

Report of External Evaluation and Review

The Learning Connexion

Highly Confident in educational performance

Confident in capability in self-assessment

Date of report: 18 January 2012

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Purpose of this Report

The purpose of this external evaluation and review report is to provide a public statement about the Tertiary Education Organisation's (TEO) educational performance and capability in self-assessment. It forms part of the accountability process required by Government to inform investors, the public, students, prospective students, communities, employers, and other interested parties. It is also intended to be used by the TEO itself for quality improvement purposes.

Introduction

1. TEO in context

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| Location: | 182 Eastern Hutt Road, Taita, Lower Hutt |
| Type: | Private training provider (PTE) |
| First registered: | 1993 |
| Number of students: | Domestic: 721 International: two |
| Number of staff: | 73 full-time equivalents |
| Scope of active accreditation: | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Certificate of Art and Creativity (Level 4)• Diploma of Art and Creativity (Level 5)• Diploma of Art and Creativity (Honours) (Level 6)• Diploma of Art and Creativity (Advanced) (Level 7) |
| Sites: | No additional sites |
| Distinctive characteristics: | <p>The Learning Connexion (TLC) was first established in 1988 as a specialist provider of art skills, art industry experience, and creativity skills development, and became a registered PTE in 1993. The campus on which the organisation operates is owned by TLC Educational Trust, a charitable trust established in 2000.</p> <p>The organisation's aim is to establish, encourage and nurture sustainable creativity. TLC believes that an enhanced engagement with the visual arts</p> |

opens up new pathways, in work and life, for its students. Art is used as a means to explore and learn creative processes, which can then be applied in many diverse areas, such as academic study, professional development, community assistance, or personal growth.

TLC offers four qualifications from the level 4 certificate to the level 7 advanced diploma. Its suite of programmes covers the visual arts spectrum from painting, drawing, and design to jewellery, video, photography, computer graphics, print-making, bronze casting, ceramics, and stone carving. All programmes have flexible entry points and can be studied part-time, full-time, on site, or by distance. At the time of the evaluation, the majority of those enrolled were studying by distance.

Students at TLC come from diverse backgrounds. TLC describes a major part of its student demographic as those, 'neglected in mainstream education', stating that a high percentage are 'second-chance' learners seeking to return to education. At the time of the evaluation, 75 per cent of students were female, 76 per cent were aged over 25 years, 10 per cent declared disabilities, 25 per cent identified as Māori, and 3 per cent as Pasifika; 84 per cent were studying by distance.

TLC is a founding member of the New Zealand Independent Tertiary Institutions Inc.

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| Recent significant changes: | TLC relocated to the current Taita site in January 2009. This transition was managed effectively and seems to have had no negative impact on the students enrolled at the time. |
| Previous quality assurance history: | The organisation was last quality assured by NZQA in November 2007 under the audit system; TLC met all audit requirements. |

2. Scope of external evaluation and review

The agreed scope of the external evaluation and review at TLC included the following mandatory focus area:

- Governance, management, and strategy

The other three focus areas were:

- Programme support

This focus area was chosen because it is an area that TLC has specially targeted to seek new and innovative ways of supporting students, with a particular emphasis on digital options and support for distance students. This focus area includes TLC's prison, deaf, and inclusion programmes.

- Certificate of Art and Creativity (Level 4)
- Diploma of Art and Creativity (Advanced) (Level 7)

The Certificate of Art and Creativity was chosen because it is an open-entry, foundation-level programme in which the majority of students are enrolled. Students develop core technical skills in art and are taught the principles of creativity, to prepare them for higher-level study.

The Diploma of Art and Creativity (Advanced) was chosen because it is the highest-level programme offered by TLC and has been identified by the organisation as a programme for future growth. The diploma is a level 7 qualification with equivalence to the third year of an undergraduate degree.

3. Conduct of external evaluation and review

*All external evaluation and reviews are conducted in accordance with NZQA's published policies and procedures. The methodology used is described fully in the web document *Policy and Guidelines for the Conduct of External Evaluation and Review* available at: <http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/providers-partners/registration-and-accreditation/external-evaluation-and-review/policy-and-guidelines-eeer/introduction/>*

The evaluation team comprised three evaluators. An NZQA member was also in attendance as an observer. The evaluators spoke with directors, the senior management team, academic board members, tutors, mentors, administration staff, and a selection of on-site and distance students. The evaluators interviewed local community stakeholders such as local high schools, Hutt City Council, Youth Transition Services, and Atiawa Toa FM. They also spoke with four external advisors including a researcher, a practising artist, an education consultant, and a group of senior academics. In addition, the evaluators reviewed a number of TLC's documents and records, and received supporting information on TLC's

performance against its investment plan from the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC).

