ICDE EDUCATIONAL POLICY FORUM 2025

THE TĀKINA ACCORD

Advocating inclusive, scalable, and sustainable education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over 250 education leaders, policymakers, and practitioners assembled for the inaugural ICDE Education Policy Forum (EPF), a pre-conference event featuring as part of the 2025 ICDE World Conference held in Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand from 10 to 13 November 2025. The EPF sought to share experiences and canvas and discuss practical policy solutions in support of improving the inclusivity, scalability, and sustainability of tertiary education, with a particular focus on the Australasian and Pacific regions. The event was moderated by Professor Judyth Sachs, Chief Academic Officer of Studiosity, Kauri sponsor of the ICDE World Conference 2025.

Professor Judyth Sachs, EPF moderator

The three-hour EPF reflected the spirit of the indigenous Māori concept of 'ako', the reciprocity inherent in teaching and learning, with an emphasis on expert input and participant feedback. The event was facilitated by a highly experienced Australian senior education leader, and speakers were asked to provide brief presentations by way of introducing themed discussions. Presenters represented the New Zealand government, UNESCO, funders, assurers of education quality, education providers, OFDL (Open, Flexible, Distance Learning) professional associations, and students. Each presentation was followed by audience discussion, with feedback requested in response to three key questions:

- What challenges are prominent?
- What opportunities are there?
- What policy shifts are needed?

Feedback was captured through Mentimeter engagement.

The purpose of the EPF was to prepare an advocacy statement, known as the Tākina Accord (to acknowledge the building and the place in which we gathered), to inform policymakers in

designing education systems that better promote inclusive, scalable, and sustainable education solutions and address known challenges, ambiguities or unintended consequences of policy dissonance.

As a result of the EPF, the Tākina Accord suggests eight principles for policy development and five immediate actions.

Principles:

1. Policy must incentivise education practices that are inclusive, sustainable and scalable, and be aligned at all levels.
2. Inclusive policies rely on addressing evidence-based issues centred on the student voice, with particular emphasis on valuing indigenous knowledge systems and promoting equity for diverse learner groups.
3. Policies must provide evidence-based approaches that transcend political ideology and align with the broader national and international policy landscape.
4. Policies must recognise that lifelong learning (LLL) and education (qualification) outcomes are equally important.
5. Policies must provide quality assurance systems grounded in flexibility, inclusivity and contextual relevance, and support continuous institutional improvement rather than compliance-driven reporting.
6. Policies must promote the digital transformation of education practice, while addressing the digital divide and avoiding techno centrism.
7. Policies must promote and support the readiness of educators and their institutions toward developing and implementing new education practices.
8. Policies must address the potential of OER and incentivise practices that improve the inclusivity, sustainability, and scalability of education.

Immediate actions:

1. Investigate the challenges to education access and benefits of participation from a student perspective. A rich-data, first-person investigation including students from diverse backgrounds, locations and life stages will help policies to better reflect reality.
2. Identify innovative education models that support inclusive, sustainable, and scalable education. Evidencing the value of innovative education models from these dimensions will help incentivise and spread a more equitable and flexible higher education system.
3. Determine a position on the development, sharing, and maintenance of OER, based on an investigation into their potential. Consider how they might be incentivised to the benefit of the education system, mindful of the dynamics related to competitiveness, customisation, and management.
4. Develop a series of higher education positions and long-term strategies that draw together UNESCO, OFDL, digital education, and systems thinking perspectives

toward lifelong learning and do this in a benchmarked context which can readily evidence standards of international excellence.

5. Create a coherent and detailed lifelong learning strategy, ideally one that supports innovative delivery promoting flexible, modular, online, and work-based solutions.

INTRODUCTION

The International Council for Open and Distance Education's purpose statement is "Together we shape inclusive, scalable, and sustainable education".[1] In pursuit of this purpose and as part of its global advocacy, ICDE held an Education Policy Forum (EPF) as a pre-conference activity as part of its 2025 World Conference, held in Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand, from 10 to 13 November. The purpose of the EPF was to discuss policy solutions promoting inclusive, scalable, and sustainable education in ways aligned with UNESCO Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*.

Four key questions shaped the EPF:

1. What are the policies and frameworks that recognise and encourage higher education practice in ways that are inclusive, scalable, and sustainable?
2. Put from the negative, what are the characteristics of higher education policy, funding, and accreditation, that hinder an inclusive, scalable, and sustainable higher education sector?
3. What metrics are appropriate for incentivising and shaping the new normal toward desired outcomes?
4. What lessons are there for stakeholders from local and overseas practice?

Over 250 delegates representing education leaders, policymakers, and practitioners of inclusive, scalable, and sustainable education, gathered for the EPF. The forum was based around a series of expert presentations followed by participant feedback. Small groups discussed the following questions, with answers captured through Mentimeter:

- What challenges are prominent?
- What opportunities are there?
- What policy shifts are needed?

