MINISTRY OF EDUCATION
TE TĀHUHU O TE MĀTAURANGA

Education Report: Supporting every school to succeed – developing a national approach to flexible learning using distance education

To:	Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister of Education		
Date:	30 January 2020	Priority:	Medium
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Purpose of report

The purpose of this paper is to seek your agreement on an approach to policy work on distance education using online learning, to improve flexibility within the schooling system and ensure equitable learning opportunities.

Summary

1. *Supporting all schools to succeed: Reform of the Tomorrow's Schools system* says that "over the longer term [2-4 years], the Government will consider opportunities to promote a more cohesive national approach to support flexible learning."

2. The greatest opportunities to support flexible learning lie with changing how the schooling system enables and supports distance education. Distance education can also ensure access to the full breadth of the national curriculum. This will be of particular importance for ākonga in small schools, and in subjects impacted most by teacher shortages.

3. While you have agreed to work which will ensure the status quo is sustainable, there are three key gaps in the work programme which may identify where changes are needed for distance education.

    a. identifying the degree of access and choice in distance education we want to enable and/or support (e.g. who can be a recognised provider of distance education, and under which circumstances can ākonga access distance education);

    b. setting out clear functions, roles and responsibilities for high quality distance education across the schooling system; and

c.   ensuring resourcing and regulatory systems which assure online learning is high quality and will lead to excellent and equitable outcomes.

4.   Changes in these areas may impact work already agreed to. We propose one distance education work programme which sequences this work.

Recommended Actions

The Ministry of Education recommends that you:

a.   **note** that before the reform of the Tomorrow's Schools system was announced, you agreed to the Ministry starting a number of small pieces of work on online learning including:

   i.   progressing technical and clarifying changes through the Education and Training Bill [METIS 1175954 refers] by: updating the language from "correspondence" to "distance;" and making it clearer that all school boards can enter into dual tuition agreements, including tuition delivered online;

   ii.   starting work on the funding settings for dual tuition delivered online to improve equity of access to the full curriculum [METIS 1175954 refers]; and

   iii.   reviewing how Te Kura is funded [METIS 1205000 refers]

Noted

b.   **note** that in *Supporting all schools to succeed: Reform of the Tomorrow's Schools system*, you agreed to consider opportunities to promote a more cohesive national approach to support flexible learning and specialist provision. This would include the roles of Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu and the Virtual Learning Network (VLN), and the national and local special schools over the longer term [2-4 years]

Noted

c.   **agree** that work on flexible learning using distance education should be sequenced into one cohesive work programme which will:

   i.   identify the degree of access and choice in distance education we want to enable and/or support (e.g. who can be a recognised provider of distance education, and under which circumstances can ākonga access distance education);

Agree / Disagree

   ii.   set out clear functions, roles and responsibilities for high quality online learning across the schooling system; and

Agree / Disagree

   iii.   ensure resourcing and regulatory systems which assure online learning is high quality and will lead to excellent and equitable outcomes

Agree / Disagree

d. **agree** that the Ministry approach this work as:

   i. option A: enhancing the status quo by better enabling and supporting Te Kura and the VLNs to provide distance education, including working with schools;

   Agree /Disagree

   It's a combo of these 2 things

   ii. option B: considering the role all parts of the schooling system could have in making learning more flexible through distance education, and ways this could be enabled over time **(recommended)**; or

   Agree / Disagree

   iii. option C: creating a fully flexible schooling system

   Agree / Disagree

e. **note** that in the long term, this work could be revisited to create a fully flexible schooling system if it is seen as needed or desirable

   Noted

f. **note** that these decisions will separate advice on flexible learning from advice on specialist provision given their different roles in the schooling system, and you will receive advice on specialist provision at a later date

   Noted

Proactive Release Recommendation

g. **agree** that this Education Report is not proactively released because final decisions are still to be made on the wider piece of work.

   Agree / Disagree

Dr Andrea Schöllmann
Deputy Secretary
Education System Policy

30/01/2020

Hon Chris Hipkins
Minister of Education

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Background

New Zealanders want an inclusive, equitable, connected and flexible education system

1. In September 2019, the Government released a discussion document outlining the long-term vision, objectives and actions resulting from the Education Conversation | Kōrero Mātauranga. The vision reflects the overwhelming aspirations of New Zealanders, as expressed in their kōrero, for a more inclusive, equitable, connected and future-focussed New Zealand learning system.

2. For the purposes of this report, flexible learning refers to the requirements around the time and place where learning takes place, and the extent to which learning programmes can be personalised for ākonga. Distance education occurs when the teacher and the learner are not in the same physical location. Online learning is a mode of delivery that can be used in both distance and in-person learning environments.

