

ETSG response

The ETSG is of the view that, while, in general terms, the Report is fair and accurate, the comments made by the reviewers – particularly regarding progress against agreed outcomes and goals – merit commentary.

First, a few general observations should be made. While the ETSG members consider the Report useful, they note that the review does not:

- a) Refer to the Terms of Reference (ToR) for the Enhancement Theme (see attached);
- b) Appears to be centred on the assumption that the ETSG itself is the locus of activity and, therefore, progress; whereas, the ToR are clear in stating the oversight and guidance role of the ETSG; and
- c) Does not refer to any data (beyond the small number of interviews with ETSG members) which can evidence a shift in outcomes for Māori and Pacific learners (this might have been offered as contextual information for any audience).

Notably, the reviewers were not tasked with assessing shifts at the sector level – and indeed, each university will be assessed on this during the course of the academic audit. It should be noted too that the development of guideline statements by the ETSG is intended to allow progress to be assessed through the audit phase of Cycle 6 to which individual universities will be accountable. But the Report does make a number of broad statements that betray a slight misreading of the ToR for the Enhancement Theme.

In light of the above, the ETSG suggests that the Enhancement Theme should be seen in context of the parameters in which it was established. The ETSG considers that the report particularly highlights the short timeframe left in terms of the remainder of the Theme and prompts useful questions for the group as to how we can and should make the best use of our remaining time.

The ETSG members recognise that, as the Report notes (along with the international reviewer cited in the Report) a number of benefits have been produced to date. First, in terms of the timeframe, given international benchmarks, we have made progress. When the enhancement-led approach began in the Scottish higher education sector, we understand that there was initially significant scepticism about whether matters raised by individual institutions in an ‘enhancement’ space might be used or valued in a review/audit context. Moreover, our understanding of the Scottish process is that it took some years for participating universities to develop trust and open collaboration.

Further, we note that broad culture change (in terms of implementing new actions to see different outcomes) in our organisations is not fast, nor is it an ‘overnight’ process, particularly if change is to be sustainable; the fact that all ETSG respondents value the opportunity for collaboration is in itself a positive outcome and a good basis on which to move into the next phase. Some members of the ETSG concur with the Report’s observation that if the Enhancement Theme has prompted universities to evaluate their own activities, then this is useful. Some members note too that there can often be a significant time lag between sector-level activity and organisational discussions and action taking place. Other members of the ETSG view the Theme as complementary to work already underway or planned within their institution in connection with their Māori and Pasifika strategies and plans.

Finally, all members endorse the Report’s finding that they appreciate and value the goodwill that exists among the group, the value of student voice in the Group and the increased levels of trust that have developed as a result. As the Report indicates, in addition to the high-level sharing, the Theme has

prompted individual institutions to evaluate their own activities – this again provides a useful base for future work.

There is much that is useful in the Report and its existence has invited the ETSG members to focus on what we can achieve between now and the end of March 2020 (noting that measuring and delivering ongoing outcomes in our universities in terms of impacting Māori and Pasifika students will take longer than a two-year period to continue to deliver ‘real’ evidence).

Some members of the ETSG question how we can achieve collective impact from individual contributions and whether funding issues should be considered. Some note, too, that common ground might exist in considering policy recommendations (noting that other groups are involved in policy work), but it is much harder in terms of implementing specific actions. Funding is, for all of us, an ongoing challenge, both in terms of levels of funding and allocation of existing funding; this is not an excuse for inaction, but it is part of the context in which we all operate.

The ETSG agrees with the observations in the Report that while an initiative might work well in one university, this does not mean it will necessary work well in another institution. Initiatives need to be a good fit for the institutional (staff and student) context and culture. The Report acknowledges the need to situate actions in specific contexts (at page 5 of the Report: ‘The Enhancement Theme approach is recognised as providing a source of support for pushing the importance of its focus and related activity at an individual university level, including with senior leadership.’)

The Report refers to different perspectives and levels of expectation which is an important point. This might be a useful point for the ETSG to discuss; to draw out and clarify further so the Group can, on behalf of the sector, communicate a shared understanding of the Theme, and its medium and longer-term ambitions. Progress on the Theme will continue to be considered throughout Cycle 6 of the Academic Audit. The ETSG will, too, have input into the development of guideline statements to be used in this Audit, noting that work and progress on the theme topic extends from well before and beyond the Enhancement Theme time period. Further, as the universities will be reviewed over three years, auditors will need to take into account how much time a university has had to demonstrate progress.

Other ETSG members commend the Report’s comments about the importance of student voice and ask if New Zealand might learn from other countries who have carried out similar work with regard to supporting first nations populations, either around student voice or in thinking about pedagogies and curriculum content (e.g. taking a ‘decolonising’ approach). This is a point for further discussion.

In the ‘hard conversations’ section of the Report, some of the detail requested (expectations) in the direct quotes sections are at a level of detail that may be difficult to achieve at this stage of the Enhancement Theme, especially as some of these ‘hard conversations’ have yet to be had or resolved at local levels. Some ETSG members asked that we should encourage member universities to share learning from their various activities, rather than comments on the strengths and weaknesses of the activities themselves. This is a valuable comment.

A number of ETSG members consider that the Report overplays the extent to which the Enhancement Theme constitutes a ‘first’. We note that senior members of our universities have certainly met to discuss various cross-cutting topics in the past and previous academic audits have examined access and achievement of Māori students and Pasifika students. We note, however, that this is the first time in New Zealand that an Enhancement Theme Steering Group has been constituted around this particular

topic. Similarly, we note that the comments regarding the extent to which the Enhancement Theme activity is a 'first' also applies to the ETSG Symposium held in Wellington in October 2018. Again, there will have been other gatherings that would claim to share many of the characteristics of the Symposium; however, it was probably the first time in New Zealand that such a meeting has been constructed in the way that it was, with the focus squarely on the New Zealand university sector.

Finally, some ETSG members note that the question of 'agreed priorities' sits in contrast to the design of the Enhancement Theme. The Enhancement Theme framework sets our objectives, outcomes, strategies, outputs and impact indicators. Although the plans set by each of the universities broadly cluster into activities addressing access, success and organisational change, there is no expectation that priorities will be agreed between universities. Each university ultimately is responsible for its own priorities, and progress on those priorities will be assessed in the audit phase of the forthcoming academic audit cycle. By the time of writing this summary response, we are about to enter the second quarter of 2019. The ETSG has twelve months' remaining. It is therefore imperative that we agree and have clarity about how we will focus our work in the remaining months of the Enhancement Theme.

Some members are of the view that the Theme could and should get more 'fine grained' about sharing effective practice – focussing on 'what works' and 'what doesn't work' - and potentially from this, the ETSG could derive a finite set of goals for the remainder of this year. This might be, for example, two or three key initiatives that a few or all universities commit to sharing and, where appropriate, testing. Another ETSG member suggested, in response to the Report, that we should move towards more detailed sharing of practice by encouraging universities to share the outcomes of their self-evaluation. We could then select the extent of detail to be shared; ideally, we would select those willing to share openly in the hope this provided a catalyst for others.

Finally, there is a view among most ETSG members that while the Report is useful, the purpose of the Theme is not to strive for the level of collective action that the Ako Aotearoa-commissioned Report appears to be indicating. The purpose of the Theme is on sharing good practice so that we can be collectively informed about what works well. In other words, this is about leading and guiding on practices that will deliver 'more than the sum of our collective parts'. This will be an important conversation for the ETSG going forward.

16 April 2019