



# Contributing to better tertiary teaching and learning outcomes – the summary

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A summary of two reports on the impact of Ako Aotearoa's co-funded projects

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for Ako Aotearoa



This document is a summary of the following two reports by Fleur Chauvel:

*Collation of information from Impact Evaluation Framework Conversations about 22 co-funded Regional Hub Project Fund projects (March 2017)*

*Understanding project value and impact and the co-funding approach from the budget-holder perspective (March 2017)*



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Published by  
Ako Aotearoa | National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence

Date: July 2017

ISBN 978-0-947516-76-5 (online)

978-0-947516-77-2 (print)

More information and download free at:

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## Introduction

Ako Aotearoa works alongside tertiary education organisations to support them to explore and evaluate new approaches designed to improve tertiary teaching and learning. One of these ways of working involves co-funded evidence-based change projects with a high potential to benefit learners. We have evaluated the impact of this co-investment in change projects and the value added of both co-funding and the project outcomes themselves. Evidence indicates there is high value in this model and also scope for change.

## The Project Funds

Ako Aotearoa's remit includes working with tertiary education organisations and supporting them to investigate teaching and learning approaches. One component of this is project funding which includes both the Regional Hub Project Fund (RHPF) and the National Project Fund (NPF). The former supports exploratory regional-based projects that are expected to result in a measurable improvement in tertiary teaching and learning. The NPF is a strategic change fund that supports longer-term, large-scale national-level evidence-based change in teaching and learning practice for the benefit of learners.

Ako Aotearoa's project fund moved to co-funding in mid-2012 as part of a new business model that seeks to focus on projects that will effect change, a significant change from the past funding model where Ako Aotearoa fully funded projects. Part of the rationale for a move to the co-funding model was the premise that organisations actively investing in change projects would be more likely to act on the outcomes of results.

## Outlining the Evaluative Approach

The information contained here comes from two evaluative approaches – Ako Aotearoa-initiated evaluations and independent evaluations.

The RHPF co-funded projects are evaluated using Ako Aotearoa's Impact Evaluation Framework (IEF) which supports project teams to explore the impact of their projects on learners, practitioners, and project teams themselves. It also determines project reach.

As part of a robust evaluative approach, Ako Aotearoa commissioned an independent contractor to conduct two evaluations. The first related directly to the RHPF impact evaluations outlined above. The contractor undertook an analysis of the data from the impact evaluation conversations of 22 RHPF projects completed between 2013 and 2015. No NPF projects were included in this evaluation as few had been completed at that time.

The second evaluation was carried out directly with budget-holders from 32 co-funded projects that had been completed or were nearing completion by October 2016. These included both RHPF and NPF projects.

## Scope of Projects

The projects included in this evaluation are diverse in approach, objectives and settings. They include those that focused on:

- highlighting experiences and knowledge of good practice to inform internal organisational practice;
- contributing to discourse and understanding for the benefit of the wider sector;
- implementation of teaching and learning approaches to enhance knowledge development;
- improving learner engagement, learning experiences and learner achievement outcomes;
- evaluating teaching and learning practices for effectiveness and validity; and
- utilising learner voice to inform future initiatives and practice.

These contributed to both institutional and national understanding of teaching and learning approaches and initiatives. Co-funders were also interested in projects that:

- evaluated existing approaches, or trial and evaluate new approaches, before wider implementation;
- built insights in emerging areas to support innovation and enhance the reputation of the institution; and
- contributed to the experience, reputation, and capability development of project team members.



## Project Impact

Project impact was analysed using Ako Aotearoa's IEF and therefore focused on the four key dimensions of reach, and impact on learners, practitioners and project teams.

### Reach

Data collected from Ako Aotearoa's website on project web page views and output downloads enabled project reach to be gauged. The data was particularly useful for showing individual projects that had a notably higher number of views, and for demonstrating interest and relevance to the sector. While there are some limitations in analysing collated data across multiple projects, this information provides a useful baseline for determining reach.

