

**TEU****TERTIARY EDUCATION UNION**  
**TE HAUTŪ KAHURANGI**

Submission of

**Te Hautū Kahurangi | Tertiary Education  
Union**

to the

**Ministry of Education**

on the

***Draft Tertiary Education Strategy***

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. Te Hautū Kahurangi | Tertiary Education Union (TEU) welcomes this opportunity to respond to the *Draft Tertiary Education Strategy*.
- 1.2. The TEU is the largest union and professional association representing 12,000 academic and general/allied staff in the tertiary education sector (in universities, institutes of technology/polytechnics, wānanga, private training establishments, and rural education activities programmes).
- 1.3. The TEU actively acknowledges Te Tiriti o Waitangi as the foundation for the relationship between Māori and the Crown. We recognise the significance of specific reference to Te Tiriti in the Education Act and the emergent discourse resulting from this. We also accept the responsibilities and actions that result from our nation's signing of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- 1.4. The TEU expresses its commitment to Te Tiriti by working to apply the four whāinga (values) from our *Te Koeke Tiriti* framework as a means to advance our TEU Te Tiriti relationship in all our work and decision-making – with members and when engaging on broader issues within the tertiary sector and beyond – such as our response to the *Draft Tertiary Education Strategy*.

*Tū kotahi, tū kaha – We are strong and unified; we are committed to actions which will leave no-one behind; we create spaces where all people can fully participate, are fairly represented, and that foster good relationships between people.*

*Ngā piki, ngā heke – We endure through good times and bad; we work to minimise our impact on the environment; we foster ahikā – the interrelationship of people and the land, including supporting tūrangawaewae – a place where each has the right to stand and belong.*

*Awhi atu, awhi mai – We take actions that seek to improve the lives of the most vulnerable; we give and receive, acknowledging that reciprocity is fundamental to strong and equitable relationships; and we work to advance approaches that ensure quality public tertiary education for all.*

*Tātou, tātou e – We reach our goals through our collective strength and shared sense of purpose, which are supported through participatory democratic decision-making processes and structures.*

- 1.5. Our response to the *Draft Tertiary Education Strategy* stems from our commitment to the whāinga expressed above and our wish to see these enacted in the tertiary education sector and in our society and communities.

## 2. PREAMBLE

- 2.1. A national strategy is essential to guide the system and set expectations for how tertiary education contributes to the wellbeing of Aotearoa New Zealand. While the draft TES identifies key areas of focus, it frames these priorities too narrowly through the lens of economic growth and productivity. This diminishes the broader civic, cultural, environmental, and social purposes of tertiary education, and overlooks the central role of staff and students in sustaining the system. At a time when many countries are grappling with similar challenges of balancing economic imperatives with equity, academic freedom, and sustainability, Aotearoa New Zealand has the opportunity to set an international example by adopting a more holistic and future-focused vision for tertiary education.
- 2.2. Tertiary education strengthens our democracy by fostering independent, critical thinking and providing the knowledge base for informed public debate. It supports social cohesion by bringing together diverse communities, creating shared spaces of learning, and equipping people with the skills to navigate difference with understanding and respect. It advances cultural identity and expression by sustaining te reo Māori, mātauranga Māori, Pacific knowledge systems, and the creative arts, ensuring that Aotearoa's unique cultural life thrives. In all of these ways, tertiary institutions contribute far more than simply preparing people for employment — they underpin the civic fabric of society.
- 2.3. None of these contributions are possible without staff. Academic and general staff are the foundation of teaching, research, and student support, yet their working conditions have been steadily eroded by underinvestment which in turn leads to rising casualisation and excessive workloads. Student learning conditions are inseparable from staff working conditions: where staff are secure in their employment, well-resourced, and respected, students are better able to succeed. The draft TES does not acknowledge this relationship, and by omitting it, fails to recognise one of the most fundamental drivers of educational quality and achievement.
- 2.4. It is also concerning that the draft TES makes no reference to the role of tertiary education in advancing environmental sustainability or responding to climate change. The sector is uniquely placed to lead in this area: through research that generates new knowledge and technologies for mitigation and adaptation; through teaching that equips learners with the skills, values, and critical

understanding needed for a just transition; and through institutional practices that model sustainability in energy use, transport, procurement, and campus life. Tertiary institutions are also sites where communities can come together to debate and shape responses to the climate crisis, ensuring that policy and innovation are informed by evidence and by diverse perspectives. By omitting any recognition of this role, the draft TES neglects one of the defining responsibilities of education in the 21st century.

