

SPECIAL EDITION: EVALUATION RESULTS

Results of the independent formative evaluation of Ako Aotearoa conducted by TNS Conversa

Summary of evaluation

Our independent formative evaluation confirms:

- our reach across the sector
- our stakeholders understand what we do
- our stakeholders value our services
- we are already having an impact
- the quality of tertiary teaching and learning in New Zealand still needs considerable attention
- the scope of our work is on track.

The evaluation identifies that we need to do more:

- work with Māori and Pacific peoples
- work of the kind we are already doing
- to influence change in how tertiary organisations value and support teaching and learning
- to continue to extend our reach.



Introduction

TNS Conversa was commissioned by Ako Aotearoa, through an open request for proposal process, to undertake an independent formative evaluation of the organisation, framed in an outcomes hierarchy developed by PS Services ... (2009) that now forms part of our new Strategic Plan 2010–2013 (<http://akoatearoa.ac.nz/strategic-plan>).

The research was conducted with existing contacts to assess the impact Ako Aotearoa has had to date with those who are aware of the organisation, its potential future impact, and stakeholder perceptions of its level of service delivery.

This special edition of *Ako Aotearoa Alert* highlights TNS Conversa's key findings and notes our responses to the recommendations. The evaluation is extensive and has given us much to think about. We recommend to you the full evaluation report, which is published on our website along with a detailed overview presentation (<http://akoatearoa.ac.nz/formative-evaluation>).

Also included in this newsletter is a summary of the evaluation of our Regional Hub Project Funding Scheme conducted by Networkers (see pages 10-12).

Our key conclusions for the TNS Conversa evaluation is that we have been successful in our initial strategy of establishing our position as a facilitation, support and advocacy agency for tertiary teaching and learning. The evaluation also confirms our direction of travel is broadly right: the test over the next few years will be whether, working with tertiary educators and institutions, we can make the strongest possible contribution to the improved benefits for tertiary learners that we all seek.

As illustrated in our outcomes hierarchy, significant, sustainable improvements in the tertiary teaching and learning system take time to achieve and we will not, of course, accomplish them by ourselves. Our role is to highlight priorities for improvement, and support and facilitate such work, but the prime agents for change are practitioners and management within the tertiary organisations themselves and the system that supports them.

We would like to thank TNS Conversa and, in particular, the project manager Dr Catherine Frethey-Bentham, for the careful and collegial way in which they undertook the work. Most of all, however, we would like to thank our colleagues throughout the sector and beyond who gave their time and expertise to participate in the informant interviews or respond to the survey. We value your support and critical insight very much. As always, we welcome continued discussion.

Bryan Gould
Chair, Ako Aotearoa Board

Dr Peter Coolbear
Director, Ako Aotearoa

An outline of the evaluation approach

The formative evaluation process included preliminary interviews with all Ako Aotearoa staff, followed by 35 in-depth key informant interviews recruited from a wide range of sectors and backgrounds. These interviews were conducted between 2 December 2009 and 4 February 2010. They were followed by an online survey of all the organisation’s contacts between 16 March and 9 April 2010. A total of 474 full, and a further 229 partial, responses were received to the questionnaire, representing a response rate of over 21 percent.

Each of the three steps of this sequential process (staff interviews; key informant interviews; online survey) informed the development of subsequent steps. Findings were, in turn, placed in the context of the outcomes hierarchy (see our website for details of the presentation).

The detailed findings of the report are summarised in four main sections:

- awareness and communications
- general perceptions of Ako Aotearoa
- usage and perceptions of resources
- impact of initiatives.

Section 1: Awareness and communications

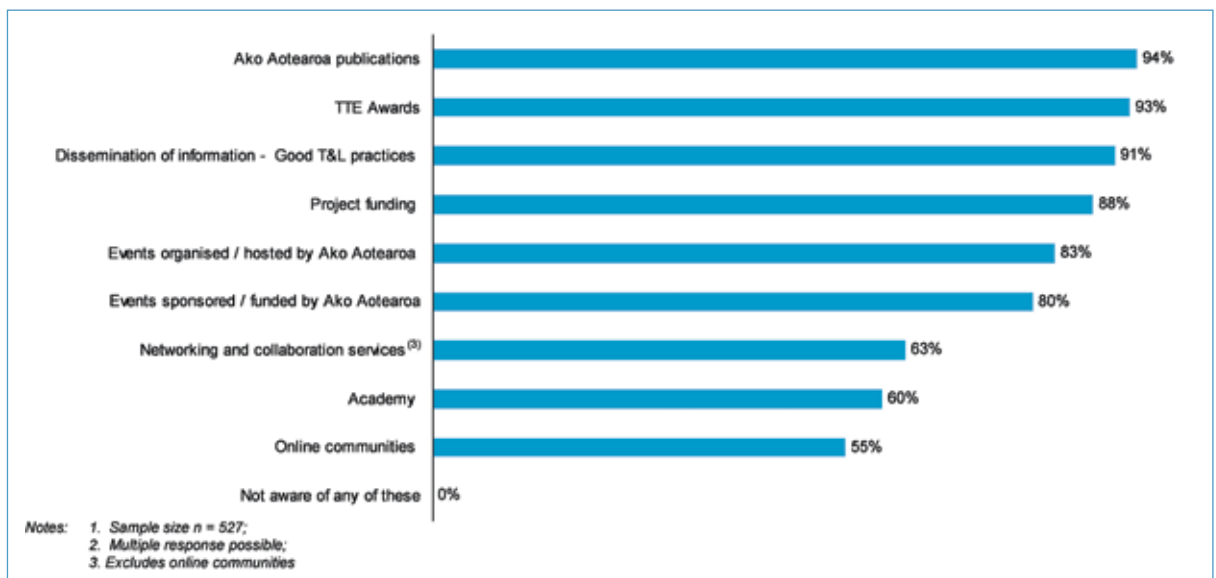
Survey respondents were first asked an open question to list or name the services, functions or resources they could recall that Ako Aotearoa provided. These open-ended responses reveal top-of-mind or unprompted awareness of Ako Aotearoa’s functions. The results demonstrate nearly half of the respondents recalled that Ako Aotearoa provided funding and/or sponsorship, and over four in every ten recalled events hosted, attended or sponsored by Ako Aotearoa. Conversely, online communities and the Ako Aotearoa Academy of Tertiary Teaching Excellence (the Academy) had lower top-of-mind awareness among respondents.