3. The opportunities for online learning in schooling, both in-class and by distance, to achieve this vision were raised through the Education Conversation | Kōrero Mātauranga, including through enabling ākonga to:

    a. have equitable access to the full breadth of the National Curriculum, particularly in areas of teacher skill shortage, or for ākonga enrolled in small schools;

    b. have more control over when and how they learn;

    c. have learning programmes tailored to their interests, strengths, development areas, aspirations and learning styles;

    d. develop digital literacy and citizenship skills to succeed in future education, work and life; and

    e. access greater consistency in teaching and learning across the country.

4. There are likely to be ongoing skills shortages for teachers, particularly those in specialist subject areas. This is compounded for New Zealand ākonga living in rural or geographically isolated areas where schools are often not large enough to support specialisation, limiting curriculum breadth. Distance education delivered online is likely to play a key role in enabling equitable learning opportunities by addressing these shortages in the future.

5. On the other hand, submitters also raised their concerns about distance education (mostly delivered online), including:

    a. the need for student-teacher interaction to build educationally powerful relationships;

    b. low completion and achievement rates for distance learning programmes;

    c. that ākonga using distance learning may need support to develop the managing-self competencies that are essential to success for online learning;

    d. whether broadening access to distance learning will lead to schools "off-ramping" ākonga from disadvantaged backgrounds; and

    e. the impact of socio-economic status on the accessibility of digital devices.

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6. In contrast, Te Kura tell us that they have received positive feedback from ākonga and their families about increased engagement and achievement through distance education.

7. The mixed views of Te Kura and submitters to the Education Conversation | Kōrero Mātauranga are likely to reflect a broad range of experiences in distance learning under the current settings. These views will need to be explored further in new distance education work.

You have also agreed to work to ensure that current arrangements are sustainable

8. Through the Education Work Programme, we will drive towards this vision. *Supporting all schools to succeed: Reform of the Tomorrow's Schools system* says that "over the longer term [2-4 years], the Government will consider opportunities to promote a more cohesive national approach to support flexible learning." This would include reviewing the roles of Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu o Aotearoa (Te Kura) and the VLNs.

9. Before the reform of the Tomorrow's Schools system was announced, you agreed to the Ministry starting a number of small pieces of work on online learning including:

   a. progressing technical and clarifying changes through the Education and Training Bill [METIS 1175954 refers] by:

   - updating the language from "correspondence" to "distance;" and

   - making it clearer that all school boards can enter into dual tuition agreements, including tuition delivered online.

   b. starting work on the funding settings for dual tuition delivered online to improve equity of access to the full curriculum [METIS 1175954 refers]; and

   c. reviewing how Te Kura is funded [METIS 1205000 refers].

10. While this work is essential to modernise our legislation, and ensure there is no confusion about current arrangements, it will not in itself improve or expand the distance learning opportunities which are available for students.

The current distance learning policy framework limits how distance education can achieve what New Zealanders want

11. Distance learning has developed without a coherent policy framework or strategic government direction. As a result of an expansion in the functions provided by Te Kura, and new and emerging distance and/or online learning providers entering the education system, the policy framework underpinning online learning is no longer fit for purpose (Annex One).

12. This ad-hoc distance learning framework is limiting choice for ākonga and preventing equitable access to digital technologies and online learning. Having a regulatory and resourcing framework that supports full-time or dual tuition in online learning is likely to be essential in the future.

There are gaps in the work programme around distance education

13. We have identified key work-stream gaps where change is needed to create a fit-for-purpose online learning framework for the 21st Century. Filling these gaps will identify opportunities and lower barriers to promoting a cohesive national approach to support flexible learning through distance education. These gaps include:

    a. identifying the degree of access and choice in distance education we want to enable and/or support (e.g. who can be a recognised provider of distance education, and under which circumstances can ākonga access distance education);

    b. setting out clear functions, roles and responsibilities for high quality distance education across the schooling system; and

    c. ensuring resourcing and regulatory systems which assure online learning is high quality and will lead to excellent and equitable outcomes.

14. These work-streams will be integrated and sequenced with the Education and Training Bill technical amendments, work on funding settings for dual-tuition, and the review of Te Kura's funding model to create a single distance learning work programme. This work programme would address the *Reform of the Tomorrow's Schools* commitment to consider opportunities to promote a more cohesive national approach to support flexible learning.

