TERTIARY EDUCATION AND TE TAIAO – CLIMATE CHANGE AND SUSTAINABILITY

Introduction

Aotearoa New Zealand's tertiary education sector has a critical role to play in supporting Aotearoa New Zealand to respond to climate change and ensure a sustainable and equitable future.[1] Our tertiary education sector is uniquely positioned to generate knowledge, model sustainable practices, and support just transitions for communities and industries. Te Hautū Kahurangi | Tertiary Education Union (TEU) recognises that climate action – central to which is the reciprocal relationship between tāngata and Papatūānuku – is inseparable from the public mission of tertiary education and is essential to the long-term wellbeing of kaimahi (staff), ākonga (students), and communities.

Consistent with TEU's Equity Policy, this policy recognises the intersecting inequities experienced by women, Māori, Pacific, disabled persons, queer, migrant, and other marginalised kaimahi and ākonga. While this document focuses specifically on climate change and sustainability, it should be read alongside TEU's policies on Equity, Funding, Decent Work, and Te Tiriti o Waitangi, which provide further detail on intersecting principles and commitments.

Whare — Our aspiration

We envisage a tertiary education sector that models leadership in responding to the climate crisis. In this future, climate responsibility is embedded in teaching, research, governance, and institutional operations. Tertiary institutions act as exemplars of sustainability, regenerative practice, operating with a low carbon footprint, resilient infrastructure, and practices that demonstrate care for the environment. Te Tiriti o Waitangi is honoured with mana whenua exercising tino rangatiratanga in relation to whenua and taonga.

Teaching, research, and community engagement foster the knowledge, understanding, and capabilities needed to sustain people and planet. Curricula and pedagogy at every level reflect a deep integration of climate change, sustainability, circular economy, intergenerational justice, and participatory democracy – grounded in te ao Māori and

[1] Within the context of TEU policies, 'tertiary education sector' is the umbrella term used to infer the following sub-sectors: polytechnic; PRRISM (private; REAP; research institutes; statutory; miscellaneous); university; and Wānanga.

mātauranga Māori, and taught in ways that inspire both critical thought and emotional connection. Educators and ākonga are well supported through optimum working and learning conditions and ongoing professional learning that equips them to teach and learn across disciplines and to nurture a sense of shared responsibility for the future. Reciprocal relationships between tertiary institutions and communities flourish, creating spaces where collective learning and action drive enduring environmental and social transformation.

Kaimahi and ākonga are equipped with the knowledge and skills to contribute to just transitions in work and society. Research is future-focused, interdisciplinary, and responsive to community needs, supporting mātauranga Māori to flourish alongside scientific and technical expertise. Campuses are models of sustainable design, fostering environments that are accessible, inclusive, resilient, and conducive to climate impacts. The sector contributes not only to national climate targets but also to a broader vision of intergenerational wellbeing.

Pou — Why this policy is needed

The urgency of climate change and other environmental crises requires the tertiary education sector to act decisively. Institutions are significant users of energy, transport, and resources, and have both the opportunity and responsibility to reduce their environmental impact. At the same time, tertiary education is uniquely placed to prepare society for climate transitions by embedding sustainability in all learning and advancing climate-focused research.

Despite growing awareness, significant barriers prevent tertiary education from fully realising its potential in addressing climate change and environmental sustainability. Climate-related content is often unevenly embedded across programmes, with limited coordination between disciplines and insufficient recognition of mātauranga Māori as central to environmental understanding and action. Many educators lack access to the training, time, or institutional support required to develop new curricula and pedagogical approaches, while existing funding models prioritise short-term outputs over long-term social and ecological goals. Community partnerships and public education initiatives remain underdeveloped, limiting opportunities for reciprocal learning and collective climate action. Without systemic change, tertiary institutions risk remaining reactive rather than leading the transformation that this moment demands.

Climate change has direct implications for campuses and communities, from rising insurance costs to physical risks from extreme weather events. It also presents equity challenges: some groups are disproportionately affected by climate disruption, and

without deliberate action this could widen existing inequities as well as create new forms of inequity.

As outlined in TEU's Equity Policy, addressing the systemic barriers faced by marginalised groups is a necessary part of ensuring that climate strategies are fair, effective, and inclusive.

Waka — Our actions

To achieve our aspirations, TEU will implement a range of the following actions.

Advocacy

- Advocate for tertiary institutions to adopt sector-wide climate adaptation and mitigation strategies aligned with the goal to limit global warming to 1.5°C.
- Advocate for sustainability transitions that protect kaimahi and ākonga wellbeing by ensuring campus environments remain safe, healthy, and comfortable, with energy efficiency measures balanced against the need for conducive working and learning conditions.
- Ensure climate education and decision-making are centred on mātauranga Māori, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and the reciprocal relationship between tāngata and Papatūānuku..
- Advocate for the integration of climate change, sustainability, and just transition content across all disciplines, supported by national frameworks and tertiary education strategy settings.
- Advocate for climate-resilient and accessible campus infrastructure, ensuring the needs of disabled kaimahi and ākonga are prioritised in adaptation planning.
- Ensure sustainability and climate change are woven throughout tertiary curricula, rather than confined to specific disciplines, and that mātauranga Māori and local community knowledge are integral to course content and design.

Campaigning

- Campaign for government funding to support sustainable infrastructure, research, and teaching, ensuring costs are not shifted onto kaimahi or ākonga.
- Call for sustained government and institutional investment in educator capability-building, curriculum renewal, and pedagogical innovation to support effective climate education.
- Hold institutions accountable for sharing and meeting their sustainability commitments through consultation, monitoring, and transparent reporting.

Organising

- Support members to engage in climate-related initiatives and decision-making through training, resources, and workplace advocacy.
- Support members involved in curriculum design and delivery to embed sustainability, circular economy, and intergenerational justice into their teaching practice.
- Provide professional learning opportunities and networks for members to share resources, research, and examples of transformative climate teaching and learning.
- Ensure that kaimahi have the rights, protections, and resourcing necessary to undertake climate-focused research and teaching.
- Protect decent work in the context of institutional sustainability transitions, opposing precarious employment or outsourcing under the guise of "efficiency."

Partnerships

- Partner with ākonga associations, sustainability-focused clubs, iwi and hapū, community groups, and environmental organisations to discover and advance shared goals of climate justice and sustainability.
- Encourage tertiary institutions to work closely with local communities, iwi and hapū, on adaptation planning and to act as anchors of resilience during climate events.

Policy sign-off and ownership details

Document name	Tertiary Education and Te Taiao – Climate Change and Sustainability
Classification	Professional
Version number	1.0
Sponsor	Te Pou Ahurei | National Secretary
Policy Owner	Te Pou Tuhura | Research and Policy Officer
Date approved	29 April 2026
Date for review	31 December 2027
Document location	G:\TEU\Constitution & Policies\Policies\PROFESSIONAL_Tertiary Education and Te Taiao – Climate Change and Sustainability.pdf
Related policies	Professional policies
Equity assessment and policy whakapapa	This policy was developed in late 2025. Input from TEU's committees and networks informed the content of this policy. Minor amendments were suggested by TEU Council in early 2026 – a working group was formed to coordinate these amendments.

Revision history

Version	Date	Revision description	Owner
v1.0			
v1.1			
v1.2			

v2.0			