Total awareness of Ako Aotearoa’s functions

Survey respondents were then asked a second question about the functions they were aware of that Ako Aotearoa provided. In this question, however, respondents were given a range of responses to select from. This was conducted to measure the total awareness of Ako Aotearoa’s functions (including top-of-mind and awareness of other functions that were not top-of-mind).

The results demonstrate a high awareness of all functions provided by Ako Aotearoa, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Total awareness of functions provided by Ako Aotearoa⁽¹⁾⁽²⁾

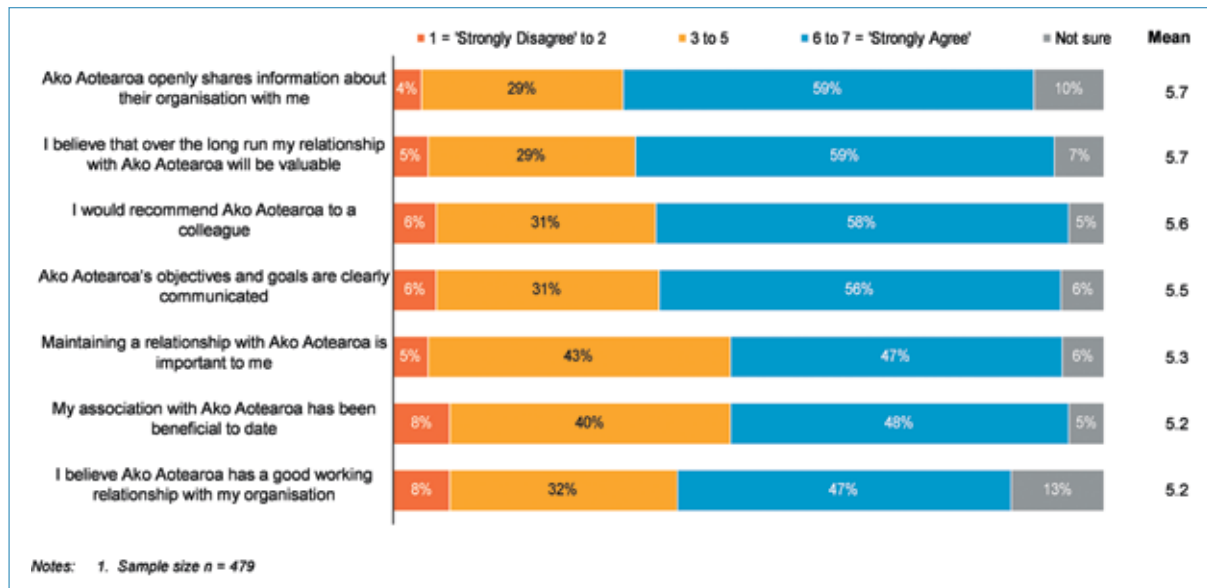


Has Ako Aotearoa effectively engaged stakeholders?

Ako Aotearoa rated high on all dimensions of relationship quality using an adapted version of the RELQUAL scale developed by Lages et al (2005)¹, averaging scores between 5.2 and 5.7 out of 7. In particular, over half of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that:

- Ako Aotearoa openly shares information about the organisation
- their relationship with Ako Aotearoa will be valuable in the long run
- they would recommend Ako Aotearoa to a colleague
- Ako Aotearoa’s objectives and goals are communicated clearly.