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[1] [ICDE Model and Strategic Objectives](https://icde.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Final-ICDE-Model-and-Strategic-Objectives.pdf) | https://icde.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Final-ICDE-Model-and-Strategic-Objectives.pdf

The presentations were as follows:

- **EPF opening address**: the Honorable Penny Simmonds (Minister, Vocational Education of Aotearoa New Zealand). Brief: "a grounded situation representation establishing the governmental orientation toward inclusive, scalable, and inclusive education and the need for policy."
- **UNESCO activities toward SDG4**: Faryal Khan (Education Programme Specialist, UNESCO Bangkok). Brief: "international initiatives toward inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all."
- **Funders of HE (Higher Education)**: Anne-Marie Scott (Vice-President of Commonwealth of Learning). Brief: "the challenges of funding education and proposing policy possibilities."
- **Quality standards**: Mark Nichols (President of ICDE; standing in for Grant Klinkum, New Zealand Qualifications Authority). Brief: "the challenges of education quality and proposing policy possibilities."
- **Providers of HE** (separately): Alan Cadwallader (Executive Director, Open Polytechnic) and Jan Thomas (Vice-Chancellor, Massey University). Brief: "the challenges providers of higher education face in attempting to offer education that is inclusive, scalable, and sustainable."
- **Professional Associations** associated with OFDL (Open, Flexible, Distance Learning), (joint): Kate Ames (President of ACODE, the Australian Council on Open and Digital Education), Dawn Gilmore (President of ODLAA, the Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia), and Ralph Springett (President of FLANZ the Flexible Learning Association of New Zealand), Ralph Springett representing the three associations. Brief: "the challenges ACODE/FLANZ/ODLAA members face in providing higher education that is inclusive, scalable, and sustainable."
- **Students** (separately): Henry Geary (Open Polytechnic), Michelle Matson (Massey University). Brief: "a student perspective on the importance of inclusive, scalable, and sustainable education and the sorts of policy and funding decisions that would make it easier for students to participate in higher education."

The first group discussion took place after the opening presentations by the Honorable Penny Simmonds and Faryal Khan. Other group discussions followed each presenter.

The location of the World Conference suggested an Australasian and Pacific focus to what is, in truth, a global theme. While many higher (or tertiary) education models are similar in terms of their overall architecture and system design, national governments and regions differ somewhat in the local challenges their policies are designed to address. For that reason, presenters were asked to provide both a generic and high-level overview of challenges related to their subject.

This report overviews each of these presentations and participant feedback in turn, and concludes with a statement, the Tākina Accord, as a summary of policy recommendations

advocating for the extension of inclusive, scalable, and sustainable education in higher education.

As a preliminary activity, participants were asked to rank the relative importance of inclusivity (education access to more learners), scalability (ability to cater for more learners), and sustainability (cost-effectiveness and system viability) as policy considerations. The order decided upon was inclusive, then sustainable, then scalable. This order is followed from here on in this summary.

EPF OPENING ADDRESS: THE HONOURABLE PENNY SIMMONDS

In opening comments the Honourable Penny Simmonds, Minister for Vocational Education in the New Zealand government, emphasised the importance of inclusive, sustainable, and scalable education noting that it is a shared aspiration. Minister Simonds also mentioned the pressures on systems, including "demographic change, workforce and skills shortages, funding constraints, digital transformation, and shifts in how learners expect to engage with education throughout their lives."

Minister Simmonds' presentation focussed on the contemporary changes occurring in the New Zealand vocational education system and why there is still a need for further change. Eight new Industry Skills Boards (ISBs) are now in place to "give employers and professionals a direct role in shaping qualifications, overseeing quality, setting standards and endorsing providers." The ISBs will liaise with the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), the funders of education in Aotearoa New Zealand, "so public funding supports the right training, in the right areas, at the right time." At the same time, a federation of vocational education is (at time of writing) in place "to share blended and online delivery, academic expertise, and back-office services." Open Polytechnic, a specialist OFDL provider, is mandated as an anchor institute for this federation.

Minister Simmonds's address highlighted the importance of a vocational system that is responsive to industry needs; flexible; practical; and lifelong. In her closing remarks, Minister Simmonds stated that "We all seek systems that: keep qualifications relevant and credible; expand access through flexible delivery; engage industry meaningfully; maintain public confidence in education; and to do this in a way that is financially sustainable."

UNESCO ACTIVITIES TOWARD SDG4: FARYAL KHAN

Faryal Khan is Programme Specialist for Education, UNESCO Regional Office in Bangkok and Office for UN Coordination for Asia and the Pacific. In her overview Faryal expressed the importance of education that is inclusive, scalable, and sustainable:

Faryal Khan

> Across the world, education stands at the intersection of planetary crisis, digital disruption, inequality, and growing polarization. The climate is changing faster than our curricula; technology is evolving faster than regulation; and our societies are dividing faster than education can bridge them.

> Policy can no longer simply react — it must anticipate. It must cultivate foresight, resilience, and ethical imagination so that education empowers learners not only to adapt to change, but to *shape* it.

The presentation pointed out various discrepancies in education globally, including these statistics:

- **272 million** children and youth remain out of school.
- **Seven out of ten** ten-year-olds in low-income countries cannot read a simple story.
- **267 million** young people are not in employment, education, or training.
- Only **31% of researchers** are women.
- The number of **internationally mobile students** has tripled in two decades — from **2.1 million to nearly 6.9 million**.

Reference was made to some key UNESCO reports, including The Recommendation on Education for Peace and Human Rights and Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence - UNESCO Digital Library, which suggest solutions.

UNESCO's policy priority areas include skills development and TVET (see unesco_strategy_for_tvet_2022-2029_discussion_document.pdf); higher education access, flexibility, quality, relevance, and digital and cultural transition (see UNESCO World Higher Education Conference 2022 | UNESCO); and digital transformation and AI ethics. In her close, Faryal included the comment "the Futures of Education initiative reminds us that the future is not something to be predicted — it is something to be *created*".

