalised, and with intergenerational needs that may inhibit their success in education and employment.

The ACE sector provides affordable, responsive, local education and professional development to communities, and often within communities, to people who need intensive support to experience first-time success in learning. The sector targets adults and offers programmes to gain foundation skills, building people's capabilities to begin their pathways to achieve and further their education success, and gain employment or promotion within the New Zealand workforce.

2. Definition of the ACE Sector

Adult and Community Education (ACE) is a process whereby adults choose to engage in a range of educational activities within the community. The practice fosters individual and group learning which promotes empowerment, equity, active citizenship, critical and social awareness and sustainable development. ACE occurs alongside the formal education system and is therefore accessible to all. It promotes a culture of lifelong learning. It happens in a wide range of contexts in both structured and spontaneous forms, all of which have their own value.

It may be initiated by individual and group needs which encourage adults to learn to understand their world and to seek change within it.

The nature of ACE makes it well suited to deliver effective programmes in:

- Adult literacy and numeracy provision
- English language and social support programmes for speakers of other languages
- Personal development education

- Revitalisation of Māori language and culture
- Learning for whānau/hapū/iwi development
- Cultural retention
- Education to facilitate group and community development
- Education for social and environmental justice.

Currently ACE is funded by the TEC, through provision in schools, Tertiary Education Institutions (TEIs), and Private Training Establishments (PTEs), or on a user pays basis. Many community providers of ACE are not funded by the TEC. They may be accessing some government funding through other government agencies, or relying on grants and/or voluntary input.

3. Draft TES Objective and Drivers for Change

ACE Aotearoa supports the draft objective for the Tertiary Education Strategy (TES) that establishes:

> *A tertiary education system that enables people to succeed with knowledge and skills that advance an innovative, high-productivity economy, and improve quality of life.*

ACE Aotearoa would go further to say that the TES should consider revisiting elements of the NZ Productivity Commission's report, *A Fair Chance for All – Breaking the cycle of persistent disadvantage.* While this report is no longer current, it provides useful frameworks that can be used to address persistent disadvantage, social inclusion and wellbeing.

ACE Aotearoa recognises the imperative to address the issues of productivity and innovation challenges and appreciates the role played by the entire tertiary sector to, as noted in the Draft TES Strategy:

- be closely connected to employers and industry, delivering relevant knowledge and skills through flexible learning options at all career stages
- offer opportunities at every level, from foundation literacy, numeracy and life skills to advanced research-led teaching, with formal education, that complements practical and informal learning throughout life.

For ACE Aotearoa, the ACE sector's commitment to New Zealanders who experience marginalisation and disadvantage illustrates how we continue to advocate for, and therefore endorse the TES intention to lift the relevance and performance of the New Zealand tertiary education response to:

- Māori, Pacific peoples, disabled people, those from low-income backgrounds who continue to face significant barriers to success and migrants and refugees,
- the complex needs of school leavers with low prior attainment.

ACE Aotearoa agrees that New Zealand can do more to enable tertiary education to support regional development, being responsive to the needs of local businesses, industries, and communities, to build economic performance in these areas and addresses persistent social disadvantage.

ACE Aotearoa is committed to ensuring rural communities thrive through access to meaningful tertiary education that meet their aspirations and circumstances. We appreciate the recent changes to the Funding Determinations regarding online synchronous and asynchronous learning have enabled rural and other communities' access to a greater range of learning that they may otherwise not experience.

Regarding improved practice, ACE Aotearoa will appreciate the opportunity to discuss how the ACE sector can be engaged in a national process so that **all** providers are supported to evolve their practices to meet changing learner needs, respond to shifting labour market and community demands, and align with national research and innovation priorities.

4. Priorities for this Tertiary Education Strategy

ACE Aotearoa supports the Government's specific priorities for improvement in five areas, and notes for:

- **Achievement**

  ACE Aotearoa recommends amendment to this priority to read:
  *Ensure **all** students, trainees **and other tertiary learners** achieve qualifications **or educational outcomes that enable them to progress** to good careers and economic security, with a focus on strong pathways between school, tertiary education, and work.*

  ACE Aotearoa is concerned to ensure that all learners experience achievement from their tertiary programmes. For those learners who have experienced persistent disadvantage, such as people with complex needs of school leavers with low prior attainment, Māori, Pacific peoples, disabled people, and those from low-income backgrounds who continue to face significant barriers to success, achieving a qualification may not be the first steps back into learning. Instead, the informal or non-formal ACE programmes offer a much broader recognition of achievement, including acquisition of relevant new skills, knowledge and confidence to progress into formal education pathways that can result in the achievement of a qualification, and more.

  Most significantly, inclusion of learners who have faced significant barriers in their educational experience is a very significant adult population of this country. Their rights to be supported to achieve in this Tertiary Education Strategy is part of the economic wellbeing of New Zealand.

  ACE Aotearoa supports reduction in disparities in achievement between population groups (including gender, ethnic, disability and socioeconomic), particularly in fields of study and industries/occupations that have large disparities in achievement but have strong income and employment outcomes. We appreciate the provision of evidence-based approaches to learner success that are appropriate to their learner cohorts and educational setting, and recognise the opportunity to the ACE sector to build sector-wide systems that demonstrate the social, educational and economic contribution of every programme.

  We would suggest that Māori, Pacific peoples, disabled people, and also those from low-income backgrounds who continue to face significant barriers to success, be reinstated as ACE Priority Learners in the next Funding Determinations. There was strong agreement that the ACE sector must continue to push for meaningful equity for everyone.

  It should also be noted that removal, and continued absence, of terms from this year's Determinations, such as culturally appropriate, or a focus on female learners in 'non-traditional' careers, will not be consistent with the intentions of the new TES.