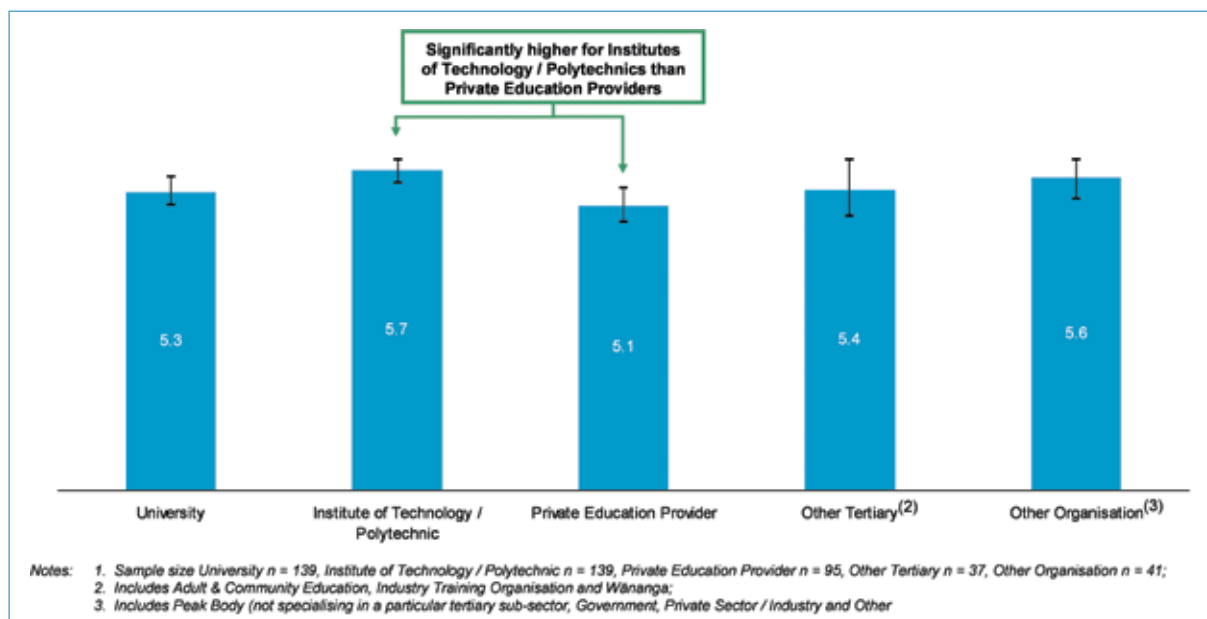
Figure 2: Stakeholder ratings of relationship quality⁽¹⁾



Stakeholder engagement by sub-sector

Also of interest to this formative evaluation was how different sub-sectors of the tertiary community perceive their relationships with Ako Aotearoa. There were few differences in perceived relationship quality between sub-sectors, with the exception that institutes of technology and polytechnics rated their relationship quality significantly higher (on average) than private education providers (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Average measure of relationship quality by sub-sector⁽¹⁾



1. Lages, C, Lages, CR and Lages, FD (2005) The RELQUAL Scale: A measure of relationship quality in export market ventures. *Journal of Business Research*, 58: 1040–1048.

Suggestions for improvements

When it came to recommending improvements for Ako Aotearoa in the future, the most common suggestions provided centred on Ako Aotearoa improving communications. This included:

- sharing information with a growing audience and increasing the profile of the organisation through further promotion of Ako Aotearoa's resources and services (through direct communications with organisations and teachers, and events)
- continuing to develop relationships with other organisations interested in teaching and learning, and building networking facilities
- further developing relationships with Māori
- better communicating funding criteria and criteria for awards (that is, making them more readily available and accessible).



Our response

While the level of awareness about what we do as an organisation is generally encouraging, we acknowledge the message that we need to continue to develop relationships with the sector and increase our reach. We have relatively high levels of awareness from all stakeholders across sectors, but will continue to expand our reach and networks. For example, we are actively working alongside the New Zealand Association of Private Education Providers to continue to build our relationships in the private training establishment (PTE) sector. As work we are doing already with the PTE sector is completed it will demonstrate what is possible to other private providers. We also look forward to continuing to develop relationships with Māori and Pacific PTEs, which are both represented on our Board, and Māori and Pacific caucuses.

There was mixed feedback about the 'glossy' look of some of our published material, in particular from the informant interviews, with some respondents being enthusiastic about this look and others wondering whether the money could better be spent elsewhere. First, it needs to be explained that, with current technology, achieving an attractive published product (whether hard copy or online) is increasingly economical to achieve. Second, there is a point of principle here: we believe that paying attention to the quality and accessibility of what we produce is highly important in an environment where teaching and learning needs to be better valued.

We will, wherever possible, continue with our layered publishing approach to ensure the work we support and debate we facilitate are available to researchers, practitioners and decision makers. Each has different information needs and we will be delighted to receive suggestions about how we may better serve these requirements.

Section 2: General perceptions of Ako Aotearoa

Key informants and survey respondents were asked how they perceived tertiary education in New Zealand. Key informants agreed the quality of tertiary education was variable, and most survey respondents rated the value placed on tertiary education and quality of professional development services available for tertiary teachers in New Zealand as average (5.5 and 5.7, respectively, on a scale of one to ten).

Stakeholders, however, believed that Ako Aotearoa is working to change this. Over half of survey respondents strongly believed Ako Aotearoa contributes to professional development in the tertiary sector (Figures 4a and 4b) and around a quarter believed Ako Aotearoa had already had an extremely positive impact in improving the quality of professional development services. There were no significant differences in responses by sub-sector, except to the statement about the relevance of information Ako Aotearoa provides (Figure 4b, eighth bar below), where the PTEs rated this aspect of Ako Aotearoa's role slightly lower than did other parts of the sector.