15. There are three ways that we could approach the scope of this work programme. These are to:

    a. **option A**: enhance the status quo by better enabling and supporting Te Kura and the VLNs to provide distance education, including working with schools

    b. **option B**: consider the role all parts of the schooling system could have in making learning more flexible through distance education, and ways this could be enabled over time **(recommended)**

    c. **option C**: create a fully flexible schooling system

16. Options A and B would begin with a review of the barriers that current players are experiencing under the current settings, and the experiences or evidence that sits behind the mixed feedback in support of, or against, distance education.

Option A: enhance the status quo by better enabling and supporting Te Kura and the VLNs to provide distance education, including working with schools

17. Option A would focus on opportunities to better support Te Kura and the VLNs in providing distance education. This would incrementally build on the strengths of the key players within the status quo, but within a more strategic policy framework.

18. The work would be developed in conversation with Te Kura and the VLNs to ensure we understand the barriers that they are facing and ensure any proposed options are able to be easily implemented.

19. This option is likely to be considered inequitable by those who have an interest in becoming distance education providers, including some schools. Given the shortage of teachers in specialist areas, it is possible that considering opportunities to support Te

Kura and the VLNs alone will not be enough to ensure equitable access to the full curriculum in the long-term. It also constrains the potential opportunities for flexible learning which could otherwise be considered as we would not understand the barriers emerging providers of distance education are facing.

Option B: consider the role all parts of the schooling system could have in making learning more flexible through distance education, and how this could be enabled over time (recommended)

20. Option B would consider the role that all players could have in providing distance education in the schooling system, and how the Government could approach enabling and/or supporting these players.

21. The work would be developed in conversation with all those who have an interest in distance education to ensure we understand the barriers that they are facing and ensure any proposed options are able to be easily implemented. This will broaden our stakeholder list to schools, ākonga and their whānau, teachers, tertiary providers, peak body representatives, our Te Tiriti partners, and some Non-government organisations.

22. By involving more parties, we are likely to get a more sustainable and equitable outcome as more perspectives have been sought and heard. It will also enable a broader range of opportunities to be considered, including those arising as a result of the reforms in the broader Education Work Programme.

23. On the other hand, some stakeholders may not see option B as going far enough as the scope will be limited to distance education. Some stakeholders have a vision of a fully-flexible schooling system. This option will enable these perspectives to be heard. This feedback could inform immediate options where appropriate, or be fed in to the other parts of the Education Work Programme where they would be better placed.

Option C: create a fully flexible schooling system

24. Option C would be the broadest option, considering all of the options for increasing flexibility in the schooling system.

25. This approach was considered as part of the 21st Century Learning Reference Group report *Future-focused learning in connected communities* in 2014. This report recommended that the Ministry of Education, in partnership with key education sector leaders and agencies, develop a coherent, system-wide plan for future-focused learning.

26. The proposed plan was intended to support fully flexible learning – anywhere and anytime, while creating tailored learning programmes around the needs of the learner. This plan was seen as needing to transform the curriculum, digital technologies, property, infrastructure, funding and legislation.

27. Flexible learning, distance learning, and online learning through digital technologies overlap, but also face distinct problems and opportunities. Some of these problems and opportunities have been considered through the broader Education Work Programme.

28. Given the extent of the reforms underway through the Education Work Programme, and the conflicting views and evidence about fully flexible learning, we do not recommend this approach at this time.

29. Once the Education Work Programme reforms and opportunities to improve flexible learning are fully implemented, we could revisit whether further changes for a fully flexible schooling system would be desirable.

It will be critical to ensure that Te Tiriti is upheld in the development of work to support flexible learning by lowering barriers to distance education

30. The Māori Education Strategic Framework will be integrated appropriately, to ensure that online approaches complement and support culturally responsive pedagogy. It will, for example, be important to ensure that online learning programmes for Māori integrate face-to-face (kanohi ki te kanohi) interactions between teachers and students, and students and students. Direct face-to-face contact and high-quality interactions are important because it develops whānaungatanga.

31. There are three key barriers to high quality online learning in kaupapa Māori environments which will need to be considered and addressed including:

    a. an over-emphasis on content development as the centre of practice and under-emphasis on context and learner experience;

    b. a relative lack of evaluation of real-world practice and professional development available to teachers in kaupapa Māori environments; and

    c. roles and tools have been designed by those who are separated or disconnected from the end users of the roles or tools, including Māori.[1]

32. There are ongoing inequities from social and economic systems that have not valued, and are not reflective of Te Ao Māori. This means that Māori are less likely to have internet access at home; digital devices; and parents, caregivers and whānau who are digitally literate to support learning at home. It also means that there are barriers to accessing appropriate resources based on kaupapa Māori and / or written in Te Reo Māori.