Participant feedback

Of the Mentimeter responses, the majority of the over 150 feedback elements mentioned funding in some way; more money for education was by far the most prominent suggestion. While some feedback solely suggested more investment in education, this was tempered by other contributors who mentioned the following nuances:

- "cost effectiveness and flexibility"
- "ensuring learners have cost effective access to the learning they need to improve their skills to help them reach their goals"
- "get the business model right"
- "reduce funding for non-innovative models"

These comments indicate that additional funding need not be assumed to merely continue the current approach. Sustainability was considered the most important consideration for policy makers to aim for.

Several comments also suggested that an evidence-based, rather than an ideologically driven, approach to policy needs to be taken. Taking a system-wide, holistic approach to policy development was also emphasised.

Technology access (including AI) was a further prominent theme, both in terms of ethics and availability on an equitable basis. Funding digital transformation was suggested more broadly as a policy direction.

Concern was raised that under-represented and marginalised people and groups need to be empowered to influence policy; it was also suggested that educators should likewise be involved in policy development. Associated with this was the observation of education's importance as a civic and moral moderator, with the added comment "we need values to live together peacefully and sustainably". Not all education need be purely industry focused, with several respondents noting that "social justice" is also a valid goal.

The feedback urged the importance of thoughtful policy to drive improvements to educational systems, noting improvements ought to be targeted toward improving educational models, technology access, and cooperation across organisations toward improving the inclusiveness, sustainability, and scalability of education. The equity and status of OFDL approaches was explicitly promoted by several respondents.

Policymakers clearly face difficult challenges, well-articulated in Minister Simmonds's opening address. However, it is also clear that well designed policy can navigate these challenges by incentivising desired outcomes and promoting evidence-based activities and models. The international challenges toward education that is inclusive, sustainable, and scalable are immense, and national issues are likewise inevitably complex. The initial round of Mentimeter feedback suggested that sustainability of investment, through the inclusion of multiple perspectives, innovative education models, and a future-oriented vision for education, should drive policy.

The presentation summaries and raw Mentimeter feedback was provided to Copilot, with the request to "Provide a two-paragraph summary of the audience feedback."

Output was as follows:

> *Audience feedback highlighted strong alignment with the presenters' emphasis on inclusivity, sustainability, and scalability in education policy. Participants praised the*

clarity of both presentations and showed particular interest in systemic reform that better connects industry, funding structures, and educational providers. Several comments indicated that audiences resonated with the need for flexible, lifelong learning pathways and more proactive approaches to digital transformation. There was also broad acknowledgement of the challenges outlined — demographic shifts, labour shortages, inequity, and rapidly evolving technologies — and agreement that these require both urgency and long-term planning.

At the same time, participants raised concerns about policy coherence, practical implementation, and the risk of reform fatigue within education sectors already under strain. Questions emerged around the feasibility of building resilient systems amid funding constraints and the pace of technological change. Many also underscored the need for stronger cross-sector collaboration — among governments, industry, educational institutions, and international bodies — to ensure that policy aspirations translate into meaningful, equitable outcomes for diverse learner groups. Overall, the feedback suggests cautious optimism: audiences support the direction of travel but emphasise the need for coordinated strategies and realistic, sustainable mechanisms for change.

FUNDERS OF HIGHER EDUCATION: ANNE-MARIE SCOTT

Opening comments on behalf of education funding agencies was provided by Anne-Marie Scott, Vice-President of the Commonwealth of Learning. In her presentation Anne-Marie noted that she "had never yet met an education system that didn't need money", adding

Anne-Marie Scott

that funding is often considered insufficient. Given this situation, funders tend to seek value, primarily through innovative models that can scale (something that incumbent or traditional approaches to education are unable to adequately do).

Attention was given to several activities across the Commonwealth of Learning, including Open Education Resources

(OER) work with Lakehead University ([About – Global Youth](#)), the Ministry of Education in Papua New Guinea ([Advancing open schooling partnership with PNG - Commonwealth of Learning](#)) and a long-standing partnership with the National University of Samoa ([Celebrating decade-long collaboration with Samoa in advancing ODFL - Commonwealth of Learning](#)), which evidence a large return relevant to investment made. The latter example,

Anne-Marie mentioned, "sustained engagement over a long time, it was not fiddling around the margins".

Anne-Marie cautioned that context is key, and that one-size-fits-all solutions do not exist, noting that "governments fund what matters to them" and that funders should "use open and digital to their fullest potential, with contextually appropriate implementations that emphasise collaboration".

Participant feedback

Mentimeter responses mentioned Open Education Resources (OER) seven times across the 42 items of feedback received, primarily in terms of placing value on their creation and use; respecting their value; establishing the OER business model; and incentivising OER adoption (with reference to faculty tenure and promotion). One participant proposed incentivising adoption might be based on funding to "[e]stablish local teams who take on ownership [of OER] and can update resources to make them applicable to their contexts". Interoperability of resources was also mentioned, as was using funding to "[change] culture around ownership."

As with the feedback to opening comments incentivising innovation and systems change was a prominent theme, stated by one participant as "[a]ccept and support innovation even if it does not adhere to common regulation and quality schemes" alongside a call for "[n]ew learning and new ideas". Another participant proposed incentivising practices "[a]llowing for today's challenges, while catering for future changes". Another stated that:

> Scalability depends on designing adaptable models that suit diverse contexts, supported by robust governance and risk management. Funders should promote innovation and adaptation, encouraging iteration.