Figure 4a: Perceptions of Ako Aotearoa⁽¹⁾

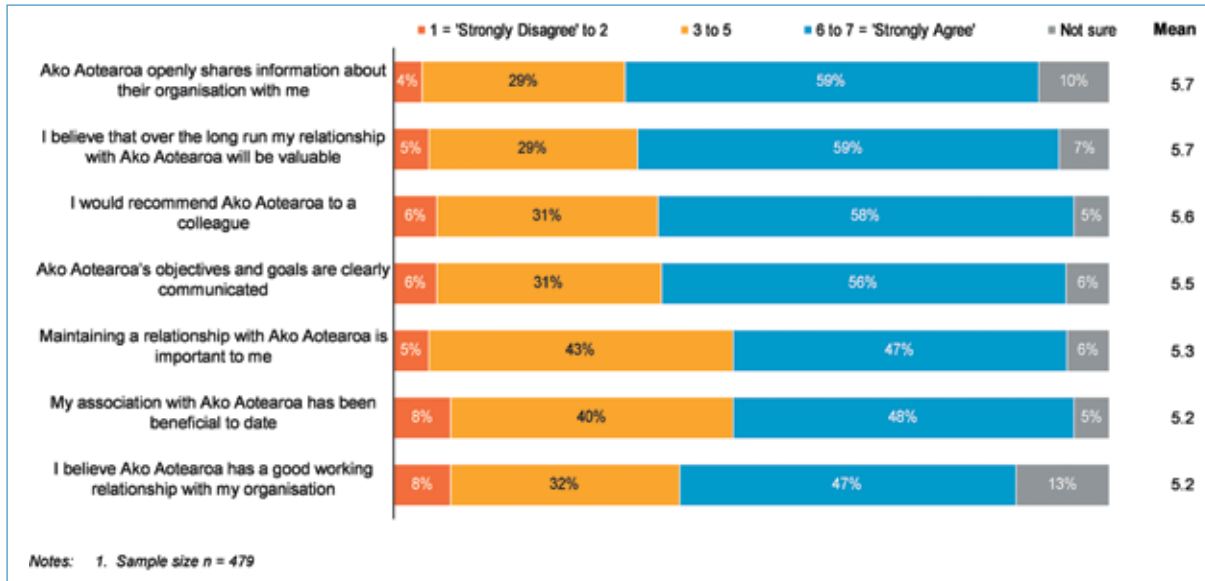
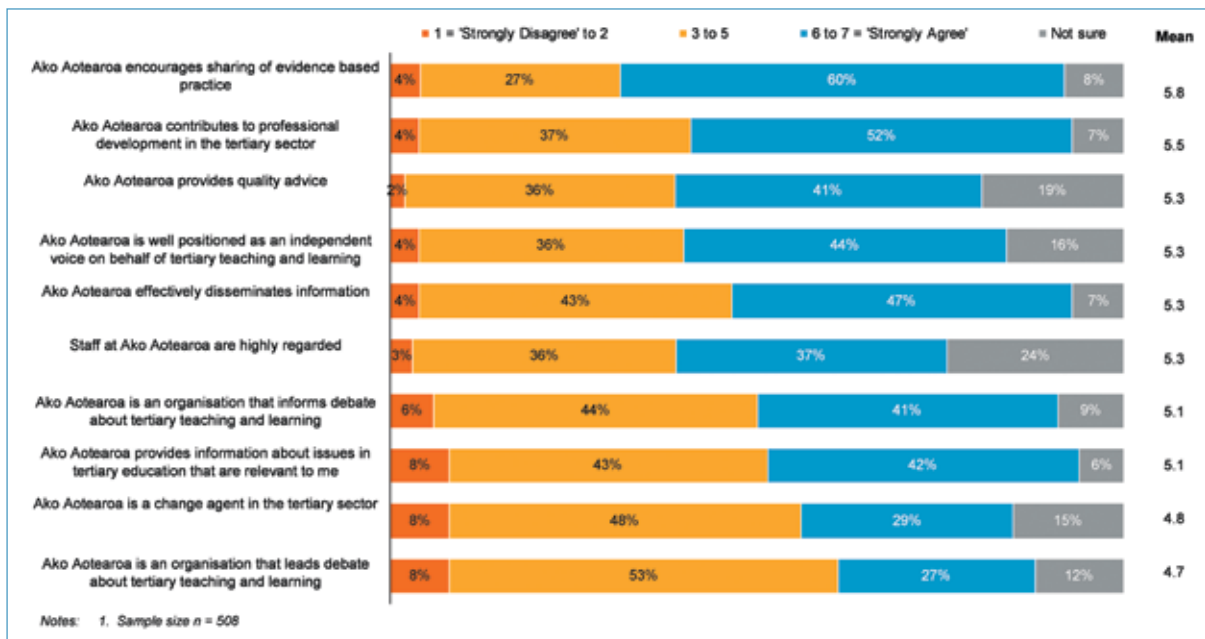