- **Economic Impact and Innovation**

  Increase the economic impact of tertiary education by delivering relevant, adaptable skills, and research that drives productivity, innovation, commercialisation and broader economic opportunities.

  ACE Aotearoa supports the priority and notes that economic impact should explicitly include reversing negative outcomes, such as:

  - persistent disadvantage,
  - financial, geographic, cultural, and systemic factors that disproportionately affect under-served communities such as Māori, Pacific peoples, disabled people, and those from low-income background, and
  - low literacy and numeracy levels.

  As previously noted, the previous Productivity Commission's inquiry into economic inclusion and social mobility – A Fair Chance for All, and other reports published, including by the MoE and TEC, will provide useful insights and frameworks for consideration.

- **Access and Participation**

  ACE Aotearoa recommends amendment to this priority to read:

  Enable access to education and training for people from all backgrounds and regions, ensuring more people build relevant skills that contribute to a productive economy, ***and the wellbeing of themselves, their whānau and families, and their community.***

  For the ACE sector, to enable successful renewed engagement in education, it is important to appreciate, for those most disadvantaged, their preliminary goals may not easily reflect economic or employment outcome. Instead, it is important to note that according to a range of research sources, tertiary education focus on community and foundation education programmes provide numerous benefits including:

  - Improved communications and relationships with learners' families and communities
  - Improved parental engagement in school, creating four times more importance than socio-economic class in influencing performance if young people in school
  - Increase in civic and political participation
  - The average literacy score in a given population is a better indicator of growth than the percentage of the population with very high literacy scores. Importantly a focus on promotion of strong literacy skills widely throughout its population will be more successful in fostering growth, productivity and wellbeing than one is which the gap between high-skill and low-skill groups is large.
  - Taking part in formal and informal tertiary education activity influences attitudes and behaviour related to sustainability, including use of resources and management of local environments.

  Consideration and inclusion of the ACE sector as a valid voice in the determination for strategies and policies to affect change and improves lives for those adults, whānau and communities most marginalised in our communities will benefit discussion of Access and Participation.

The provision of smaller courses in the context of local urban and rural communities is often designed to address specific needs in the community, with the intention to upskill, and support learners to gain employment or seek further education opportunities. What could be possible with an intentional focus across an integrated tertiary education system, would be the potential of partnerships with Polytechnics and Universities, as some ACE providers do to support workbased training, to provide a level of local pastoral care and learner agency development, that enables greater participation and opportunity for achievement.

- **Integration and Collaboration**

  Deepen collaboration between education providers, employers, iwi, research institutions, and communities to align education with regional and national economic development.

  ACE Aotearoa supports sector-wide alignment to regional and national development goals in order to better serve diverse learner needs and maximise the impact of teaching and research.

  As Peak Body for the ACE sector, ACE Aotearoa understands the necessity to maintain opportunity to learn from Iwi, Pacific, rural and other key stakeholders, including government representatives and other providers, and to maintain connection and opportunity to collaborate.

  ACE Aotearoa would recommend that:

  - the MoE and the TEC consider incentives and opportunities to encourage greater collaboration amongst tertiary education providers, including dissemination of case studies as examples of success.

  ACE Aotearoa fully supports partnership between tertiary education providers and hapū and iwi as critical to support Māori development aspirations and to honour te Tiriti o Waitangi. We appreciate that a tertiary education system able to understand and meet the needs and aspiration of Māori communities, iwi, hapū and whānau remains a critical element for Māori. As noted, we would suggest that the MoE and the TEC review the Māori Tertiary Education Framework - a framework that represented a first step toward collective Māori agreement on a strategic direction for tertiary education, with particular regard to its guiding principles and priority areas, to gain any further insights.

- **International Education.**

  Boost numbers of international students, supporting the sector to grow and increasing New Zealand's international connectivity, as set out in the International Education Going for Growth Plan.

  ACE Aotearoa fully supports the value of International Education, appreciating the mutual benefits for international students and New Zealand.

5. Roles and Expectations for Different Parts of the Tertiary Education System

ACE Aotearoa has no comments to make on the Roles and Expectations for Different Parts of the Tertiary Education System, but would note that some ACE providers, including REAPs and unfunded providers, such as WEAs and Te Ataarangi, are not included in the categories.

ACE Aotearoa asks, while recognising that the TEC is not solely responsible to ensure an effective, joined-up and collaborative tertiary education sector, that the TEC consider facilitating greater cross-sector engagement, including representatives of the ACE sector, to guide policy and practical solutions for the tertiary education system.

6. Monitoring Outcomes

ACE Aotearoa believes we need to see measurable outcomes that report on learner participation, retention, and achievements in ways that are easily evident. This includes providing results in numbers, rather than percentages or percentage points, for Māori, Pacific peoples, disabled people, and those from low-income backgrounds who continue to face significant barriers to success.

It will also be valuable to measure and report on achievements toward diversity, equity and balance and the proposed TES priorities, providing annual comparisons over the following years – celebrating successes, and recognising, in order to then address, where greater effort and improvement is required across the tertiary education system.

Finally, ACE Aotearoa believes that the value of NZ tertiary education should be widely appreciated by our country. Greater nationwide promotion of the benefits of tertiary education, its breadth, and what the MoE and TEC are doing to make accessible and achievable difference to all, inclusive of those who experience marginalism, disengagement and disadvantage would be a valuable way to enhance achievement of the TES. Hearing from a diverse range of learners across the full scope of tertiary programmes and learning opportunities may offer other New Zealanders options for their engagement.

7. Final Comments

ACE Aotearoa greatly appreciates the opportunity to provide comments as part of the TES consultation process.

Please contact Hannah Pia Baral, Chief Executive, for any clarification or additional information.

Mauri ora.