Funding for infrastructure and professional development was also promoted.

A market- and democratically driven approach to funding was proposed, mindful that access for marginalised learners and the decolonisation agenda emerging internationally must be extended (and funded). It was pointed out that the digital divide and rural access to education options remain realities. An apt comment was, "[t]he needs of the learner groups should drive priorities, not needs of the funders". Broadening consideration of policy included the notion that all 17 SDGs, not just the one specific to education, should be considered; funders are certainly able to incentivise more broadly than solely education access.

Overall, participants were eager to see that "public funding is invested for impactful outcomes", tempered by one comment that added that funding should "embed innovations beyond pilots". A long-term approach to funding, incentivising innovation, promoting collaboration across a competitive landscape and reuse of resources were seen as important.

The presentation summary and raw Mentimeter feedback was provided to Copilot, with the request to "Provide a two-paragraph summary of the audience feedback."

Output was as follows:

> *Audience feedback strongly emphasised the need for funding models that genuinely support inclusive, sustainable, and scalable educational systems. Participants repeatedly highlighted the importance of valuing Open Educational Resources (OER) and enabling their widespread use through interoperability, open licensing, and supportive incentive structures. Sustainability—informed by all 17 Sustainable Development Goals—was a recurring theme, along with concerns about equitable distribution of funds, addressing the digital divide, and designing policies that reflect actual learner needs rather than the preferences of funders or regulators. Many comments pointed to the importance of innovation that can flourish without being constrained by overly rigid quality assurance schemes, suggesting that continuous, context-driven improvement is more meaningful than pre-set comparative metrics.*
>
> *Participants also underscored the need for culturally grounded and community-centred approaches, including decolonisation, Indigenous perspectives, and locally owned resource adaptation. Concerns were raised about political barriers, competitive funding environments, and institutional behaviours such as ring-fencing and overhead gouging that limit collaboration and resource openness. A strong theme was the call for systems that prioritise people at place—ensuring those closest to learners can shape decisions and define "value for money." Overall, the audience expressed a desire for policy that encourages long-term investment in infrastructure, professional development, and adaptable models capable of scaling across diverse contexts.*

QUALITY STANDARDS: MARK NICHOLS

ICDE President Mark Nichols stood in for Grant Klinkum, Chief Executive of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (who had to withdraw from the event). Mark emphasised the difficulties of agreeing on how quality should be defined and applied, noting that "quality agencies are inevitably caught in the difficulty of trying to be fair, yet firm; evidence-based and conservative, yet also open to new initiatives and practices". This was proposed as a "Procrustean task", whereby quality systems were needed that "are firm enough to ensure a

Mark Nichols

particular standard, yet flexible enough to realise that not everything needs to look the same".

Mark questioned whether quality systems assume a particular model of education (primarily in-classroom), whether appropriate evidence was being evaluated, and whether criteria were broad enough to assess the breadth of education practices now emerging. He also introduced four contemporary challenges, including indigenous representation in quality criteria; the pace of knowledge change; the role of Artificial Intelligence; and the importance of establishing equitable criteria.

Participant feedback

The comment "fitness for purpose, not fitness for comparative assessment (i.e. QA has been hijacked to show satisfactory outcomes for funding) rather than continuous quality improve for student learning", from one participant, highlighted the hand-in-glove relationship that often exists across funding and quality. Meeting quality standards can become a fit-for-funding pursuit, rather than a genuine interest in student development. Some scepticism in quality criteria was expressed by participants in such statements as "[o]ne person's 'quality' is another's tick-box" and "[q]uality needs to be an authenticity measure not a compliance measure".

It was agreed that quality assurance systems need to be flexible yet rigorous, and that such systems generally stifle innovation. Capturing the differences across different student groups and education models was also mentioned; single-set quality assurance criteria are not considered suitable for the complex differences in practice now seen across higher education. Quality systems might also be used to "inform strategies and investment for improvement", by incentivising desired activities and reflecting innovation in education, "driving innovation not inhibiting it"; one participant articulated this as "[s]tarting with a quality vision of opportunity". Taking a risk-based, rather than a compliance-based, approach was suggested by one participant, perhaps by having institutions disclose their own risk status. A further participant added that "QA measures need to be flexible and holistic. Looking to the real impact of learning on the learner, the intangibles often overlooked (self-awareness and growth)". Taking a continuous improvement view, built on foundational criteria related to governance and resource planning was suggested as a means of seeing quality as an ongoing, rather than point-in-time, activity.

Participants argued for clear criteria that reflect the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, including students, and for criteria to be set by agencies with an appropriate mandate. Students, for example, may have a different set of personal criteria linked to personal goals: "Are the marginalised (most in need) people and the environment thriving by their own measures? We need to think about the purpose of any measurement systems."

Despite the scepticism of quality assurance noted above, participants saw opportunity for quality to drive innovation and reshape education practices toward inclusive, sustainable,

and scalable activity even to the extent of having explicit measures against these three elements. Agencies themselves have a role to play here, with one participant proposing that quality assurance agencies ought to "strengthen their own capacity for evidence-based evaluation, training reviewers in inclusive pedagogy, digital readiness, and equity metrics". Ultimately, one participant suggested, graduates are themselves the ultimate indicator of quality.

The presentation summary and raw Mentimeter feedback was provided to Copilot, with the request to "Provide a two-paragraph summary of the audience feedback."