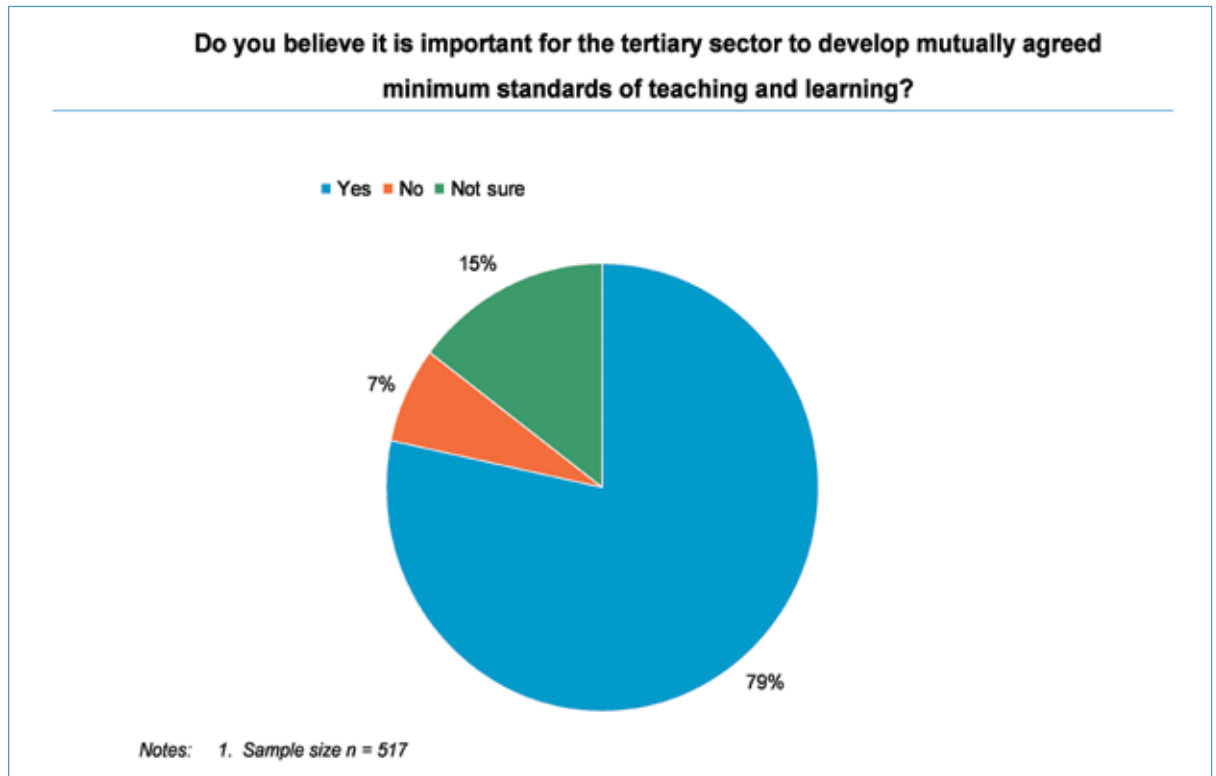
Figure 4b: Perceptions of Ako Aotearoa⁽¹⁾



While key informants provided mixed responses as to whether mutually agreed minimum standards in tertiary education should be developed, most survey respondents agreed this was a good idea. Survey respondents from all establishments were generally in favour of developing mutually agreed minimum standards in teaching and learning (Figure 5), but institutes of technology, polytechnics and private education providers were significantly more likely to favour these than universities.

Key informants and survey respondents were also asked about their general perceptions of Ako Aotearoa as an organisation, and responses were very positive. Many people noted the professionalism of the organisation and staff, and acknowledged the contribution that Ako Aotearoa has made to encouraging the sharing of evidence-based practice, professional development and providing quality advice. Numerous people also noted it was beneficial to have an organisation such as Ako Aotearoa that acts as an independent voice on behalf of tertiary teaching and learning in New Zealand.

Figure 5: Minimum standards in tertiary education⁽¹⁾



Our response

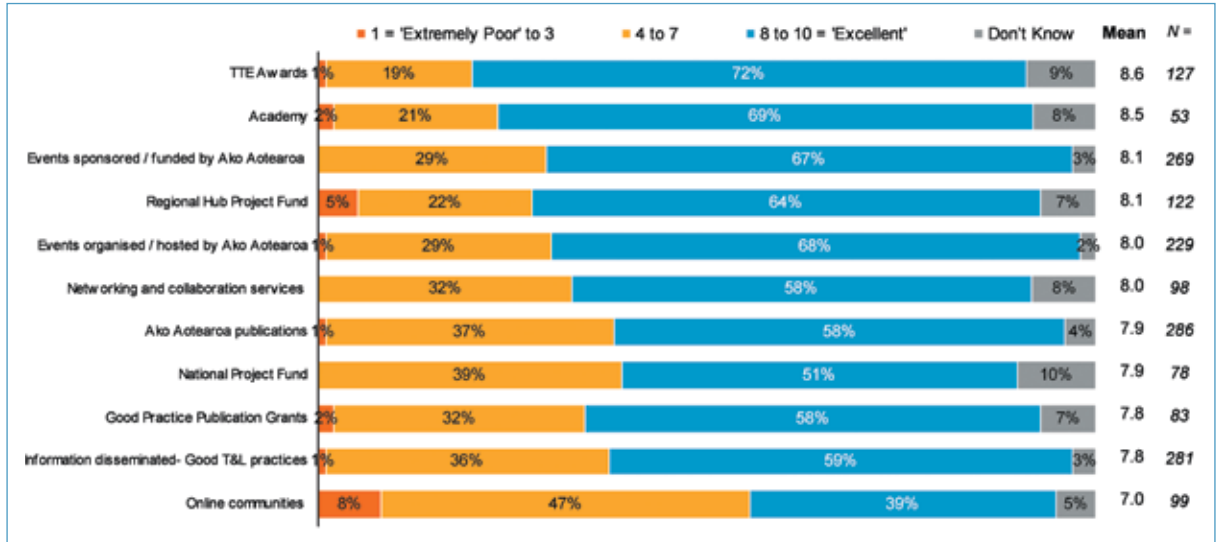
These results reaffirm the conclusion from the Teaching Matters Forum that the tertiary sector needs an organisation such as Ako Aotearoa to champion teaching and learning. There is a general perception that aspects of the sector could be improved. A key part of our role is to stimulate debate around teaching and learning, and act as a change agent where necessary.

While there is inevitably some acquiescence bias from the survey, in that we were reviewing the views of stakeholders with an expressed interest in the role of Ako Aotearoa, we were somewhat surprised at the strength of the mandate to explore the development of mutually agreed minimum standards of teaching and learning. The need to address thresholds of acceptability within tertiary education is incorporated within Ako Aotearoa's new strategic plan.

