

# Monitoring the Tertiary Education Strategy 2002/07: meaningful information and diverse perspectives

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## **Abstract**

In 2002, the New Zealand government produced a five-year strategy for the tertiary education sector. A key theme of the Tertiary Education Strategy is a greater focus on the contribution of tertiary education to national, regional and indigenous development through greater collaboration with stakeholders and a stronger focus on access, relevance and excellence.

The Ministry of Education has developed a monitoring framework for the Tertiary Education Strategy. This will be followed by an overall evaluation of the effectiveness of the strategy. This paper examines:

- How the Ministry has approached monitoring and evaluating the Strategy
- The challenges of providing meaningful and useful information that reinforces the achievement of the Strategy and reflects and balances the diversity of views and perspectives
- Larger challenges raised by this project in terms of how to better monitor the results and contribution of tertiary education in the future.

## **Tertiary Education in New Zealand**

The New Zealand tertiary education system covers all post-school education and training. It includes education at public and private tertiary providers, academic and vocational education, industry training, provision of tertiary level courses within secondary schools, second chance education and community education.

The main government agencies involved with tertiary education are the:

- Tertiary Education Commission – responsible for funding and planning of provision
- Ministry of Education – responsible for policy and monitoring
- New Zealand Qualifications Authority – responsible for the qualifications system and quality assurance of tertiary education providers
- Career Services – responsible for careers advice and support

- Department of Labour – responsible for labour market policy and industry and skills development.

## **The Tertiary Education Strategy (TES)**

The Tertiary Education Strategy 2002/07 is the cornerstone of the government's tertiary education reforms. The TES sets out the Government's medium to long term strategy and articulates the government's overall goals for tertiary education. It is designed to ensure that all those working in tertiary education in New Zealand are moving in alignment with those goals.

The TES has a complex architecture. It is structured into six broad strategies, supported by 35 objectives. The six strategies are as follows:

- Strategy 1: Strengthen System Capability and Quality.
- Strategy 2: Te Rautaki Mātauranga Māori – Contribute to the Achievement of Māori Development Aspirations.
- Strategy 3: Raise Foundation Skills so that all people can Participate in our Knowledge Society.
- Strategy 4: Develop the Skills New Zealanders need for our Knowledge Society.
- Strategy 5: Educate for Pacific Peoples' Development and Success.
- Strategy 6: Strengthen Research, Knowledge Creation and Uptake for our Knowledge Society.

Across the TES, there are nine key change messages which summarise the overall direction for change:

- Greater alignment with national goals.
- Stronger linkages with business and other external stakeholders.
- Effective partnership arrangements with Māori communities.
- Increased responsiveness to the needs of, and wider access for, learners.
- More future-focussed strategies.
- Improved global linkages.
- Greater collaboration and rationalisation within the system.
- Increased quality, performance, effectiveness, efficiency and transparency.
- A culture of optimism and creativity.

The focus of the TES is on lifting the capability of the tertiary education sector to improve outcomes for learners and research users and to contribute to national goals. As such, it does not specify targets to be achieved, but rather focuses the sector on improving outcomes and contributing to broader goals.

Implementation of the TES involves a mix of shifts in attitudes and culture within the sector and introduction of specific policies and initiatives. Tertiary Education Organisations (TEOs) are expected to take a broader view of themselves as part of a

wider tertiary education system and work collaboratively to contribute to local, regional and national development. This is supported by a range of policies aimed at supporting and rewarding quality, excellence and innovation.