Summary of Results

Statement of confidence on educational performance

NZQA is **Highly Confident** in the educational performance of **The Learning Connexion**. The key reasons for this are:

- Students improve their well-being while studying at TLC. The majority of students enrol for personal development, to improve their skills, and to gain more confidence in themselves. Students achieve well in these areas as evidenced from the feedback received through formal surveys and ongoing communications.
- Distance learners achieve at the same level as on-site learners. Qualification completion rates have improved significantly over the last two years. This is attributed to the successful implementation of retention and completion strategies, particularly those focussed on distance learners.
- TLC supports community development and minimises barriers to tertiary education. This is particularly evident through the work TLC does with its 'non-traditional students' through the prison-based, deaf, and inclusion programmes.
- Student achievement is enhanced through effective teaching and a high level of guidance and support. Tutors are all practising artists and maintain networks within the art community nationally and internationally. Their experiences are reflected in their teaching and shared with students. TLC provides all students with a high level of guidance and support, especially those who require specialist support through increased pastoral care.
- TLC has effective governance and management structures to support educational achievement. The campus provides a vibrant learning environment and programmes are well resourced for both the on-site and distance students.

Statement of confidence on capability in self-assessment

NZQA is **Confident** in the capability in self-assessment of **The Learning Connexion**.

- TLC's senior management is committed to constructive self-assessment practices across the organisation that are designed to improve programme design and delivery and, ultimately, enhance learner achievement.
- Instances of effective self-assessment leading to improved outcomes include the building of community relationships within TLC's 'new community' (Taita), retention and completion initiatives aimed at distance learners, and TLC's long-term support for individual learning plans.

- Despite these successes, TLC has encountered some difficulties reporting on and analysing its achievement data at the programme level. TLC recognises this gap and is attempting to fill it.
- TLC has also embarked on a longer-term and more challenging project to demonstrate the lasting benefits, in terms of 'sustained creativity', that it hopes are enjoyed by its graduates.

TEO response

TLC has commented on a draft version of this report, and the organisation's comments have been taken into consideration before the report's finalisation.

Findings¹

1.1 How well do learners achieve?

The rating for performance in relation to this key evaluation question is **Good**.

The rating for capability in self-assessment for this key evaluation question is **Adequate**.

In the context of New Zealand art schools, TLC stands somewhat apart because of its distinctive emphasis on unleashing 'creativity'. Whereas a more mainstream TEO might measure good achievement as student success in improving their art and design skills, gaining a qualification, and entering a related profession, TLC's primary concern is to enable its trainees to gain creative confidence through the process of artistic engagement.

TLC's measures of success reflect this particular emphasis. Entry surveys confirm that most people enrol in TLC programmes for reasons of personal development, to gain more confidence in themselves, and to improve their artistic skills. Students achieve well in each of these areas. For example, data collected from on-course and graduate surveys showed that about 50 per cent of the students (43 per cent in 2010, 52 per cent in 2011) reported an increased sense of well-being as a result of their study. The randomly selected sample of current students interviewed by the evaluation team was uniformly positive. They spoke very favourably of how much they had learned about themselves, some referring with enthusiasm to having been on a journey of personal discovery. All noted how much their creative skills had improved through the TLC programmes. Many had sold their artwork and they viewed this as a key achievement in its own right.

TLC actively supports its students to meet their creative potential through its extensive network of artistic and pastoral support (discussed later in this report) and through its ongoing validation of the work being produced. Students' artwork is displayed on walls around the campus, a point of pride to many of those currently enrolled. In addition, students collectively plan, organise, and contribute to the end-of-term exhibitions, which are open to the general public (who customarily purchase many of the artworks on display).

The number of TLC learners who complete courses and qualifications has significantly improved over the past three years. Between 2003 and 2008, TLC's achievement rates against this measure were consistently below the sector median, and did not rise over 50 per cent until 2008. Qualification completion rates for 2009 and 2010 were much higher, and well in excess of the TEC sector median of 71 and 75 per cent, although some uncertainty remains as to the exact level of

¹ The findings in this report are derived using a standard process and are based on a targeted sample of the organisation's activities.

achievement because of the possible inclusion of 'embedded qualifications'. TLC attributes its overall improvement in completed qualifications to increased support for its students, particularly the growing percentage of those enrolled as distance learners, through improved pre-enrolment guidance and information, and closer monitoring of those identified as at-risk students.

