TE HONONGA AKORANGA
COMET

Submission on
Towards a Digital Strategy for Aotearoa

Whakatauāki

E kore e taea e te whenu kotahi ki te raranga i te whāriki kia mōhio tātou ki ā tātou.

Mā te mahi tahi ō ngā whenu, mā te mahi tahi ō ngā kairaranga, ka oti tēnei whāriki.

I te otinga me titiro tātou ki ngā mea pai ka puta mai.

Ā tana wā, me titiro hoki ki ngā raranga i makere nā te mea, he kōrero ano kei reira.

nā Kūkupa Tirikatene, ONZM, 1934 - 2018

The tapestry of understanding cannot be woven by one strand alone.

Only by the working together of strands and the working together of weavers will such a tapestry be completed.

With its completion let us look at the good that comes from it.

And, in time we should also look at those stitches which have been dropped, because they also have a message.

About COMET Auckland

Te Hononga Akoranga COMET is an independent charitable trust and Auckland Council's CCO focused on education, skills and lifelong learning across Auckland and, increasingly, other parts of the country.

Briefly, our work involves:

Sector leadership – mapping data and evidence, working with sector leaders to identify and prioritise the most pressing areas of focus, and connecting people around that common agenda, to plan collaborative action.

That can then lead to advocacy or changes to partners' business as usual, or sometimes to planning and trialling new ways of working (incubation projects).

These incubation projects generally develop through scoping and planning to trialling, and then implementation and evaluation, with the goal of handing them on once they are fully developed so we can move on to focus on another part of the system.

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Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the paper *Towards a Digital Strategy for Aotearoa*.

This submission has been assembled based on our own collective knowledge and experience, and our ongoing engagement with our stakeholders, including educators, community leaders, employers, parents and learners of all ages.

We welcome the recognition that digital technologies have potential to support wellbeing, equity, prosperity and sustainability for Aotearoa, and that a strategy is needed in order to reap the benefits and ensure these benefits are fairly distributed.

The past two years have underlined the importance of equity in digital access and use. The schools, early learning centres and community organisations we work with have seen the effects of digital inequities in limiting children's access to learning, their ability to connect with friends and family members beyond their bubble, and their own or their parents' ability to gain and maintain employment in a labour market where digital skills were suddenly essential.

It is no surprise that Māori, Pasifika and low-SES families are over-represented in the statistics for school disengagement and unemployment during 2020 and 2021; these groups are the same ones that already had dramatically lower access to digital technologies in the years leading up to 2020.

It is hard to imagine even the most dedicated teenager staying engaged in school if all they have is a pile of copied papers to work through on their own for five weeks.

In March 2020 we saw a stark illustration of the impact of digital inequities. In the two working days between the Prime Minister's announcement and the start of the first lockdown, all staff members at one secondary school we know were flat out assembling and photocopying learning resources for their students, knowing that very few would have internet access or devices to enable them to engage with the school digitally during lockdown.

It is hard to imagine even the most dedicated teenager staying engaged in school if all they have is a pile of copied papers to work through on their own for five weeks.

Despite the school's and the MOE's best efforts most of these young people were no better equipped for subsequent lockdowns. Little wonder so many young people like these have subsequently left school.

Comments on the vision and goals

We strongly support the vision of enabling all of Aotearoa New Zealand to flourish and prosper in a digital world; and the three goals of mahi tika, mahi ake and mahi tahi. The three goals give a good balance between equity, safety and growth, all of which are essential if Aotearoa is to gain the potential social and economic benefits of digital technologies. As your diagram demonstrates, the three goals are all connected, contributing to each other and to the overall vision.

While all three goals are important, to us, the most urgent goal to address is mahi tahi/equity. Our nation cannot reap the potential benefits of digital technologies if a proportion of our population are unable to access the digital world and have missed out on building the skills they need to harness it. All too often the people who are missing out on digital technologies are the very people who could

bring their cultural, linguistic and life experiences to the task of creating digital tools that engage the diverse communities of Aotearoa. They are also the ideal people to represent the uniqueness of Aotearoa to the world.

Comments on the measures and components

The suggested measures on page 7 makes sense but there seem to be no measures of equity in this list. The measures in the section on tracking progress (pp24-25) are at least grouped against the goals, but the measures of equity all seem to relate to internet access and skills to use the internet. You have said yourselves (page 16) that digital equity requires that all New Zealanders have motivation, access (to devices and services as well as just the internet), skills and trust in digital technologies.

At the very least, some of the measures listed on page 7 and on pages 24 and 25 should be disaggregated by gender, ethnicity and socio-economic background in order to track any changes in equity, positive or negative. In particular, we would want to see measures such as:

- % of students gaining NCEA credits in technology by gender, ethnicity and school decile
- Completion of technology-related tertiary qualifications by ethnicity, gender and decile of feeder school
- % of ICT sector employees by ethnicity and gender
- Salary rates of ICT employees by ethnicity and gender
- Tech entrepreneurs and owners of ICT companies by ethnicity and gender
- % of families with access to at least one computer and reliable internet, by ethnicity and geographical area

Once baseline is established for these measures, targets should be set to increase equity in each measure over time.

Under components (page 10), the important role of the education and skills system is not clear enough. This should be added as a separate component, aimed at building both foundation skills and high-level skills for entry to the ICT workforce. Meanwhile under Digital Inclusion, replace building foundation skills (now moved to education) with ensuring access to digital tools including connectivity and devices; and digital relevance - ensuring people can "see themselves", their culture, language and interests, in the digital world.

Comments on the proposed actions and opportunities

Under Mahi Tahi, we suggest more actions that focus on families rather than individuals. There is an opportunity to leverage schools and ECEs to reach families who are not currently digitally connected, in order to increase connectivity, skills and computer access for parents and children at the same time. The old Computers in Homes project (from 2020 Trust) used to provide computers and internet access for families, but this funding ceased a year or two ago, replaced by a much more restrictive programme available only to people with few or no formal qualifications.

Under Mahi Ake, we would like to see more actions supporting Māori and Pasifika innovation and entrepreneurship in digital technologies. This would leverage these groups' cultural and linguistic strengths to create products for new markets, here and overseas. It would also contribute to equity by increasing employment rates and income levels for Māori and Pasifika, while also increasing the diversity of the ICT workforce and creating a digital world that is relevant for all.