2.5. As indicated in our recommendations, it is our view that the TES needs to be rebalanced to ensure it recognises the full value of tertiary education: economic, civic, cultural, social, and environmental. Only by embedding equity, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, decent work for staff, and the public-good role of education at its core can the strategy deliver a system that genuinely serves all people of Aotearoa New Zealand.

### 3. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

PRIORITY	RECOMMENDATION
<i>Priority 1: Achievement</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Broaden the definition of achievement to include civic, cultural, and intellectual development alongside qualification completions and employment outcomes.</li> <li>2. Address systemic barriers to student success — including financial hardship, racism, ableism, and inadequate support — through stable public investment.</li> <li>3. Recognise the direct link between staff working conditions and student learning conditions by embedding commitments to decent work and secure employment for tertiary staff.</li> </ol>
<i>Priority 2: Economic Impact and Innovation</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Balance economic objectives with recognition of tertiary education's civic, cultural, and democratic roles.</li> <li>5. Ensure Industry Skills Boards and other governance structures include staff, union, student, and iwi representation to prevent employer capture.</li> <li>6. Safeguard curiosity-driven and investigator-led research across disciplines from being overshadowed or displaced by commercialisation targets.</li> </ol>
<i>Priority 3: Access and Participation</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Reframe access as an equity and Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligation, not just a driver of productivity.</li> </ol>

	<p>8. Sustainably fund regional polytechnics and foundation education, with stable governance and secure staffing.</p> <p>9. Ensure flexible provision (online, blended, micro-credentials) complements, rather than substitutes, full qualifications and protects both equity of access and staff employment conditions.</p>
<i>Priority 4: Integration and Collaboration</i>	<p>10. Broaden collaboration to include social, cultural, and Te Tiriti o Waitangi-based partnerships, not just industry alignment.</p> <p>11. Address structural barriers — such as competitive funding and insecure staffing — that undermine collaboration.</p> <p>12. Resource and recognise staff contributions to integration work, ensuring collaboration strengthens both institutions and the working lives of staff.</p>
<i>Priority 5: International Education</i>	<p>13. Reframe international education as a reciprocal partnership focused on student wellbeing, intercultural exchange, and high-quality teaching and research.</p> <p>14. Resource staff and student services proportionately with international enrolments to protect quality and prevent staff overload.</p> <p>15. Link growth strategies to commitments to decent work for staff and protections for international student rights.</p> <p>16. Establish sustainable limits on international enrolment growth to safeguard educational quality, student wellbeing, and staff working conditions.</p>
<i>General</i>	<p>17. Explicitly acknowledge the role of tertiary education in advancing environmental sustainability and responding to climate change, embedding this responsibility either as a standalone priority or across all priorities.</p>

#### 4. PRIORITY 1: ACHIEVEMENT

4.1. TEU acknowledges that improving student achievement is a central responsibility of the tertiary education system; we want students to succeed and complete their qualifications. But equating achievement primarily with labour market outcomes overlooks the broader purposes of tertiary education. As set out in the Education and Training Act 2020, universities are required to act as the “critic and conscience of society,” and all tertiary institutions contribute to social, cultural, and civic life as well as economic prosperity. If achievement is reduced to whether students

complete a qualification that secures them employment, the system will undervalue creativity, critical thinking, and the personal and collective benefits of education that extend beyond the workplace.