At six months post project completion, 2,613 web page views were recorded across the 22 projects, 85% of which were by unique users. A significant increase in page views was evident when data was analysed for just nine projects that had been completed for 12 or 24 months. Total page views more than doubled to 5,667 indicating ongoing relevance and reach of the projects over time.

The same pattern was evident for project output downloads. At six months post project completion, 1,200 project outputs had been downloaded across the 22 projects with a similar rate of unique users. Output downloads more than doubled to 2,281 when data from the nine projects that had completed 12- or 24-month impact evaluation conversations was added.

Topical or emerging issues typically attracted high views or downloads.

Reach is also measured by dissemination activity. At the time of their six-month impact evaluations, 70 separate dissemination activities had been undertaken across the projects.

Dissemination activities for 22 RHFP projects at six-month IE conversations	
Conference presentations	28
Meetings and / or general presentations	23
Ako Aotearoa branded workshops	6
Media (e.g. TV, radio, newspaper)	5
Journal articles	4
General publications (e.g. chapter in book)	4

### Project Snapshot

The project *A beginner's guide to plagiarism* by Dr Deb Hill achieved the greatest number of downloads across all projects. Six months post completion, project outputs and information received 1,058<sup>1</sup> views (87% were unique users). The project resource was viewed 565 times and downloaded 426 times at the time of the six-month impact evaluation conversation.

*"I work in a training centre in... Ireland teaching...adults with various disabilities. I have been a long time trying out various methods in the classroom to demonstrate to learners how not to plagiarise...Your guide has been immensely useful as it is simple and uncomplicated."*

National Learning Network,  
Sligo, Ireland

### Key Finding

Information collected on dissemination activities to date shows that project dissemination activities are greatest in the first six months following projects completing. Few additional dissemination activities have been observed for projects at 12 and 24 months following completion.

<sup>1</sup>565 webpage views, 112 Ako Aotearoa shop page views and 381 views of a news alert relevant to the project.

## Impact on Learners

Collectively, 6,672 learners were identified as likely to have benefitted from 15 completed RHFP projects. This figure includes projects completed for six, 12 and 24 months. One project significantly impacted this figure, with 4,000 learners estimated as benefitting from the project's contribution to a university's assessment policy.

Four other projects<sup>2</sup> also widely impacted learners, each project identifying that 300-plus learners had been impacted.

Estimated numbers of learners identified as benefitting from projects solely at the six-month post-project completion point is much lower at 2,288 so impact improves over time.

Impact on learners is considered in relation to the following five IEF themes:

- Academic enhancement: improved academic outcomes and contributions to learner's academic development;
- Enhanced learning environment and/or resources;
- Improved relationships within a learning environment (with peers, between learners and staff);
- Personal development (e.g. increased confidence); and
- Pathways and progression.

Academic enhancement and learning environment improvements are the most frequently impacted practices.

Budget-holders felt that benefits realised for learners related to improvements made to learning environments, numeracy and literacy achievement, quality of learner work, attendance, retention and completions, and improved pathway opportunities and progression to employment and further study.

<sup>2</sup> *Motivation and engagement of Māori and Pasifika students at PTEs: Lessons for improved teaching and learning techniques* led by Dr David Lillis, *Informing the development of a student profile for LLB degrees taught at NZ universities* led by Professor Ursula Cheer, *Teaching for Numeracy and Mathematics Transfer in Tertiary Science* led by Dr Erik Brogt, and *Evaluating a mentoring scheme for trainees in the Primary ITO* led by Mike Styles.

### Project Snapshot

It is estimated that 4,000 students have been impacted by the project *Contemporary Assessment Practices in University: Impact on Teachers and Students* led by Professor Tony Harland, because of changes to university assessment policy and practices that were contributed to by the project findings. That figure reflects the number of first-year university students enrolled in courses now operating under the university's new assessment policy.

The project *Change Strategies to Enhance Pasifika Student Success at Canterbury Tertiary Institutions* is an example where change is in progress. However, even from the early stages of the project, practitioners have commented on having a better understanding of the role of support and family for Pasifika learners.