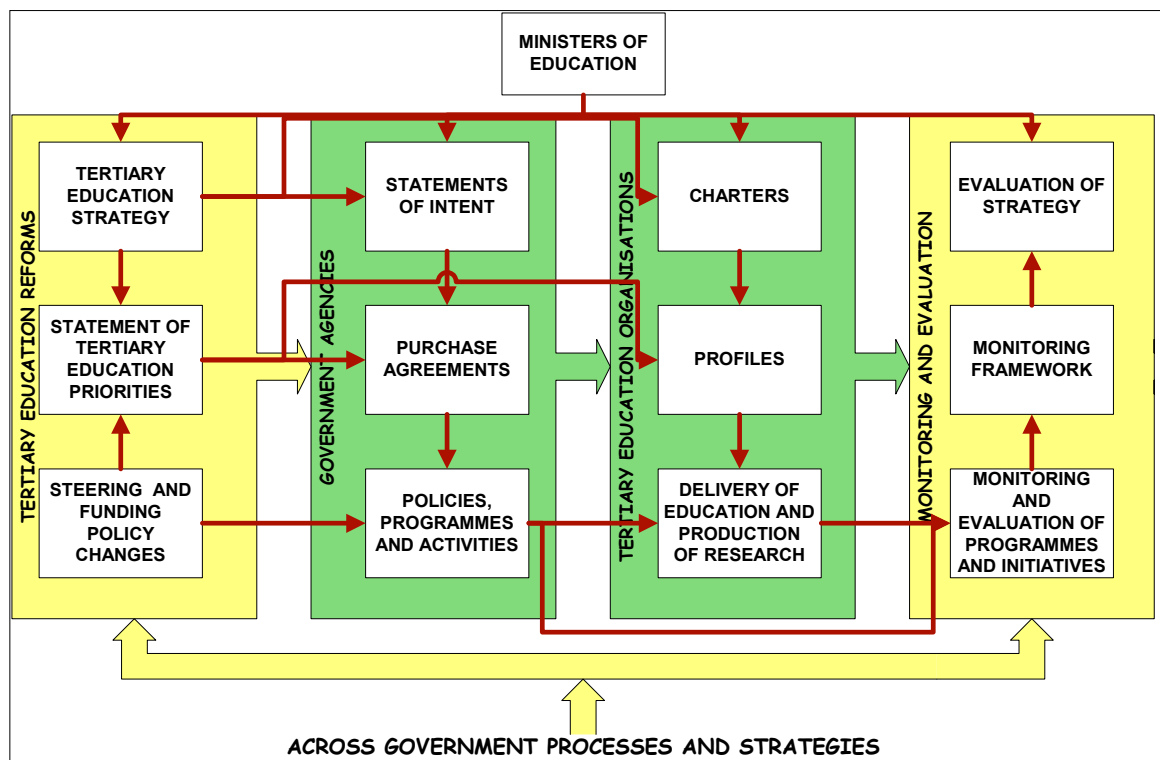
A clear message in the TES is that the system needs to be more responsive to the needs of a diverse range of learners and stakeholders. It is no longer enough to provide ‘one size fits all’, tertiary education needs to be relevant to the learner, their current and future employers and the wider community.

There is a clear expectation that the progress of the tertiary education sector towards the goals of the TES will be monitored and that overall effectiveness of the current TES will be evaluated.

### Monitoring, evaluation and accountability

The TES guides, but does not supplant, the accountability arrangements for the tertiary education sector. The TES sets out the 5 year direction for the tertiary education sector and is supported by Statements of Tertiary Education Priorities (STEPS) that are issued every 1 to 3 years. The implementation of these documents is underpinned by a set of steering and funding policy changes.

**Figure 1: Illustration of relationship of monitoring and evaluation to accountability arrangements**



The TES and STEPs inform the development of the documents of accountability for government agencies and TEOs. The strategic plans (statements of intent of government agencies and charters of TEOs) are expected to align with the TES. The business plans (purchase agreements of government agencies and profiles of TEOs) are expected to align with the STEPs.

The monitoring and evaluation of the TES sit alongside the accountability arrangements for tertiary education agencies and TEOs. It doesn't form another layer of accountability between agencies, TEOs and the Minister. Rather it provides an overview of progress and achievement in order to build understanding of what is and is not happening with regard to the TES.