- 4.2. The draft TES also underplays the systemic barriers that undermine learner success. Māori, Pacific peoples, learners living with disabilities, and other marginalised students continue to face disproportionately low rates of completion, but these disparities cannot be overcome simply through institutional accountability or performance metrics. Structural factors such as financial hardship, racism and discrimination, inadequate disability support, and insecure housing directly affect retention and progression. This requires a commitment to properly funding students in their learning journey and institutions in providing adequate pastoral and academic support.
- 4.3. In addition, the increasing casualisation of tertiary staff erodes the continuity and quality of support that students require. Unless these underlying issues are addressed through public investment and policy settings, the expectation that providers will “lift completion rates” is unrealistic and risks penalising institutions and learners alike.
- 4.4. Achievement is also closely tied to staff wellbeing and working conditions. International research consistently demonstrates that student outcomes improve when staff have secure employment, manageable workloads, and the resources needed to provide personalised teaching and support.<sup>1</sup> The removal of staff wellbeing as a distinct priority from the current TES is therefore a significant omission. The success of learners depends on the stability and capability of the staff who teach and support them; it is our view that this relationship must be explicitly recognised in the framing of achievement.

### ***Commentary on Priority 1 contributing activities***

- 4.5. The contributing activities listed in the draft TES are uneven in scope and ambition. Initiatives such as “distance travelled” measures and Disability Action Plans are welcomed but will remain tokenistic if not properly resourced and implemented.
- 4.6. Similarly, the emphasis on kaupapa Māori provision and foundation education programmes is essential, yet these areas have historically suffered from unstable

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<sup>1</sup> See [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/benchmarking-higher-education-system-performance\\_be5514d7-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/benchmarking-higher-education-system-performance_be5514d7-en.html)

funding. Without sustained investment, such commitments will remain aspirational rather than transformative.

- 4.7. The proposed alignment of achievement with employment outcomes must also be treated cautiously: employment opportunities are shaped by labour-market conditions that providers cannot control, and there is a danger that the tertiary education sector will be judged by factors outside its remit. A more balanced approach would be to support providers with the resources to both address barriers to student achievement and ensure measurements of success which reflect both academic progress and the broader purposes of tertiary education.

### ***Priority 1: Achievement – recommendations***

- 4.8. The TES should broaden its definition of achievement to encompass civic, cultural, and intellectual development alongside qualification completions and employment outcomes.
- 4.9. The Government should address structural barriers to learner success by resourcing comprehensive student support, reducing financial hardship, and recognising the impact of staff working conditions on student achievement.
- 4.10. The contributing activities under this priority should be underpinned by stable, long-term investment to ensure that kaupapa Māori provision, Disability Action Plans, and foundation education are delivered effectively and equitably.
- 4.11. The TES should explicitly acknowledge the direct link between student learning conditions and staff working conditions, committing to decent work and secure employment for tertiary staff as a necessary foundation for learner achievement.

## **5. PRIORITY 2: ECONOMIC IMPACT AND INNOVATION**

- 5.1. We recognise that tertiary education has an important role in contributing to economic life through research, innovation, and the development of graduates with knowledge and skills. However, the draft TES places excessive weight on productivity and labour-market outcomes, framing education primarily as an instrument of economic growth. This emphasis narrows the mission of tertiary education, sidelining its civic, cultural, and intellectual contributions. The broad value of tertiary learning — as a source of critical thinking, democratic participation, and cultural enrichment — will be undermined when economic performance becomes the dominant measure of success.
- 5.2. A further concern lies in the proposed governance and influence of employers and Industry Skills Boards (ISBs). While employer perspectives are valuable in

shaping relevant vocational provision, industry-dominated governance can undermine the diversity of voices that should guide education. Academic staff, students, unions, iwi, and communities must play an equal role in determining the direction of tertiary programmes. Over-reliance on employer needs will lock the system into short-term definitions of skills, eroding the academic independence required for long-term innovation and creativity.

