

Empowerment Award Entrant: Te Wānanga o Aotearoa



An internal Women's Empowerment and Leadership Programme guided by Māori principles is inspiring and uniting women from the front line through to executive level at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa.

Te Whare Mareikura was launched in 2016, with the goal of developing, challenging and growing influential, transformational leaders throughout the organisation.

Te Wānanga o Aotearoa is the second largest tertiary provider in New Zealand, with more than 300,000 students graduating since its inception in 1985. It operates nationwide from Kaitia to Invercargill, in more than 80 sites, providing qualifications ranging from certificate to masters level in subjects including small business, computing, social work, teaching, Māori performing arts and te reo Māori. Classes are run both in the day and in evenings.

With more than 1400 kaimahi (staff) at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, the gender disparity within executive and senior levels of leadership is consistent with statistics across New Zealand, with only 34 percent of women in the organisation working in senior positions.

The Te Whare Mareikura initiative was designed by the three women of the Te Wānanga o Aotearoa's Executive Team, as a way of using their senior positions to benefit other women. The three carefully planned to reach into all levels within Te Wānanga o Aotearoa to recognise and promote the unique leadership qualities that wāhine (women) naturally possess.

Executive Officer – Educational Excellence Awhimai Huka says that as part of its strategic direction, Te Wānanga o Aotearoa is committed to supporting its kaimahi to be leaders and beacons in their fields of expertise, who deliver world-class indigenous education and services.

The programme required a new way of thinking on behalf of its participants. “One of the main challenges of launching Te Whare Māreikura was promoting and communicating the intention of the programme. It required a mind shift about women being leaders within the workplace as intuitively as they do within their own homes,” she says.

Awhimai believes it is important to note, however, that the notion of leadership is but one measure at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa . “Other measures of leadership include work that our wāhine do within their own whānau (families), iwi (tribes) and communities.”

Te Whare Māreikura consisted of three workshops across nine main sites throughout New Zealand, run in the evening, outside work hours.

The first workshop focused on the three women from the Executive sharing their personal accounts of their own leadership journeys. The second was a facilitated session that explored and discussed kaimahi strengths and their value to the workplace. The final workshop was around celebrating kaimahi successes and reassessing their own leadership goals and aspirations.

The sessions broke down barriers: “Due to our geographical spread, it is often difficult to maintain a close working relationship between kaimahi and Tumu (leaders) and across the organisation,” says Awhimai. “This can lead to kaimahi feeling undervalued and disengaged, therefore not providing optimum results for the organisation. Communication barriers can also lead to misunderstandings resulting in substandard outcomes. The presence of our Tumu wāhine and their personal investment into this programme and therefore into our kaimahi began the breakdown of barriers, the first step in developing strong, enduring relationships,” says Awhimai.

The workshops, elicited great response.

“... Such an engaging evening! I was absorbed listening to and hearing the transformation and development of three powerful wahine! What I identified with the most was that the women had 'risen up' from ordinary beginnings where, in some cases, their parents had been miners and shearers, the latter of which resembles my own background. I've been searching for the common characteristics that were woven through their stories: determination, courage, confidence, resilience and a healthy level of self-esteem plus whanau support...” (Whangarei).

“Ngā mihi nui for an amazing, moving and inspiring evening in Porirua last night. So much aroha shared, so real and profoundly powerful. I feel I am walking among immensely powerful and courageous wahine who are making a profound contribution to our peoples of Aotearoa.” (Rotorua).