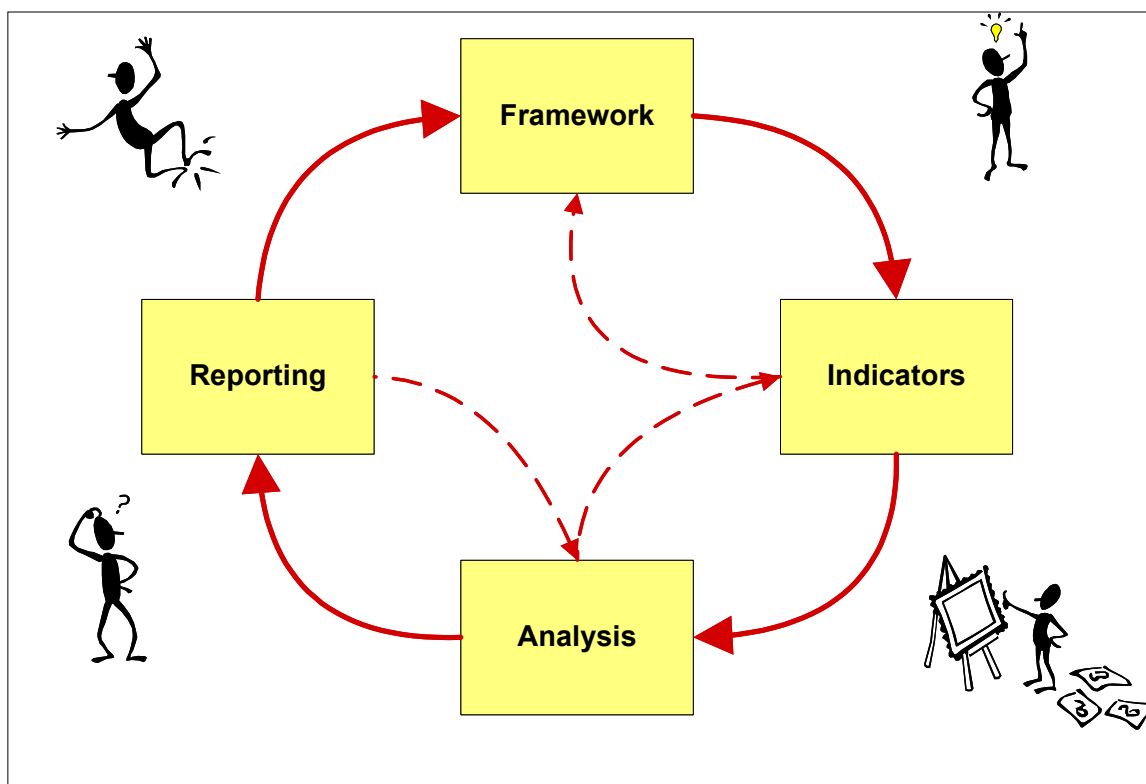
The Ministry of Education is responsible for monitoring and evaluating the success of the TES. Monitoring will provide an annual overview of change across the tertiary education sector with regard to the goals of the TES. The evaluation will look at the effectiveness, value and significance of the TES overall.

The Ministry has taken the approach of developing the monitoring of the TES first. This will provide base data for evaluating the effectiveness of the TES overall. Work on designing the evaluation will begin in 2005. The remainder of this paper focuses on the development of monitoring.

### Developing the monitoring framework

We began the monitoring project with developing a monitoring framework that identifies the key areas for monitoring the TES. This has been followed by specifying indicators and undertaking analysis and reporting.

Figure 2: Illustration of monitoring cycle



This has been an iterative process, as illustrated in figure 2. The development of the indicators helped refine the framework. The analysis of the data helped refine the indicators. The writing of reports helped refine the analysis. At the end of the cycle,

the framework was reviewed to ensure it is focusing on the right things, given the information from the report.

In developing the monitoring framework, we identified a set of broad questions that the monitoring of the TES will need to inform:

- How have outcomes improved for learners, students, research users, Māori / iwi, Pasifika communities, business, government and NZ?
- How much progress is there in achieving the strategies, objectives and change messages?
- What changes have been made in the sector as a result of the TES?

We recognised that there was a real risk that the monitoring could rewrite the TES. We saw it was quite easy to overlay new interpretations and directions on the TES through the way the monitoring framework was specified, which may not have been intended.

A key decision was that the monitoring framework had to be very closely linked to the strategies, objectives and change messages as they are represented within the TES itself. We needed to be able clearly demonstrate the linkage from the TES, to the framework and to the indicators and reported information.

However, in developing the framework we had to reconfirm the context and rationale for many aspects of the TES with key experts and stakeholders. It was important to get a wide range of perspectives on what the monitoring should focus on. It was quite critical in this process to focus them on how to monitor what is in the TES, rather than what they thought the TES should have said, or was meant to have said.

In some areas, the monitoring framework has had to pick up further developments in thinking since the publication of the TES. An example of this is within the area of foundation education, where thinking has moved beyond foundation skills to a broader concept of foundation competencies, encompassing skills, knowledge and dispositions.

## **The monitoring framework**

The monitoring framework has gone through two stages of development. The initial framework was very detailed and focused at the level of the objectives. While it was useful to go to this level of detail as a starting point for development, it proved unwieldy for ongoing reporting.

The current version of the framework is simpler, although still contains quite a lot of detail, as does the TES. The framework takes each of the six strategies and identifies for each one four or five:

- **Key shifts** – which are the changes we would expect to see in the sector as progress is being made towards achieving the strategy
- **Success criteria** – which are statements of what would be different about the sector once the strategy has been achieved

The key shifts and success criteria are then cross referenced to the objectives and change messages.

In developing the framework we found that it took time and a number of goes. We have constantly had to gain a balance between rich detail and broad overview. The framework needed to be credible and clearly connected to the Strategy. However, we also recognised that there is no one 'right' answer.