- 5.3. The prioritisation of research commercialisation is also problematic if pursued without balance. While applied research has an important role, the history of higher education shows that many transformative discoveries have come from investigator-led, curiosity-driven research. Tying research too closely to immediate commercial outcomes threatens to erode academic freedom and compromise the statutory responsibility of universities to act as the “critic and conscience of society.” It is likely to also stymie the desired innovation and productivity sought by the Government by narrowing what research is carried out in our universities. In addition, pressure to generate commercial returns can divert resources away from social, artistic, cultural, or indigenous research, and reduce the level of research on Aotearoa and our local needs, as these do not lend themselves easily to monetisation but they are of immense public value.

#### ***Commentary on Priority 2 contributing activities***

- 5.4. The contributing activities under this priority highlight knowledge transfer, research commercialisation, entrepreneurial education, AI leadership, ISB guidance, and stronger links with the Māori economy. These aims cannot be pursued effectively without safeguards.
- 5.5. For example, knowledge transfer should extend to social and cultural innovation, not just commercial partnerships. AI leadership must incorporate ethical and equity frameworks, not simply technical expertise. ISBs should be structured to ensure democratic representation, avoiding employer capture. Partnerships with the Māori economy must be anchored in tino rangatiratanga, rather than framed solely in economic terms.
- 5.6. Taken together, the activities show ambition, but without explicit protections for academic freedom, staff and student voices, and kaupapa Māori principles, they will reshape tertiary education into a narrow economic utility.

#### ***Priority 2: Economic Impact and Innovation – recommendations***



- 5.7. The TES should balance its economic objectives with explicit recognition of tertiary education's civic, artistic, cultural, and democratic roles, ensuring these are given equal weight to productivity and innovation goals.
- 5.8. The Government should require that Industry Skills Boards and other governance mechanisms include representation from staff, students, unions, and iwi, protecting democratic decision-making and preventing employer capture.
- 5.9. The TES should safeguard curiosity-driven research and academic freedom by ensuring that research commercialisation targets do not overshadow or displace investigator-led research or limit the public-good contributions of tertiary scholarship.

## **6. PRIORITY 3: ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION**

- 6.1. We strongly support access and participation as a priority for tertiary education, but we are concerned that the draft TES frames access primarily in terms of its contribution to a "productive economy." While the strategy rightly notes that participation rates have declined for some groups and remain disproportionately low for Māori, Pacific peoples, learners living with disabilities, and those from marginalised backgrounds, it does not sufficiently foreground equity, social justice, or Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations.
- 6.2. Participation is not only about numbers in classrooms but also about addressing systemic barriers such as financial hardship, racism, ableism, and the high cost of living. Unless these structural issues are explicitly tackled, widening access will inevitably be reduced to a rhetorical goal rather than a substantive commitment.
- 6.3. The draft TES places considerable emphasis on flexible modes of delivery — including online learning, blended provision, and micro-credentials — as solutions to access challenges. While such options may benefit some learners, they also carry risks if quality and equity safeguards are not built in. Digital divides and affordability of devices remain significant barriers for many learners. Moreover, an over-reliance on fragmented short-course provision can undermine progression into higher-level qualifications and exacerbate workforce casualisation for staff. Access is not only a question of entry points, but of creating sustainable, high-quality educational journeys that allow learners to thrive.
- 6.4. The vocational education and training sector has faced prolonged disruption from recent structural reforms, and staff, students, and communities have lost confidence in the stability of local provision. Rebuilding trust requires stable governance, secure staffing, and long-term investment rather than piecemeal

initiatives. If regional participation is to be strengthened, polytechnics must be funded and empowered to act as genuine anchors for local skills, cultural development, and community life, not just as training pipelines for industry.

### ***Commentary on Priority 3 contributing activities***

- 6.5. The contributing activities under this priority touch on rebuilding regional polytechnics, supporting foundation education, expanding secondary-tertiary pathways, growing online provision, and increasing the use of micro-credentials.
- 6.6. These are all important areas, but their effectiveness depends on whether they are adequately resourced and implemented in ways that protect equity and quality.
- 6.7. Foundation education has often been the first to face cuts in times of fiscal restraint, yet it is crucial for enabling young people with limited prior attainment to re-engage in learning. Similarly, credit-transfer and mobility between providers are worthwhile goals, but without consistent national frameworks, they will become bureaucratic hurdles. Taken together, the activities must be anchored in a clear equity lens, otherwise they will not meaningfully change participation patterns for under-served groups.

