

**SETTING SEED –**

**THE NEW ZEALAND EXPERIENCE IN  
HARVESTING EXCELLENCE**

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*Ako Aotearoa is New Zealand's national centre dedicated to supporting the improvement of tertiary teaching and learning. It was set up in October 2006 as part of a \$20 million governmental initiative over five years to boost the quality of teaching in all branches of the post-school education sector. In late 2007 the Centre prepared to establish the Academy of Tertiary Teaching Excellence. This paper backgrounds its formation.*

**Ako Aotearoa – the new farmer**

Ako Aotearoa is a title drawn from the indigenous Maori language. 'Ako' means to learn, instruct, study, teach or advise; 'Aotearoa' is the collective name for the New Zealand islands.<sup>1</sup>

The symbol of the Centre is the sprouting seed, intended to suggest the Centre's role as seedbed for growing effective tertiary teaching and learning.<sup>2</sup> Its roles include mapping the New Zealand tertiary education centre, initiating research and implementation projects and, as part of its mission to celebrate and share excellent

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<sup>1</sup> The word can be broken up as: ao (meaning cloud), tea (meaning white) and roa (meaning long) and it is accordingly most often interpreted as 'the land of the long white cloud'. The name was originally used only in relation to the North Island; the South Island being "Te Wai Pounamu" (waters of greenstone).

<sup>2</sup> A consortium headed by Massey University won the contract to establish the Centre. The consortium includes AUT University, the University of Canterbury, UCOL, and Manukau Institute of Technology. The contract was agreed with the consortium in October 2006 and the Centre was established in July 2007, with a formal launch on 1 November 2007.

practice, taking stewardship of the National Tertiary Teaching awards. These awards were established in 2001 to ‘recognise and encourage excellence in tertiary teaching, encourage and promote good practice and enhance career development for teachers by valuing and rewarding excellent teaching practice’.<sup>3</sup> A premier award (the Prime Minister’s Supreme award) and 9 other awards are conferred annually.<sup>4</sup>

Ako Aotearoa saw award recipients as forming a natural catchment from which to distribute good teaching practice and to grow a national voice on tertiary teaching issues. It accordingly set the establishment of a national Awards Academy as a priority in its 2008 strategic plan:

Working alongside Ako Aotearoa, a National Awards Academy comprising Tertiary Teaching Excellence Award winners has the potential to be both a major resource for enhancing teaching practice in New Zealand and an authoritative voice in the development of tertiary education policy in New Zealand.

### **The Academy working group – the seed setters**

A working group of award winners is responsible for forging a tentative identity for the Academy. Its vision will be presented at a two-day symposium in October 2008, to which all award winners are invited.

Surveying award winners to scope the range of expertise on or interest in curriculum design, peer assessment, leadership in teaching, mentoring etc has been the first seed setting of the Academy concept. While a necessarily practical step, it is also the means by which to inculcate in the 85 current awardees a sense of the ongoing contribution they will be actively encouraged to make to the Academy’s future.

Currently the working group is planning the colloquium content. It is designing an event which will similarly promote active participation by award winners on an ongoing basis. To further embed that expectation, working group members will attend the 2008 award ceremony at Parliament in July to ‘soft launch’ the Academy and to capture the commitment of the 2008 crop of excellent practitioners.

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<sup>3</sup> Until 2008, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority supported the selection process. See New Zealand Qualifications website:  
<http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/forproviders/awards/ttea/index.html>

<sup>4</sup> As well as the Supreme Award (NZ\$30,000), up to nine awards are available for Sustained Excellence, Excellence in Innovation and Excellence in Collaboration (\$20,000 each). All tertiary providers, including universities, wānanga (publicly owned tertiary institutions that provide education in a Māori cultural context), polytechnics, colleges of education and private training establishments are invited to make nominations.

## Learning to sow

The working group faces some issues peculiar to the New Zealand context: for example, negotiating the relationship between Ako Aotearoa and the Academy through the setting of its terms of reference and recognising obligations under the Treaty of Waitangi.<sup>5</sup> So too may be the struggle to lift teaching practice in a climate driven, at least in universities and polytechnics, by a research based indexation exercise linking funding to such output.<sup>6</sup>

But there is much to be learned by this still-germinating Academy from its possible sister organizations in Australia, Canada and the United States. The Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education and the 3M Council of Teaching Fellows are obvious examples in the search for the most sustainable path to answering the challenge set down in Ako Aotearoa's strategic priorities.

Clearly there are structural differences. The Academy does not exist independent of Ako Aotearoa and will work under its umbrella; whereas STLHE is an incorporated national association of academics and acts in partnership with 3M Canada in relation to the 3M teaching Awards. Ako Aotearoa Academy membership is currently confined to award winners who may not be university based; the 3M Council of Teaching Fellows is, by contrast, so focused. However in terms of goals, each ploughs similar ground with the same view as to what is to be harvested.<sup>7</sup>

For that reason, the Ako Aotearoa Academy of Tertiary Teaching Excellence<sup>8</sup> will seek to invite a member of STLHE or the 3M Council to attend the launch of the Academy and to lead discussion with the Academy's very new members on how to sow its own seeds as well.

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<sup>5</sup> The Treaty was signed in 1840 between the British Crown and a number of tribal (iwi) chiefs (ariki), Although now regarded as one of New Zealand's most important legal documents, it existed on the edges of domestic law until legislative action in the 1980's. Statutory formulae stating that nothing in the Act permits the Crown 'to act in a manner that is inconsistent with the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi' are now scattered across the entire statute book. The 'principles' include partnership obligations, reflected in duties of good faith dealing and a duty to consult.

<sup>6</sup> Performance Based Research Funding (PBRF) began in 2003 and assesses the research performance of tertiary education organisations and distributes funding based on that performance model. See the Tertiary Education Commission's website at: <http://www.tec.govt.nz/templates/standard.aspx?id=588>

<sup>7</sup> The working group is grateful to Ron Marken, Director, Gwenna Moss Teaching & Learning Centre, University of Saskatchewan and a 3M Teaching awardee, who met with the working group in March 2008.

<sup>8</sup> A mouthful but leading to the apposite acronym AAATTE – which may be pronounced 'ah tay' – *ate* is Maori for 'heart'.