Section 3: Usage and perceptions of resources

There was little dissatisfaction from users with the services Ako Aotearoa is providing (Figure 6). The lowest rating service amongst survey respondents was the online communities; the highest rated services overall were the Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awards and Academy (which is targeted to a select group of people and members).

Figure 6: Rating of Ako Aotearoa's services and resources by users



Survey respondents were also asked, of the resources provided by Ako Aotearoa, which ones they were most likely to use as a source of information. The sources of information most often utilised were Ako Aotearoa's website and the *Ako Aotearoa Alert* newsletter (distributed in hard copy).

Because the website is a key source of information, respondents were asked specifically about their usage and perceptions of the site. Over eight out of ten respondents had used the site before, and just under half were registered users. Respondents working in PTEs were less likely to use the site than those working in other providers. The website was typically perceived to be useful and user friendly to those familiar with it. The most common reason for visiting the website was to browse.

Awareness of Ako Aotearoa's funding schemes was also assessed. This revealed that nearly nine out of ten people knew Ako Aotearoa provided funding but just under half of these people were aware of Ako Aotearoa's commissioned project work. Therefore, further promotion of this research and its benefits is recommended in the future.



Our response

We will continue to promote the website across the tertiary sector and develop content that users feel to be valuable. Since the survey was conducted, our programme of work to further enhance use of the website has resulted in several improvements to functionality, in particular, an easier registration process, improved searchability of the Resource Centre, a bookmarking function and combined news feeds.

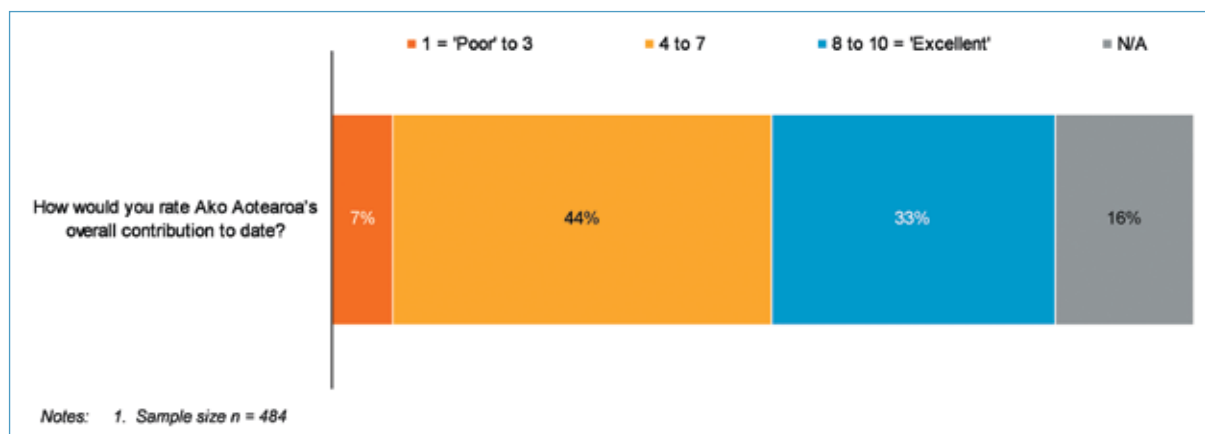
As with other sites, development of active communities of practice is slow. Experience has shown that such sites have relatively limited appeal to the majority of educators. Active participation in these sites is difficult to maintain unless there is a critical mass of active enthusiasts or immediate external incentives to participate. Although we are not resourced to drive such sites directly, we will continue to explore how this technology may be best utilised and are happy to work with, and fund, groups that wish to explore them.

We will continue to promote all our funded research, in particular, our major projects as each comes to completion. From the start, we have been looking to support work that has a use-focus and potential to drive change to improve teaching and learning: we need to collect systematic data on the impact such work is having on practice at an individual and organisational level.

Section 4: Impact of initiatives

Key informants and survey respondents were asked about the extent to which Ako Aotearoa’s initiatives had impacted on their teaching and learning practices and related activities. Key informants gave several examples of the impact Ako Aotearoa had on their teaching and learning practices, with over half of survey respondents agreeing that Ako Aotearoa had at least some impact on teaching and learning. Furthermore, less than one in ten people surveyed rated the contribution of Ako Aotearoa to date as poor (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Overall perceived contribution of Ako Aotearoa to date⁽¹⁾



The most common resources or functions that had impacted on teaching and learning practices were the knowledge, resources and publications disseminated by Ako Aotearoa. Those who did not believe Ako Aotearoa had yet impacted on their teaching and learning practices were likely to think this because they were not aware of the resources Ako Aotearoa provided, lacked interest in them and/or believed the resources provided were not relevant to their sector or role (there is some belief Ako Aotearoa does not cater as much to the needs of PTEs or industry training organisations (ITOs)). It is suggested Ako Aotearoa undertakes further work with the PTEs and ITOs to dispel these perceptions and make the sectors aware of the resources available.