### ***Priority 3: Access and Participation – recommendations***

- 6.8. The TES should reframe access and participation as an equity and Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligation, ensuring that systemic barriers such as cost, racism, and ableism are explicitly addressed alongside widening participation.
- 6.9. The Government should ensure sustainable investment in regional polytechnics and foundation education, with secure staffing and governance structures that restore confidence and provide stable pathways for learners and strong connections with employers.
- 6.10. The strategy should treat flexible provision (online learning, blended modes, and micro-credentials) as complementary to, rather than substitutes for, full qualifications, with strong safeguards to protect equity, progression, and staff working conditions.

## **7. PRIORITY 4: INTEGRATION AND COLLABORATION**

- 7.1. We agree that stronger collaboration across the tertiary sector and with external partners can enhance outcomes for students, communities, and the economy.

- 7.2. However, the draft TES frames collaboration largely as a mechanism for aligning education with labour-market needs and for increasing research commercialisation. This framing undervalues other essential forms of integration — particularly partnerships that strengthen social cohesion, uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and support inclusive learning environments. Collaboration must be defined more broadly to encompass genuine partnerships with iwi, communities, staff, and students, rather than being restricted to institutional relationships with employers and industry.
- 7.3. There is also a danger that the strategy assumes collaboration will naturally emerge if signalled as a priority, without recognising the structural barriers that currently inhibit it. Competitive funding models, short-term contracts, and precarious staffing arrangements all undermine trust and continuity between institutions, communities, and industry. Staff are often expected to take on collaborative work — such as joint curriculum design, community engagement, or industry partnerships — without adequate recognition, workload relief, or professional development support. Integration will not succeed if it relies on unpaid or under-valued labour from already over-stretched staff. Ensuring that collaboration is properly resourced, embedded in institutional strategies, and linked to decent work is essential.
- 7.4. The emphasis on iwi and hapū partnerships is welcome, but it must go beyond symbolic references. Collaboration with Māori must be grounded in tino rangatiratanga and adequately funded to ensure that iwi and hapū are equal partners, not simply stakeholders. Similarly, collaboration between universities and Public Research Organisations should not only be measured in terms of commercial outputs, but also in terms of public benefit and knowledge-sharing. Staff at all levels, from academic researchers to general staff, are essential to building and sustaining these partnerships, and their expertise and labour must be recognised as integral to integration and collaboration.

#### ***Commentary on Priority 4 recommendations***

- 7.5. The contributing activities for this priority — such as regional collaboration between providers, greater sharing of infrastructure, and stronger alignment with employers and industry — will not succeed without deliberate measures to address workload pressures, secure staffing, and institutional competition.
- 7.6. For example, joint curriculum delivery across institutions requires time, resources, and recognition for staff who carry out the integration work. Partnerships with employers can only be effective if staff have the capacity and autonomy to co-design meaningful programmes, rather than being directed to

deliver pre-determined outcomes. If collaboration is treated as an add-on rather than a core resourced activity, it will falter.

- 7.7. The TES must acknowledge that integration is not only about institutional structures but also about the working conditions of the staff who implement them.

***Priority 4: Integration and Collaboration – recommendations***

- 7.8. The TES should broaden its definition of integration and collaboration to emphasise social, cultural, and Te Tiriti o Waitangi-based partnerships alongside economic and industry relationships.
- 7.9. The Government should remove structural barriers to collaboration by addressing competitive funding settings and ensuring staff workloads, recognition, and employment conditions enable genuine partnership work.
- 7.10. Collaboration initiatives should be underpinned by stable funding and explicit recognition of staff contributions, ensuring that integration strengthens both institutional relationships and the working lives of those delivering education and research.