Output was as follows:

> *The audience strongly reinforced the presentation's core theme: contemporary quality assurance (QA) systems often constrain innovation, diversity, and equitable practice in higher education. Many participants argued that current frameworks privilege compliance over genuine improvement, rely on narrow or outdated indicators, and frequently assume a one-size-fits-all model of education that does not reflect varied learner needs, cultural worldviews, delivery modes, or emerging practices such as micro-credentials and AI-supported learning. There was consistent concern that rigid standards, numerical KPIs, and binary approval decisions often fail to capture authentic learning outcomes, do not recognise intangible learner development, and overlook the perspectives of ākonga, employers, and marginalised groups.*

> *At the same time, the audience expressed strong appetite for reimagined quality systems grounded in flexibility, inclusivity, and contextual relevance. Participants emphasised that quality should reflect fitness for purpose, be shaped by diverse stakeholder voices, and support continuous institutional improvement rather than compliance-driven reporting. They called for high-level standards that allow providers to articulate their own measures; QA agencies that stay current with educational innovation; reviewers trained in inclusive and digital pedagogies; and frameworks that balance rigour with adaptability. There was also a clear desire to ensure that quality systems maintain alignment with broader societal purposes— equity, environmental wellbeing, and sustainability—rather than simply meeting funding or political expectations.*

PROVIDERS OF HE: ALAN CADWALLADER AND JAN THOMAS

Alan Cadwallader, Executive Director of Open Polytechnic, and Jan Thomas, Vice-Chancellor of Massey University, represented the 2025 ICDE World Conference host organisations and gave an account of the policy framework faced by polytechnics and universities. Open

Polytechnic is an online, distance education provider in the New Zealand vocational sector; Massey University is a research-intensive university also specialising in distance education.

Alan highlighted the demand and supply side challenges faced by education institutions. Students seek flexibility and personal growth, the desire to "be taken somewhere"; on the supply side there are public funding priorities, which include government objectives, economic contribution, quality at scale, and the need to leverage technology. Alan also signalled the need for policies to move from assumptions based on traditional, supply-side, institution-oriented and residential contexts to assumptions based on unconventional education models, focusing on demand and learners and recognising that learning can be work-oriented.

Alan Cadwallader   *Jan Thomas*

Jan opened with the observation that higher education in Aotearoa New Zealand "is at a pivotal moment". She highlighted the complexity around pursuing education solutions that are inclusive, sustainable, and scalable and highlighted that cultural inclusivity is not optional. Talking on each of the three emphases in turn, Jan stated the challenges of remote and prioritised learners is such that "[i]nclusivity is not just about opening the door. It's about ensuring that once inside, students feel a sense of belonging and are empowered to succeed". Jan mentioned the importance of financial sustainability in "resource intensive and resource constrained environments". Finally, for scalability, Jan mentioned the growth of demand for higher education and the need to scale up mindful that "scaling up is not as simple as adding more classes, expanding our teaching capacity, or in a very simplistic sense, building new lecture theatres". However, digital solutions must be mindful of the digital divide.

In response to the need to align inclusivity, sustainability, and scalability as objectives, stronger cross-institutional partnerships and embedding indigenous perspectives were proposed, the latter so that graduates "leave not only with knowledge but with values that will shape a better future for all". Both speakers highlighted the importance of taking a progress-oriented view of what can be achieved through education and reminded the participants about the broader moral purpose of education: the creation of good, productive citizens and the intergenerational and transformational power of education for

individuals and communities alike They also spoke candidly about the current system limitations of delivering on that vision.

Participant feedback

Participants picked up on the point that education providers were dealing with a shifting learner base, toward more adult and part-time learners, as part of the context for improving access to education. Equity of access came through as a strong feedback theme. Comments also recognised shifts toward blended, community-based, digital, flexible, and online education and their need to be recognised in policy as equivalent to the traditional (one participant added "colonial") in-classroom model. Financing these new models is a priority; one participant stated that policy makers need to "[f]ix a completely broken financial model or nothing will be possible". Providers need to be incentivised to adapt their business and education models in support of more flexible and accessible education, including the adoption of OER. Among the suggestions for policy priorities in support of sustainability, one participant promoted institutions pursue "long-term capacity through staff development, digital infrastructure, open educational resources, and continuous improvement systems".

The broader roles of partnership and valuing education in policy formation were mentioned, with the proposal that education should be considered "a public good rather than private commodity". Of course, institutions must also align their activities "with the economy or industry". Relatedly, one participant stated that "[p]olicy should recognise the outputs of learning over the inputs", however the comment "policy should be about the professionalisation of higher ed educators" was also made on the grounds that teachers and nurses are professions needing to meet professional competency standards.

There was also some sympathy for Jan's comments related to inclusivity, sustainability and scalability as objectives, with the observation that being inclusive can work against being scalable. Promoting collaborative activities across providers and using data "to monitor equity, effectiveness, and impact, feeding into quality assurance and innovation cycles" were also proposed.

The presentation summary and raw Mentimeter feedback was provided to Copilot, with the request to "Provide a two-paragraph summary of the audience feedback."