### **Developing the indicators**

Having developed a monitoring framework that we were reasonably happy with, our next focus was on development of indicators.

The word 'indicator' is one of the most overused and ill-defined terms in performance monitoring. For this project we have taken an indicator to be more than just a measure, fact or observation. An indicator relates one or more of these things to a process, activity and/or purpose. It also implies a sense of desired state or desired direction of change.

In short, we have defined indicators as something that will tell us whether a process or activity is working in the way that is intended or not.

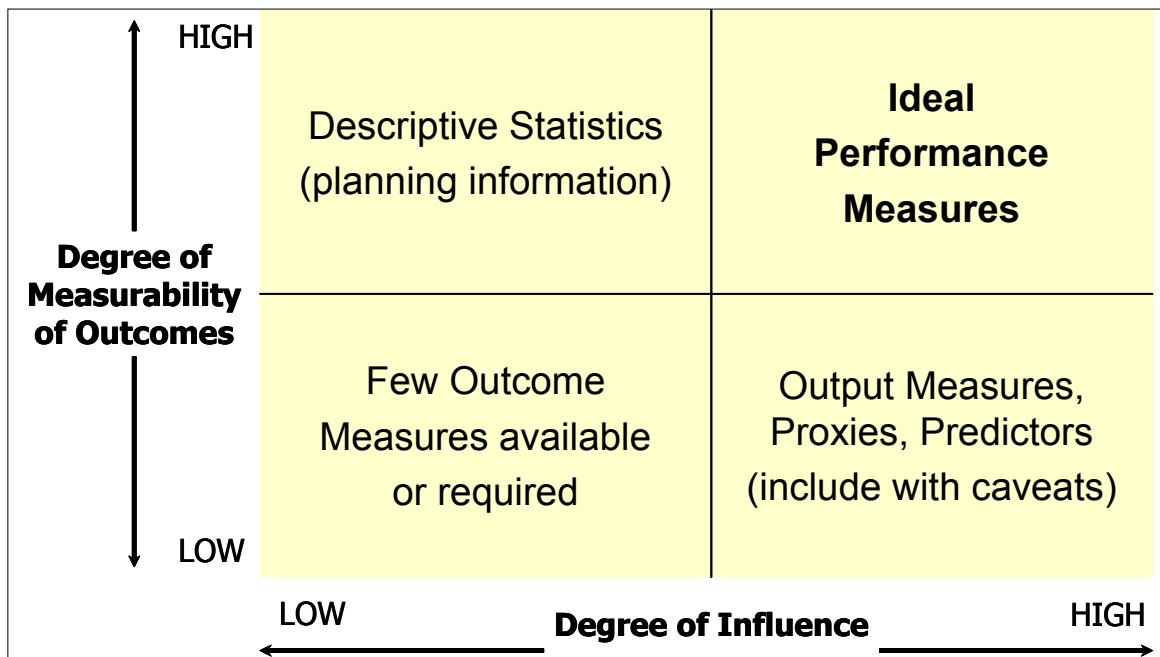
In developing the indicators we were aware that the TES is focussed on broad changes in attitude and culture across the tertiary education system. As stated earlier, its focus is on lifting capability to achieve outcomes rather than on achieving specified targets.

We were very much aware that a narrow focus on indicators could miss the true story. The sector might be 'scoring' well on a set of indicators and still missing the point of the TES – or, more likely, the other way round. There are also a number of perspectives about whether progress, or lack of progress, against any particular indicator is desirable or not.

Therefore, we saw the challenge of developing indicators as finding ways to use them to highlight the messages and differing perspectives, and not just report on the indicators themselves. We were also aware of the need to provide balanced reports, that highlight where change is happening, as well as where it is not happening and not lose the sense of change through averaging out results across the system.

We were also aware that in most of the areas where we were developing indicators, the degree of measurability of outcomes is low and/or the degree of direct influence from government agencies is low. This puts most of the TES outside the area where ideal performance measures can be developed. We recognised that many of our indicators would be descriptive in nature and would often be proxies for a more complex, harder to define set of changes.

**Figure 3: Impact of measurement and influence on types of indicators**



*Adapted from: Performance-Based Management at Forest Renewal, BC, Canada.*

Consideration of these issues reinforced the need for a mix of indicators. We realised the need for indicators supported by both quantitative and qualitative information. Quantitative information is important for providing information on relative and absolute size and trends and needs to be used where available and valid. Qualitative information provides broader context and explanation and covers areas which are hard to measure and quantify.