*"I feel more empowered to act/work within a values based practice."*

Project Fono participant

### Key Finding

Project team members often comment on the difficulty of identifying definitively the impact on learners, and for some projects, it would be very difficult to track and attribute benefits to learners over time within the parameters of the project (e.g. given the specific scope, or in the absence of any tracking of impact).

## Impact on Practitioners

Across the 22 projects, it is estimated that 2,327 practitioners have benefitted or improved their practice because of the projects. This figure is based on 13 projects having had one impact evaluation interview six months post-project completion, and nine also having 12-month post-project interviews. At just six months post-project completion, a much smaller number of practitioners (661) had been impacted, again indicating that change is more likely over time.

Two projects represented around 88% of the total number of teachers impacted. Both projects have contributed to the introduction of a key organisational policy change or delivery of a new initiative.

Both budget-holders and teams acknowledged changes in teaching practice or the adoption of new practices occurring as a project outcome. These included:

- changes in curriculum design to embed project-based learning;
- better integration of theory and practice;
- adopting and utilising mobile devices in teaching;
- enhanced self-assessment and the use of baseline of data.

The implementation and use of project findings to benefit teaching practice is a continuous process with the potential to effect change occurring across time.



### Project Snapshot

Two projects - *Evaluating a Mentoring Scheme for Trainees in the Primary ITO* led by Mike Styles, and *Contemporary Assessment practices in University: Impact on Teachers and Students* led by Professor Harland - are estimated to have impacted 2,040 practitioners. The two projects represent around 88% of the total number of practitioner impacts.

*"The biggest difference that the project has made is that it has cemented relationships with other ITPs. Increased collaboration nationally has led to a co-development team with an increased knowledge of the industry. Basically, the project recommendations have been implemented in the new qualification. Over time we expect that there will be a consistent and higher quality graduate. This will improve the standard of the automotive engineer in all areas within our consortium."*

**Malcolm Hardy, Head of School, School of Applied Technology, Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology**

### Key Finding

In general, teachers internal to project organisations are impacted. However, the dissemination activities listed above indicate the impact, while indirect, is likely to be much more significant.

Several projects had no information available about the number of teachers impacted at the time of evaluation, noting that it was too early or too difficult to gauge the numbers of practitioners impacted. This is an opportunity to explore.

## Impact on Project Teams and External Organisations

Impact on project teams was mostly identified at the six-month impact evaluation conversations, with benefits continuing to be observed at 12- and 24-month impact conversations. Impact is considered in relation to four IEF themes:

- Developing careers or capability;
- Developing reputations;
- Enabling the development of further work; and
- Receiving awards or fellowships.

Impact included team members enhancing their research capability and understanding of the linkages between research, teaching and learning, specialist knowledge, and understanding of good practice. At least three projects contributed to project members' engagement in post-graduate study and three projects have facilitated the development of international relationships.

Many of the budget-holders felt project members had grown in knowledge and capability, engaged in further work and study and established important collaborative relationships.



### Project Snapshot

*"It's good to experience the co-funded project process as a new researcher. It helps to prepare to move to the major funding league."*

ITP

*"Ako Aotearoa's co-funding helps to grow research careers."*

University

The six-month impact evaluation for the project *Change Strategies to Enhance Pasifika Student Success at Canterbury Tertiary Institutions* identifies that the project has added evidence-based research that supports project members' practice. Team members have developed confidence in their project to the extent that they felt they could add benefit to institutions nationwide and have subsequently secured NPF funding.

### Key Finding

While it is beyond the scope of the IEF, several projects are providing direct and indirect benefits to their organisation, communities and industry.

The loss of key project team members has been a key challenge impacting significantly on project timeframes and the implementation of project findings.



## Value and Benefits of the Co-Funding Model

The collated information from impact evaluations with teams and interviews with budget-holders provides insights into the value of the co-funding model and the project outcomes.