Output was as follows:

> *Audience feedback reflects a strong call for structural reform in higher-education policy to better support equity, flexibility, and sustainability. Participants highlighted that the learner base is changing, with increasingly diverse students who require adaptable, context-responsive forms of delivery such as blended, digital, or community-based models. Many emphasised that online and distance learning (ODFL) must be recognised as pedagogically valid and equivalent in policy to*

face-to-face learning—both to remove barriers to innovation and to change outdated perceptions that online learning is inherently inferior. Contributors also stressed the importance of supporting teachers through professional development, modelling high-quality online pedagogy, and ensuring consistency across modes. Digital inequity, especially in regional areas, was identified as a key barrier to inclusive participation.

A second major theme was the urgent need to fix a tertiary funding model viewed as "broken," unsustainable, and misaligned with the public good purpose of education. Participants argued that competitive funding structures distort provider behaviour and undermine collaboration, including partnerships with communities, regional stakeholders, and industry. There were strong messages about power-sharing, humility, and recognising Indigenous perspectives—particularly the need to avoid colonial framings of what counts as "traditional." Attendees also highlighted tensions between inclusivity and scalability, the need for achievable and fit-for-purpose policy settings, and the importance of using disaggregated data to drive evidence-based quality assurance and continuous improvement. Overall, the feedback points toward a policy environment that is collaborative, equitable, culturally grounded, financially sustainable, and future-focused.

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS: RALPH SPRINGETT

Ralph Springett (President, FLANZ) spoke on behalf of FLANZ, Kate Ames (ACODE) and Dawn Gilmore (ODLAA).

Ralph's presentation focused on a recent survey on behalf of the ICDE Global Advocacy Campaign, prepared by the Oceania Task Force. The survey "asked sector experts and leaders for their assessment of current achievements and challenges" with respect to inclusive, scalable, and sustainable education. Ralph noted that more challenges than achievements were identified. The survey

Ralph Springett

findings found that improving education across these three factors was complex, and that models designed to achieve them invariably require a distance education response. Findings also revealed the concern that "technology is changing rapidly, and solutions may have a relatively short useful life".

Survey findings affirmingly disclosed that policy decisions related to equity have a positive impact. The survey results identified difficulties with long-term, cross-institution changes to practice because of the cost and risk involved, indicative of an uncertain policy environment as it relates to promoting innovation. Also, in a cost-conscious environment, professional development often falls victim to budget decisions. While OFDL might be considered a means of bringing about inclusive, scalable, and sustainable education, OFDL models are often not considered equivalent to traditional ones.

Ralph closed with three proposals to policy makers: recognise the equivalence of OFDL; increase funding associated with professional development toward OFDL practice; and invest in strategically aligned innovation projects, both to improve digital infrastructure and in response to technological change (AI specifically identified).

Participant feedback

Feedback observed that there are various levels of policy in higher education, "there are big 'P' and small 'p' polices across the policy and wider education landscape". Part of this "big 'P'" environment ought to include professional development standards and requirements, an idea popular across participants. Somewhere across policy there ought to be a recognition of OFDL and its equivalence as a collection of education models, despite their different workload to the traditional method. The various models now possible through OFDL also "need clear definition", as OFDL is not expressed in any single or specific way.

It was observed that much OFDL in universities takes place in pockets, a feature of those traditional universities exploring options for blended models. Taking an institutional view of such innovations was suggested by one participant, another adding "enable policies that foster support for innovation while balancing time and workload."

OFDL might also be incentivised by policy to reduce the costs of higher education: "[t]ertiary education costs need to be reduced for the greater benefit of young people burdened by debt". Indeed, one participant simply said "[j]ust make [higher education] free". Participants saw a clear link between innovative OFDL models and efficiency, without any compromise to education outcomes.

The presentation summary and raw Mentimeter feedback was provided to Copilot, with the request to "Provide a two-paragraph summary of the audience feedback."

Output was as follows:

> *Audience feedback strongly reinforced the presentation's core message: meaningful progress toward inclusive, scalable, and sustainable higher education requires both systemic recognition of OFDL and the removal of structural barriers. Many participants emphasised that recognising OFDL as equivalent to traditional education would unlock progress across multiple fronts—from professional development to technology investment—and would empower both bottom-up*

innovation and top-down alignment. They noted that higher-education policies often operate at two levels ("big P" and "small p"), meaning that sector-level directives must be matched with institutional practices that genuinely value teaching and learning. Several commented that current workload models, inconsistent definitions of educational models, and a persistent research-over-teaching culture undermine educators' capacity to innovate and sustain high-quality OFDL practice.

Feedback also highlighted concerns about capability, equity, and professional recognition. Participants called for mandatory professional development, formal teaching qualifications (such as a PgCert), certification for tutor technological competency, and a standards framework similar to the schooling sector. They also stressed the financial pressures faced by learners and the need for policies that reduce costs and address contradictions across existing regulations (such as care-to-study ratios that disadvantage student parents). Many expressed frustration that innovation is often encouraged rhetorically but unsupported in practice due to workload constraints, wellbeing pressures, and a lack of systemic support. Overall, the audience affirmed that high-quality learning and teaching must be recognised as an institutional—not individual—responsibility, requiring coherent policies that align culture, workload, promotions, and funding with the sector's stated goals.

STUDENTS: HENRY GEARY AND MICHELLE MATSON

The final EPF presenters were Henry Geary (Open Polytechnic student) and Michelle Matson (Massey University student). Both provided first-hand personal perspectives.