We also developed a mix of lead and lag indicators. Lead indicators line up with the key shifts in the framework and provide early indications of change. They are future focused and mostly related to process. Lag indicators line up with the success criteria in the framework and provide retrospective measures of change. They are historical and mostly related to outputs and outcomes. We will need to have a balance of lead and lag indicators throughout the life of the monitoring project, so that we have a focus both on achievement to date and plans for sustaining and improving on past achievement.

Added to this, we were also aware of the need to keep an eye on what was not intended. Keeping to a broad set of mixed indicators means that we avoid the risk of promoting goal displacement. That is promoting the achievement of results as defined through the indicators rather focus on the overall intent and purpose of the TES. We also recognised the need for a ‘superset’ of broad, system-wide indicators that would help us pick up on any unintended outcomes from the TES. We have called these the cross-strategy indicators.

In general, we have found this approach to indicators fairly easy to implement, given the work we had put into the framework development. We had a strong focus on getting the framework right first. This meant that the indicators flowed reasonably easily from the framework. We also were not caught up in getting to the single right answer, but rather could consider a range of options and pick the one with ‘best fit’.

We have the option of revising indicators as we go, so long as we are clear about how they relate to the framework and openly address any issues of continuity.

### **Limits on available data**

The major barrier to systematic monitoring of the TES has been the limits on available data and information in some of the areas central to progress towards TES goals. Existing data collections in the tertiary education sector have been largely set up for the purpose such as managing and allocating resources, issuance of qualifications and management of the government's financial investment in tertiary education.

The existing data provides quite detailed information on areas including:

- Student enrolments and completions
- Provision of courses and qualifications
- Financial status of providers

However, this only gives us part of the picture we need for monitoring the TES. Significant gaps in the data at the start of the project included:

- Staffing – such as demographics, qualifications and experience
- Governance
- Tertiary education organisation strategies and plans
- Collaboration within the tertiary education system
- Quality of research from the tertiary education system
- Engagement of stakeholder groups with the tertiary education system
- Stakeholder views of the relevance and quality of tertiary education.

### **Priorities for new data and information**

The highest priority area for developing new data and information is the area of TEO capability, collaboration and contribution to wider goals and aspirations. Some of this information will come from the new system of TEO strategic and business plans. Analysis of the results from the new Performance Based Research Fund will also provide information about capability and quality in research across the sector.

These internal sources will need to be supplemented by views of external stakeholders. It is important that we get views from Māori and iwi, Pasifika communities, business and industry and those involved in regional and community development of how well the tertiary education sector is progressing towards the goals of the TES. The Ministry is in the process of scoping a programme of research in this area, which will pick up on the views of these various groups. The research is likely to be implemented in 2005.

Over the next three years, we will shift the focus of monitoring from measuring the size and output of the tertiary education system to more of a focus on linking tertiary education to national, regional, Māori and Pasifika development.



## **Where the project is up to**

Earlier this year we released the Baseline Monitoring Report. This report provides a view of the tertiary education system as it was at the start of the TES and before the policy reforms were implemented. It sets out how each of the six strategies will be monitored and provides baseline data from existing data sources.

We are currently working on the first of a series of annual monitoring reports, which will provide updates on progress and focus on significant areas of change (or lack of change). We will also incorporate new data into these reports as it becomes available.

We are developing a proposal for research on the views of external stakeholder groups. It will propose that we start a literature review of the area and existing research, to be followed with a first round of research next year.

A major focus for the next year will be making use of the information from TEO strategic and business plans. This process will have gone through its second cycle (in terms of setting plans) by the end of this year.

## **Larger challenges for monitoring tertiary education**

The experiences of this project raise larger challenges about how we can better monitor the results and contribution of tertiary education.

We have very detailed information about the events of enrolment and completion within tertiary education and we must continue to make greater use of it. However, we also need to develop better information about the context in which tertiary education is taking place. It is not just enough to know that students enrol, but we need some assurance that they are enrolling in appropriate and relevant courses of study. Similarly, that the skills and knowledge being produced by the tertiary education system are relevant to the needs of communities, business and industry, today and in the future.

This means supplementing our internally generated, largely statistical information, with views from key stakeholders, as well as improving our information on graduate outcomes.

There is more work to be done on monitoring quality and excellence in tertiary education. There will not be any single measure in this area, rather a range of dimensions will need to be considered. These could include:

- Student achievement
- Student outcomes post study
- Tertiary teaching workforce experience and qualifications
- TEO focus on teaching practice, innovation and student achievement
- The confidence of students, employers and the general public in the quality of the tertiary education system
- The reputation of New Zealand's tertiary education system internationally.

Building the evidence base on what works and what contributes to quality tertiary education will also be important to inform the development of meaningful information and indicators.