**8. PRIORITY 5: INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION**

- 8.1. TEU acknowledges the value of international education as a means of building global connections, enriching Aotearoa New Zealand's tertiary system, and supporting intercultural understanding.
- 8.2. However, the draft TES frames international education primarily as an export industry to be doubled in value by 2034. This narrow economic framing commodifies international students, treating them more as revenue streams than as learners and members of our communities. A robust strategy for international education must place educational quality, student wellbeing, and reciprocal exchange at its centre, rather than prioritising marketing and enrolment targets.
- 8.3. The draft TES does not adequately address the risks posed by rapid international education growth. Staff workloads, already stretched by underfunding and casualisation, will increase further if student numbers are expanded without additional investment in teaching, support, and infrastructure. Likewise, the quality of the student experience depends not only on immigration and marketing settings but also on the availability of well-resourced student services

and secure, adequately supported staff. Without these conditions, rapid growth will come at the expense of both international and domestic learners.

- 8.4. The potential contribution of international education to research, innovation, and community development is also underplayed. International students and scholars enrich our institutions through diverse perspectives and global linkages. Yet if international education is reduced to “bums-on-seats” targets, these broader benefits will be sidelined. Moreover, there is little acknowledgment that international partnerships should be reciprocal, contributing to the development of partner countries and communities rather than being framed solely as economic opportunities for Aotearoa New Zealand.

#### ***Commentary on Priority 5 contributing activities***

- 8.5. The contributing activities — including global marketing campaigns, agent networks, AI-driven recruitment tools, and immigration settings — prioritise enrolment growth without sufficient attention to student welfare or staff capacity.
- 8.6. Marketing strategies cannot substitute for investment in the teaching and support infrastructure that sustains high-quality education. Nor can AI recruitment systems or improved agent models ensure genuine intercultural exchange. For international education to be sustainable and ethical, the TES must commit to protecting educational standards, ensuring fair employment for staff, and embedding student wellbeing in every aspect of delivery.

#### ***Priority 5: International Education – recommendations***

- 8.7. The TES should reframe international education as a reciprocal partnership focused on educational quality, student wellbeing, and intercultural exchange, rather than primarily as an export industry.
- 8.8. The Government should commit to resourcing staff and student support services proportionately with international student enrolments, ensuring that growth does not undermine quality or overload staff.
- 8.9. International education targets should be accompanied by explicit commitments to decent work for staff, high-quality teaching and research conditions, and protections for the wellbeing and rights of international students.
- 8.10. The TES should establish limits on international enrolment growth to safeguard educational quality, student wellbeing, and staff working conditions. Some tertiary education institutions have already taken step to moderate enrolments in order to preserve the quality of teaching and support available to both

domestic and international students. Embedding a similar principle within the national strategy would ensure that international education remains sustainable, reciprocal, and firmly anchored in the public-good mission of tertiary education.

## 9. CONCLUSION

- 9.1. TEU welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft TES and supports the aim of strengthening outcomes for learners, institutions, and communities.
- 9.2. However, we are concerned that the draft TES frames tertiary education too narrowly as an instrument of economic growth, often sidelining its civic, cultural, environmental, and democratic purposes. By focusing heavily on labour-market alignment, commercialisation, and export revenue, the strategy neglects equity, wellbeing, and the statutory role of universities as the “critic and conscience of society.” It also underplays the significance of tertiary education in preparing learners and researchers to respond to the existential challenges of environmental sustainability and climate change — areas where the sector must lead with knowledge, innovation, and public engagement.
- 9.3. For the TES to be genuinely transformative, it must embed commitments to equity, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, academic freedom, environmental responsibility, and decent work for staff across all priorities. Student learning conditions are inseparable from staff working conditions, and sustainable outcomes require secure employment, manageable workloads, and robust support services.
- 9.4. We urge the Government to adopt a more balanced strategy — one that recognises the public-good value of tertiary education, invests in the people who deliver it, and ensures all learners can thrive, not only as future workers but as active participants in a fair, democratic, and environmentally sustainable Aotearoa New Zealand.