33. These barriers are also likely to impact Pacific learners, and those with learning support needs because of disability, disadvantage, difficulty or other barriers to making progress. However, further work will be needed to gain insights for these priority groups.

Other challenges and opportunities created by evolving digital environments and online learning will be addressed through the Education Work Programme

34. To ensure that online learning opportunities are equitable, delivered either by distance or in-person, all ākonga and providers will need access to digital technologies, including devices; a capable workforce supported by the digital infrastructure and tools they need; and options for access and choice about high quality online education.

Work is underway to transform how the education system supports and enables digital environments…

35. An Education System Digital Strategy was developed and endorsed in 2015 by the Ministry and education bodies[2], founded on a vision for a learner-centred, connected, interdependent education system. The Strategy provides the blueprint for on-going developments in the digital infrastructure needed to support schools' teaching, learning and administration. A Digital Transformation Plan is in draft, due for completion in April 2020, which includes technology roadmaps for investments in digital infrastructure that

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[1] Tiakiwai, S., & Tiakiwai, H. (2010). A Literature Review focused on Virtual Learning. Environments (VLEs) and e-Learning in the Context of Te Reo Māori and Kaupapa Māori Education. Report to the Ministry of Education. Kiore Enterprises Ltd.

[2] NZQA, TEC, ERO, Careers NZ, Education Council, Education Payroll, N4L and Te Kura

will support expanded opportunities for flexible learning arrangements. The plan includes building on the investment in Te Rito as a key objective.

36. The draft Digital Transformation Plan also recognises the importance of students being able to continue their learning out of school through equitable access to a suitable device and internet at home. This will build on previous initiatives to improve access to digital devices including The Network for Learning, Laptops in Schools and Computers in Homes.

... and to ensure that the Education Workforce is capable, competent and supported for high quality teaching and learning in the 21st Century...

37. The features of high quality teaching and learning are the same, regardless of whether they are learning in-person or by distance. The core difference for teachers delivering education virtually is their willingness, ability and intent to use appropriate digital tools and methods that enable learner success. Online teachers may require specific pedagogical frameworks to support them to make this shift.[3]

38. Work underway to support the Education Workforce includes the:

   a. Education Workforce Strategy which recognises challenges for the workforce in using digital environments and the potential for digital technologies to address some workforce challenges;

   b. Curriculum Support Online business case which, subject to approval, will provide digital channels for curriculum teaching and learning resources and tools for teachers, kaiako and leaders to use in partnership with ākonga, their whānau and mana whenua; and

   c. New Professional Learning and Development platform, due to be released in the first part of 2020, where digital fluency remains a priority.

Conclusion and next steps

39. We recommend you agree to option B, considering opportunities to better support all players in the schooling system to work together to provide distance education to ākonga. This approach will enable a comprehensive and future focussed review, which is broader than Te Kura and VLNs, and takes steps towards a more flexible schooling system. It also recognises that the education system is undergoing a period of significant transformation and reform.

40. In the long term, we could revisit whether a co-designed, fully flexible schooling system is desirable. This could build off the fully implemented reforms of the Education Work Programme, and any changes to how distance education is enabled or supported in the schooling system.

41. Although the recommendation in *Supporting all schools to succeed: Reform of the Tomorrow's Schools system* is over the longer term, we recommend starting earlier. This is because previously agreed work is likely to have raised stakeholder expectations.

42. We will work to provide you with an engagement plan which states the distance education problem, opportunities and key areas for change by July. In developing this discussion document we will need to fill the gaps in our knowledge of how current

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[3] e-Learning and implications for New Zealand schools: A literature review (2010)

settings are working for emerging providers, and explore what sits behind the diverging opinions on the opportunities and challenges of distance education.

43. We will undertake engagement in July, and report back in November with findings, and proposals for policy change. The implementation plan for these changes can be worked through in 2021, including how they would impact Te Kura's funding model.

Annex

Annex 1: Current state of online learning providers in New Zealand schooling

Annex 1: Current state of distance education providers in New Zealand schooling

Te Kura is the only provider of distance education recognised in legislation

1. The Education Act 1989 restricts who can be a recognised provider of "correspondence"[4] education, where students are not required to physically "attend" school, which is increasingly delivered online. While the Act allows for the designation of multiple correspondence schools, Te Aho o Te Kura Pounamu (Te Kura) is the only correspondence school in New Zealand.