Henry Geary   *Michelle Matson*

Henry reflected that of the three terms inclusive, sustainable and scalable, only the first had any direct relevance to students. To Henry, inclusive education means that "[a]nyone, no matter race, religion, gender or wealth should have access to the education they want, when they want to access it, where they want to access it, in a language they can understand, and at a cost they can afford to pay". Citing the New Zealand Ministry of Education, he observed that, in New Zealand where the population consists of 18% indigenous Māori, only 9% are

tertiary learners. Making education free may not work, but targeted funding to promote specific qualifications might. Embedding indigenous language and resources can also do much to improve inclusiveness.

In her presentation, Michelle took time to explain her "why" for study. Michelle grew up in a rural location where future options were limited. She provided an account of impoverishment and aimlessness, later shaped by a determination to "create a world for my three daughters that is better than the one I had". As a mature, distance education student in a remote location, Michelle described her experience as "a never-ending juggling act, physically and mentally". She also expressed the importance of community, connection, and balance" in study. In her "wish list" for education policy, Michelle made four suggestions: having paid and allocated study leave from employment; increasing study benefit thresholds; revising childcare entitlements to align with tertiary study entitlements; and providing travel subsidies for rural students who need to attend in-person workshops. Michelle's closing challenge in her candid presentation was the EPF to "put aside the jargon monoxide and come up with some real-world solutions that live and breathe the theme" of inclusive, sustainable, and scalable education.

Participant feedback

The perspectives offered by Henry and Michelle were highly valued by participants, one remarking "Why didn't we hear first from the students? They are our customers!" Most comments related to the reality-check the student presentations provided, and the need for policies to be joined-up and speak to one another, taking a student-centric approach (citing Michelle's example of childcare support). Some called for research to be done, articulated by one participant here: "investment in understanding the reality of students and their circumstances. Persona development and qualitative research. We can learn a lot from marketing / business / customer service". Financial analysis of policy decisions and the removal of unintended consequences were also mentioned. Policy needs to recognise that student circumstances can vary considerably, and that the learner perspective is needed. Comments in support of these points suggested they were of high value to participants.

Solutions suggested by participants to promote lifelong education included better subsidisation of education; promoting OFDL approaches to study; and extending funding considerations beyond subject-related priorities to include learner access dynamics. Incentivising employers to support employees who are studying was also mentioned.

The presentation summary and raw Mentimeter feedback was provided to Copilot, with the request to "Provide a two-paragraph summary of the audience feedback."

Output was as follows:

> *Overall, the audience strongly reinforced the students' core message: inclusivity must begin with removing structural, financial, and cultural barriers that prevent*

learners from accessing or sustaining participation in higher education. Many comments highlighted inconsistencies across government portfolios—education, social services, employment, childcare—and expressed frustration that policies often work at cross-purposes. Participants noted that "free education" alone is insufficient without addressing the true costs of study, including textbooks, publisher fees, childcare, travel, and lost income. There was repeated emphasis on understanding actual student needs through persona development, qualitative research, and continuous engagement—an approach more commonly associated with marketing or customer experience than traditional policy development.

A second theme centred on equity for diverse learner groups: Māori and other priority communities, mature students returning after long gaps, distance and rural learners, and students requiring learning in multiple languages including New Zaland Sign Language. Feedback highlighted the need for flexible, anywhere-anytime design principles; employer incentives for supporting staff who study; and targeted funding substantial enough to make meaningful qualifications genuinely free for priority learners. Many also underscored the value of OER-first approaches, culturally relevant materials, and broader recognition of different ways of knowing. Across comments, there was a repeated call for student voices to be centred rather than appended—"Why didn't we hear first from the students? They are our customers!"—and for policy to be grounded in the lived realities that Henry and Michelle so clearly articulated.

FURTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS

The final section of the EPF was an open-ended invitation for participants to suggest policy advice.

Participant comments emphasised the importance of flexible study options that give learners the ability to enter and pause study as they need to. Employer involvement was also highlighted, perhaps through a purposeful tax. Policy can promote OFDL methodologies and inclusivity, sustainability, and scalability by taking a direct interest in them. UNESCO guidelines and a long-term focus were mentioned, as was policy directed at "fiscally responsible selections such as supporting the creation of OER to develop quality reuseable materials, ultimately reducing time and cost to create by sharing". Requiring professional development for tertiary educators in support of more innovative education models was also advocated.

Feedback highlighted the importance of having the student voice represented, and for education to take a future focus. Part of a future focus may, as stated by one participant, might challenge us to "[v]alue education not qualifications". Finally, it was suggested that policies need to endure beyond the short-term political cycle of democracies. Perhaps participant feedback is best closed with this comment: "Anything is politically possible".

Copilot provided the following summary of the advice received:

Participants emphasized that education policy must be long-term, values-driven, and centred on equity and learner empowerment. They argued for treating education as a public good and a human right, ensuring that the most disadvantaged learners can access and benefit from it. A consistent theme was the need for policies that prioritise learner agency, reduce unnecessary bureaucracy, and allow flexible pathways—such as pausing study without penalty. Contributors also highlighted the importance of coherent, joined-up policy across government agencies, informed by educator and learner voices, real student stories, and a clear understanding of existing policy weaknesses. Future-focused thinking, alignment with UNESCO guidelines, and a broader view of education beyond economic outcomes were seen as crucial for inclusive, sustainable systems.