Budget-holders were generally positive about the co-funding model and identified the difficulty of accessing funding elsewhere. For some, the projects would not have taken place without Ako Aotearoa funding or would have occurred on a lesser scale.

Co-funding has enabled project organisations to contract expertise to assist with projects or fill a resource or capability gap, adding to the robustness of projects. Most commonly this has been to provide research expertise or assistance.

The projects were valued for creating and contributing understanding in areas or contexts where this had been lacking. Budget-holders identified that projects have contributed to:

- supporting organisation decision-making, strategic objectives and self-assessment;
- evidential validation and strengthening of teaching and learning initiatives;
- improved programme delivery;
- enhanced reputation of the institution; and
- meeting research obligations.



*“We wouldn’t have been able to validate what we are doing and develop the resulting teaching model without it [co-funded project].”*

ITP

*“I hope that it is crystal clear to Ako Aotearoa that this funding is critical. It is very hard to get funding for this type of project.”*

University

*“Co-funding makes it possible for smaller institutions like this to undertake a very big project. Without the funding it may not have happened at all and we would have been stuck in the old programme structure, or have undertaken change in a shallow way.”*

ITP

*“The co-funding from Ako Aotearoa comes with a prestige value.”*

University

*“Because time and work is directly costed for, and we are responsible to a funding partner, it means that the project will be finished without it being stalled for whatever reason.”*

ITP

*“It has worked well. Most contributions are in-kind. Being in-kind made it doable, we didn’t actually have to front up with the money.”*

ITO

Multi-institution projects offered additional value in sharing knowledge and cementing relationships across institution for future collaboration or communities of practice.

Co-funding from Ako Aotearoa was seen to give projects credibility, utilised by budget-holders to promote engagement in the project and findings. They valued the robust practices Ako Aotearoa has in place to quality assure projects and lift the projects to a higher standard.

For several budget-holders, the co-funding approach facilitated a more accurate understanding of costs incurred in project work and offered a helpful 'in-kind' option.

A small number of budget-holders identified concerns with the co-funding model. This typically arose in situations where multi-partner projects had been under-costed or unexpected issues had arisen driving up time and costs substantially. A small PTE found that the compliance costs had been too high when considered in relation to the amount of funding and resources available to a small organisation.



## Implications and Recommendations

While challenges to project success were identified both by project teams and co-funders, the findings of the evaluations demonstrate value and impact across all dimensions of the Ako Aotearoa IEF. The significant increase in impact observed over time demonstrates the importance of continuing to track change.

Variable impact information across projects, and project teams' ability to identify and estimate impact signals that the development and use of common tools, such as an outcomes framework, rubrics, indicators of impact, and guidance about methods for estimating and collecting evidence of impact, could be useful to evaluation of project impact. A starting point may be to build on the 2012 document, *Creating Sustainable Change to Improve Outcomes for Tertiary Learners: A framework for thinking about projects in tertiary education* developed in 2012. A set of common tools would contribute to a consistent approach. In addition, clearer expectations around the collection, estimation and evidencing of impact would assist.

Budget-holders considered that there needed to be clear expectations around what the completion of the project could realistically result in, and how far the expectation of evidence of change should go.

Enablers of project success include the strength of project teams, solid project planning, the importance of the project to the co-funding institution and commitment to the project by senior leadership, as well as Ako Aotearoa's guidance and support.

There is scope for Ako Aotearoa to refine the process, expectations and support to attend to factors identified in the evaluation. These may include, but are not necessarily limited to, the following key considerations:

*"It is useful for Ako Aotearoa to reflect on what it wants and to signal this, taking into account the type of project and objective measures."*

University

*"This research has brought together a sector view using case studies. Ako Aotearoa should take the results and consider how the findings can be tested or applied on a more substantive scale in different contexts. Ako Aotearoa needs to decide if it is doing substantive research or small case studies."*

ITP

*"I would like Ako Aotearoa to focus on innovative, larger scale research. To stop dabbling around the edges. To take the results from these studies and to apply the findings in several ways. To track the wider impact. Lead large scale research. Longitudinal studies."*

ITP



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