2. Te Kura is not a school of choice. It was established in 1922 to provide education to primary-aged learners who could not attend other schooling because of isolation, ill-health or family itinerancy. Within 10 years, the service had been extended to full-time secondary students. Over the next 80 years, new eligibility criteria has been developed on an ad-hoc basis to open up the school for enrolment and dual tuition through a number of gateways (there are currently 38 gateways, for example.

3. In 2019, Te Kura enrolled approximately 22,000 learners on a cumulative basis, with approximately 12,000 ākonga enrolled at any one time. Approximately 4,100 of the cumulative enrolments were for full-time study.

4. Te Kura has told us that 65% of full-time enrolments come through the Ministry of Education referred gateways for exclusion/expulsion, psychological or psycho-social, non-enrolled and through Oranga Tamariki referred gateways. Over half of learners registered for dual tuition through Te Kura are in attached units (alternative education, teen parent units, and activity centres), or have other learning support needs.

5. Te Kura has also told us that they provide dual-tuition for ākonga enrolled at schools who are part of VLNs or other schools who have identified themselves as distance or online education providers.

6. The increase in enrolments of learners who have been underserved by the physical schooling system has occurred without policy decisions about whether distance education is the best delivery mechanism for these learners, and/or how to best support these learners in instances where Te Kura is the best, or only, option.

7. Early Childhood Education has been offered through Te Kura since 1976. In 2019, Te Kura had 496 cumulative ākonga enrolled through in Early Childhood Education. While the focus of the distance education policy work will be in schooling, Early Childhood Education will still need to be considered as part of the review of Te Kura specifically.

8. Te Kura receives a core cash grant which is used to pay staff salaries and other operational expenses. In 2017, the grant had two components: a base component of $17.3 million including GST and a component based on the number of full-time-equivalent students of $28.3 million (these figures include the small amount of funding for early childhood services provided by the School). Additional payments are made for special needs support, trades academy students, supervision of students, and a number of other minor initiatives.

9. Te Kura's funding model was last reviewed in 2011. Te Kura have expressed a number of concerns about their funding model [METIS 1205000 refers].

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[4] The Education and Training Bill proposes amending "correspondence" school to "distance" school to reflect how digital technologies have influenced teaching.

Demand for Virtual Learning Networks is increasing, but may not be sustainable

10. VLNs provide supplementary or dual tuition for ākonga, who remain in their local schools. VLN in secondary schools provide lessons to more than 3000 students. In primary schools 751 learners participated in 2018.

11. VLN funding mechanisms are complex, using transfers of individual school funding or staffing entitlements between schools or to charitable trusts, or through reciprocal teaching agreements (school A teaches school B's students in one subject area, and school B teaches school A's students in another subject area).

12. The VLN primary has received $80,000 to $200,000 of funding per year from the Ministry of Education through annual agreements since 2012 for coordination and administrative activities. VLN Primary also applies for funding from specialist learning programmes.

13. Other VLNs do not receive similar funding support because secondary school VLN communities have had greater capacity to absorb the overhead costs associated with their virtual learning operations. However, these secondary VLNs have told us they are concerned about their financial sustainability.

14. The Ministry also provides the VLNs with access to an information technology kit. However, the VLNs do not believe this kit is fit for purpose. The Ministry is working to provide a new set of online services that will support the operation of schools engaged in online learning at a distance.

15. Despite the growth in the number of ākonga using VLNs, the number of VLNs operating is in decline. We are aware that VLNs are having difficulties meeting overhead costs, which is a barrier to their expansion.

Schools are increasingly expressing interest in providing distance education

16. A 2018 resourcing audit identified that Logan Park and Hagley College were running summer school programmes and claiming resourcing through non-compliant March roll returns. Logan Park has been running its summer school programme, primarily through distance education delivered online, for the past three years.

Other providers of distance education and online learning also play a role in the schooling system

17. Other charitable trusts, such as the Manaiakalani Trust, are running programmes in school to support learners and their whānau to use digital technology to enable learning anywhere, anytime, and at any pace to support what happens in local classrooms. Manaiakalani provides funding to buy personal devices for each learner, provide wireless internet at home and school, and support teachers in pedagogical innovation online.

18. Distance learning is offered by a large number of Tertiary Education Organisations, for example, the Open Polytechnic and Auckland University. These distance education courses can form part of Secondary Tertiary Alignment Resources or gateway programmes.

19. Ngaa Rauru Kiitahi, an Iwi in the Whanganui rohe, has expressed an interest in becoming a provider of online learning. They are currently considering entering the process to establish an online school. However, it is possible that any options developed through proposed online learning work could be a better fit.