To make education scalable and resilient, participants stressed that policy and practice must evolve together, supporting innovation, collaboration, and preparedness—particularly in ODFL (open, distance and flexible learning). This includes sustained investment in educator development, technology-enabled learning, OER creation, and systemic efficiencies in IT and programme design. Policies should enable long-term sustainability instead of short-term political or financial cycles, with stable priorities and adequate resources to maintain momentum. Several suggestions explored new funding mechanisms—such as employer contributions or dedicated taxes—to ensure fiscal responsibility while keeping learners at the centre. Ultimately, participants called for future-proof policies that empower learners, support educators, remove inequalities, and remain adaptable as society's needs change.

THE TĀKINA ACCORD

The Tākina Accord is a point of agreement across participants of the 2025 ICDE World Conference Education Policy Forum.

Purpose of the Accord

The purpose of the Tākina Accord is to promote higher education solutions that are inclusive, sustainable, and scalable, so that the benefits of education can be brought to the broadest reach of students.

Principles for higher education policy

Policy makers are required to make difficult trade-offs while seeking to maximise the outcomes of limited funding. In that context the following principles undergird the Tākina Accord.

1. Policy must incentivise education practices that are inclusive, sustainable, and scalable, and be aligned at all levels. [2]
2. Inclusive policies rely on addressing evidence-based issues centred on the student voice, with particular emphasis on valuing indigenous knowledge systems and promoting equity for diverse learner groups.
3. Policies must provide evidence-based approaches that transcend political ideology and align with the broader national and international policy landscape.
4. Policies must recognise that lifelong learning (LLL) and education (qualification) outcomes are equally important.
5. Policies must provide quality assurance systems grounded in flexibility, inclusivity and contextual relevance, and support continuous institutional improvement rather than compliance-driven reporting.
6. Policies must promote the digital transformation of education practice, while addressing the digital divide and avoiding techno centrism.
7. Policies must promote and support the readiness of educators and their institutions toward developing and implementing new education practices.
8. Policies must address the potential of OER and incentivise practices that improve the inclusivity, sustainability, and scalability of education.

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[2] The University Advisory Group, in its final report published in 2025, noted the policy dissonance across the New Zealand tertiary education sector with different agencies crafting often conflicting policies and stated that 'The lack of effective policy consideration of the universities as a system operating in the national interest is a fundamental weakness.' See further https://web-assets.education.govt.nz/s3fs-public/2025-08/UAG%20Final%20Report.pdf?VersionId=y4LFYec24XPlwJ0GXzHkIR45OKb57zvw p. 8.

Recommended actions in support of more effective higher education policy

Five immediate actions are urged in support of developing policy in support of inclusive, sustainable, and scalable education.

1. **Investigate the challenges to education access and benefits of participation from a student perspective.** A rich-data, first-person investigation including students from diverse backgrounds, locations and life stages will help policies to better reflect reality. Working with discrete 'student persona' prototypes (akin to a customer persona) may assist here as a way of understanding the student journey and the points of challenge faced by students who are navigating our complex tertiary education policy landscape.

2. **Identify innovative education models that support inclusive, sustainable, and scalable education.** Evidencing the value of innovative education models from these dimensions will help incentivise and spread a more equitable and flexible higher education system, with an emphasis on indigenous knowledge systems.

3. **Determine a position on the development, sharing, and maintenance of OER, based on an investigation into their potential.** Consider how they might be incentivised to the benefit of the education system, mindful of the dynamics related to competitiveness, customisation, Intellectual Property (IP) obligations, and management.

4. Develop **a series of higher education positions and long-term strategies** that draw together UNESCO, OFDL, digital education, and systems thinking perspectives toward lifelong learning. Aotearoa New Zealand needs a future-ready higher-education system that integrates UNESCO's lifelong learning ethos, OFDL reach and scalability, digital transformation, micro-credential flexibility, open knowledge ecosystems, and systems-thinking governance. The result would be a coherent, flexible, and equitable learning architecture that supports learners across their lifespan and strengthens national capability in a rapidly changing world. Changes should be aligned with UNESCO's SDG 4 mandate to build equitable learning ecosystems across life stages and settings and could include:
   a. System connectivity: transitioning from fragmented programmes to holistic learning ecosystems that integrate formal, non-formal, and informal learning.
   b. Open, Flexible & Distance Learning (OFDL) as Core System Capacity, shifting from a supplementary to a mainstream delivery mode, expanding access, strengthening resilience, and meeting diverse learner needs.
   c. Coherent digital Ecosystems: the implementation of existing digital action plans must address inclusion, infrastructure, and teacher digital competence gaps.
   d. Micro-Credentials & Flexible Pathways frameworks to support the longitudinal monitoring of learner outcomes and labour-market effects.

e. Positioning Open Educational Resources (OER) as Public Infrastructure.[3]

5. Finally, and locally, we note that while the Tertiary Education Strategy (TES) 2025–2030 acknowledges lifelong learning (*Priority 2: Economic Impact and Innovation* and *Priority 3: Access and Participation*). However, Aotearoa New Zealand has **need of a detailed lifelong learning strategy**. This Accord proposes lifelong learning as the optimal foundation for tertiary education policy. Essentially, the TES 2025-2030 for Aotearoa New Zealand sets direction but not a roadmap that signals that providers should support flexible, modular, online, and work-based solutions. As a nation, we are falling behind others who have such strategies.[4]

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[3] Note that this should be subject to the third recommendation point, above.

[4] The Netherlands and the EU, for instance; see https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurypedia/netherlands/lifelong-learning-strategy. Singapore, Finland and Ireland have well-developed lifelong learning infrastructures, highlighting a gap in New Zealand's strategic coherence.