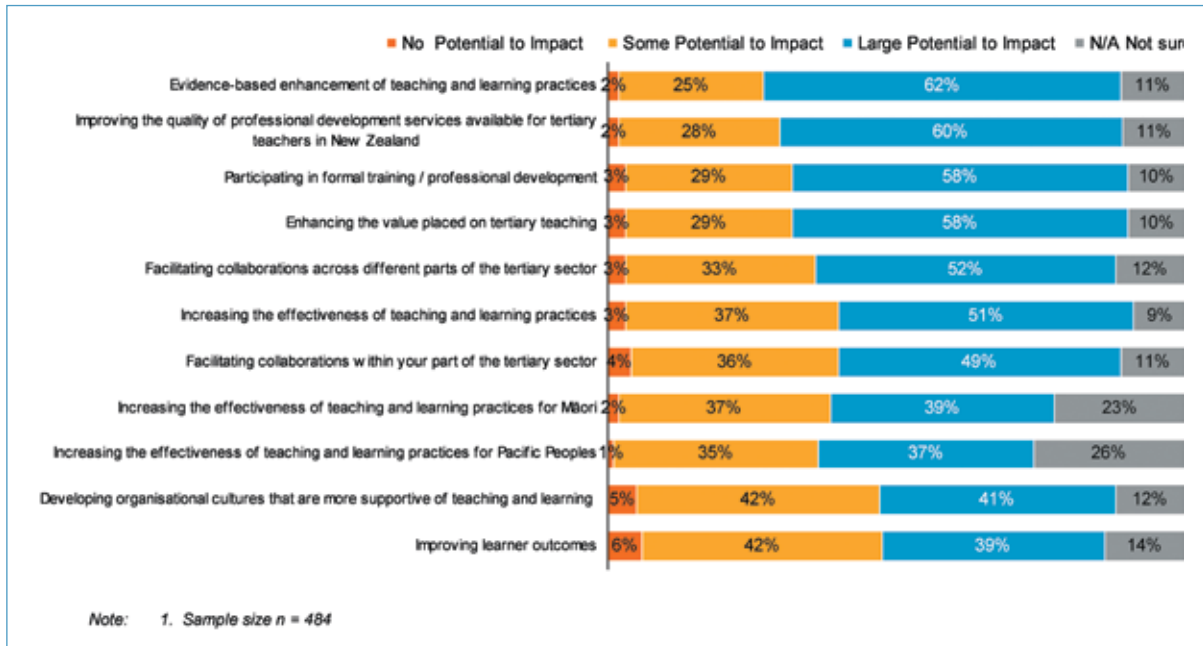
Survey respondents noted that the areas where Ako Aotearoa had the most impact to date were in providing evidence-based enhancement to teaching and learning practices, and enhancing the value placed on tertiary education. Key informants believed that while Ako Aotearoa had achieved much traction so far, it could still achieve more at the institutional level (in particular, with a wider range of institutions) and/or with individual educators.

Key informants and survey respondents were asked about the extent to which they believed Ako Aotearoa had contributed to organisations having cultures that are supportive of teaching and that enhance teaching and learning practices. While some key informants gave examples of where this had happened, others (particularly in universities) believed it would be difficult for an outside agency to change the culture within their organisation. Just over one in five survey respondents believed Ako Aotearoa had already had an extremely positive impact on organisational cultures to date, and around four in ten believed it had a large potential to impact this in the future. Therefore, it appears Ako Aotearoa’s impact is already being felt within tertiary organisational cultures.

Other areas where Ako Aotearoa has demonstrated the least impact to date are increasing the effectiveness of teaching and learning practices for Māori and Pacific peoples, and demonstrating evidence of improved learner outcomes. It is recommended Ako Aotearoa focuses resources in these areas in the future.

People had high expectations for Ako Aotearoa in the future (Figure 8), with most expecting it to have at least some impact in their areas of interest. The areas where people saw the most potential future impact were in providing evidence-based enhancement to teaching and learning practices and improving the quality of professional development services available.

Figure 8: Perceived potential impact of Ako Aotearoa in different areas⁽¹⁾



Our response

The results of this part of the evaluation confirm we are beginning to have an impact as an organisation, but there is clearly much more we can do. The TNS Conversa survey also confirms that respondents clearly view our contribution holistically: all present activities are seen as important drivers for improving tertiary teaching and learning (see section 6.4.5. of the full report). The message is that we need to continue to do more of the same, but consider giving some target groups a higher priority. This prioritisation is already under way and we hope to be able to demonstrate the value-add in the short-to-medium term.

We have significant projects under way that we believe will be of considerable benefit to the PTE and ITO sectors and encourage other work in these areas. Priorities for working with Māori and Pacific educators and learners are key themes in our new strategic plan. We already have a portfolio of more than \$1 million worth of work targeted for Māori, and anticipate our national hui, Tuia Te Ako, will identify strategic priorities for the future. Similarly, under the guidance of our Pacific Caucus, we are investing in a portfolio of work to enhance Pacific achievement in tertiary education.

We also believe there is considerable scope for cross-fertilisation of good practice across all parts of the tertiary sector and will continue to promote this sharing wherever possible.

In short, this evaluation reaffirms the priorities we have set ourselves in our new strategic plan. The challenge will be to maximise the impact of the resources we have and the leverage we can gain by working in partnership with different parts of the sector. Inevitably, we will be judged by the demonstrated value we can add to outcomes for tertiary learners in the future.

Ako Aotearoa Regional Hub Project Fund evaluation



As a separate undertaking to the TNS Conversa evaluation, the consultancy firm Networkers was contracted to undertake an independent evaluation of the operation and impact of the Regional Hub Project Fund.

An abridged version of the Networkers' executive summary on the evaluation and their recommendations in full, plus our response to them, are presented here. The full report is available on the Ako Aotearoa website (www.ako.aotearoa.ac.nz/hub-fund-evaluation).

Executive summary

The fund is increasingly popular and well-used. The range of projects, and reasons for applying, is very broad. Projects range from small-scale interventions in a single course, to large networking projects.

Applicants rated the process highly, and felt strongly supported by Ako Aotearoa throughout the project and beyond. The funding was seen as relatively simple to apply for and quite accessible to beginning researchers. Publication of project reports on the website was seen as a particular strength. The \$10,000 limit was seen as a strength by some and a limitation by others, but did tend to provide focus.

The outcomes analysis was at the heart of this study. With such a range of different projects, it is difficult to quantify at this point the size and nature of both intended and unintended effects and impacts. A series of case studies is provided to illustrate aspects of impact. Many of the projects have led directly to changes in the status and work of individuals and project teams, as well as permanent developments in the process, delivery and/or content of tertiary courses.

As a result of these projects, some teachers are now better prepared and acculturated for the classroom, a range of mentors and supervisors assist students with course or field work, online and information technology systems are hugely improved, there is more inter-organisational collaboration and a research culture is being established for the first time in some organisations. Evidence of such impacts is provided.

This evaluation found it difficult to understand expectations around the fund in relation to Ako Aotearoa's role as a treaty-based organisation. There are several projects with a Māori and/or Pacific basis, but little collaboration or partnership between organisations around culture. Ako Aotearoa should consider what kind of collaborations might build capacity in this area and encourage them through the fund.

The view of the evaluation team is that the hub project fund is effective. In funding terms, the projects are relatively small, but the commitment of Ako Aotearoa staff, the dedication and enthusiasm of fund recipients and research partners, and the determination of all parties to improve tertiary teaching and learning means there is a demonstrable short-term impact that has the potential to grow over time.



Formative recommendations

1. That Ako Aotearoa investigates ways, other than hub coordinators, to support new and emerging researchers.



Our response

This will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. Project teams with less experience are required to include someone who takes on a mentoring role. Hubs also provide this function in some aspects of projects. It was noted that some identified mentors have, in reality, little input into projects. Hubs need to be aware of this as they undertake their monitoring function and take remedial action as necessary. Hubs will collaborate to review the Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) page on the website regularly and collectively add to this resource.

2. That Ako Aotearoa ensures hub funding is adequate to support each project that is approved, possibly by the development of a good funding 'checklist' to accompany or replace the budget calculator, and detailed advice from hub coordinators or project 'buddies' on likely costs.



Our response

This recommendation is covered by current documentation and advice available from the hubs. It is noted that, as a result of organisational sign-off of project proposals, there is an expectation internal budget decisions within organisations reflect the proposed budget.

3. That Ako Aotearoa ensures the guidelines for funding and reporting are clear and comprehensive. Areas noted in case studies as unclear include what staffing costs are allowable and additional information on the final reporting process (the FAQ section could also be used).



Our response is as per recommendation 2

Hubs will monitor this and deal with it on a case-by-case basis. It is noted that, in general, the monitoring function by the hubs may need to be strengthened to avoid too many time slippages in projects.

4. That each hub runs a one-day research colloquium for current (and possibly former) fund recipients each year, to encourage cross-sectoral sharing of information and skills.



Our response

It was noted that informal events have already been run. Hubs will explore this option further, canvassing the views of project teams and Hub advisory groups.

5. Ako Aotearoa notes the wide range of impacts described by organisations, and considers further ways, as necessary, to support project teams to produce such impacts.



Our response

The examples of impacts of project work identified in the report are encouraging, but information about impact clearly needs to be more systematically collected within a consistent framework that addresses the complexities of culture change within an organisation. The hubs will work in collaboration with national office to develop this framework, apply it as soon as possible to new projects and look at ways of retrofitting the data collection strategy to completed projects. We agree this should be a priority.

6. To assist further evaluations, including self-evaluation of projects, current and future fund recipients should be asked to produce a document that charts potential impacts at the beginning of a project, actual at the end and then subsequent effects over an agreed period of (say) two years. The diary would discuss intended and unintended impacts of the project, subsequent project work and any transformative effects, and would attempt to gauge the scope of the impact.



Our response

Recommendations here will be taken into consideration in work planned under recommendation 5. The work currently being undertaken through national office, to provide a summary guide to practitioners about collecting evidence of learner benefits, will also be useful in this context.

7. The hub project fund policy and guidelines should clearly outline the organisation’s intention to support treaty-based projects and partnerships, and the implications of this for individual projects supported by the fund.



Our response

Hubs will work on developing policy and guidelines in this area, using those of the Māori Initiative Project stream of the National Project Fund as a guide.

8. Ako Aotearoa should examine how to ensure that a focus on Māori and Pacific students, teachers, knowledge systems, organisations and partnerships can be more effectively integrated into all relevant projects.



Our response

This will be picked up alongside actions planned for recommendation 7 also utilising approaches being developed for the Pacific peoples’ Project Funding stream in the National Project Fund.

9. That selection criteria be developed, agreed and published for the hub project fund, that are available to be utilised should demand for funding begin to exceed the number of eligible project applications.



Our response

Current projections for new projects for this year do not reflect the concerns in the report with respect to this recommendation. We will work on this if the demand for project support necessitates making the Regional Hub Project Fund a competitive fund in the future. It is our intention to keep this fund as an open fund for the foreseeable future.

10. A summative evaluation should be undertaken in about two years’ time, which revisits a sample of projects and considers the quantitative impact and effects at that time via an in-depth survey.



Our response

Agreed. We plan to commission a summative evaluation on this fund in the second quarter of 2012.