However, TLC is very likely to have some ongoing difficulties meeting any measure based on the regular completion of qualifications. TLC attracts many students who wish to study part-time, and others whose personal circumstances change in the course of their enrolment, forcing them to take a break from their programme. In such cases, TLC's flexible approach, responsiveness to the perceived needs of its learners, and commitment to maintaining educational standards may have an unintended negative effect on completion rates. TLC's ability to manage these tensions remains a work in progress.

TLC also has an ongoing commitment to self-assessment of its achievement data. At the time of the evaluation, TLC could not produce disaggregated data from previous years that could show achievement rates at the programme level, which has limited the ability of the evaluation team to validate trends in programme achievement over time. TLC recognises this gap, which it attributes to the limitations of its previous software capability, and is attempting to fill it.

1.2 What is the value of the outcomes for key stakeholders, including learners?

The rating for performance in relation to this key evaluation question is **Excellent**.

The rating for capability in self-assessment for this key evaluation question is **Good**.

TLC's programmes are fulfilling the organisation's mission to establish, encourage and nurture sustainable creativity, through highly effective engagement with its students and the wider community.

Students value the TLC programmes for personal, academic, and vocational reasons. A TLC post-exit survey, run over the past 18 months, indicates that most recent graduates are convinced that their creativity continues to be sustained well beyond the completion of their studies. This confidence is supported by the increasing numbers progressing to higher levels of study, both within TLC and through other tertiary providers.² In addition, 46 per cent of responding graduates gained full-time or part-time employment in relevant jobs in 2011, 77 per cent continued in their own art practices, and 39 per cent sold their own work. In each case, these figures are higher than those available for the previous calendar year.

² In 2010, 56 per cent of graduates from the Certificate of Art and Creativity (Level 4) progressed to the Diploma of Art and Creativity (Level 5). Over the same period 14 Diploma of Art and Creativity (Advanced) (Level 7) graduates went on to study with other tertiary providers, seven at Master's level.

By itself, this indicates a general pattern of progress, but TLC still has to complete the internal analysis that can establish whether, over time, these outcomes indicate high – not simply improved – achievement.

Community engagement takes place through work with special interest groups and local schools. These multiple relationships have the collective effect of minimising barriers to tertiary education.

This is most evident in the work TLC does with its 'non-traditional students' through its prison-based, deaf, and inclusion programmes. Prison-based programmes, which began in 2005, now run in 14 of New Zealand's 20 public prisons and respond constructively to the restrictions imposed by the prison environment. For many prisoners, their experience as TLC students is their first educational 'success story'.

TLC adapted its Diploma of Art and Creativity programme to the needs of stakeholders within the deaf community. TLC supports its current enrolment of 18 students with a network of additional resources, such as an on-site interpreter, and runs an annual exhibition specifically for these students to display their work.

The new inclusion programme, which enables students with intellectual impairments to access tertiary art education, is having comparable success. Building on international research, this programme effectively merges impaired and non-impaired students, and both groups reported gaining insight from the experience of side-by-side training.

TLC's opportunities have also been significantly accessed by the local high school. In one recent example, students caught tagging at school were 're-engaged' through a TLC 'street art' class which enabled them to channel their love of 'graffiti art' into a more acceptable medium. School representatives noted that the overall behaviour of the pupils involved had improved and that local tagging had been reduced as a result of this engagement.

TLC works closely with a group of well-respected national and international external advisors. This group includes practising artists, education consultants, senior academics and researchers, a legal advisor, and an accountant. Collectively, the advisors provide assurance that TLC's programmes and activities are educationally sound and valued by the wider art community. Advisors contacted during the evaluation spoke favourably of TLC as a provider of art education, commenting that TLC students are well prepared for artistic careers, and that TLC's programmes, underpinned by its distinctive philosophy of creativity, offered valuable opportunities for innovation not available from other educational providers.

1.3 How well do programmes and activities match the needs of learners and other stakeholders?

The rating for performance in relation to this key evaluation question is **Excellent**.

The rating for capability in self-assessment for this key evaluation question is **Good**.

TLC's self-assessment indicates that current programmes are well matched to the needs of individual learners. The flexibility offered by distance learning in particular allows students to structure their study (full-time or part-time) around other commitments. Students are able to set their individualised career path and take responsibility for their own learning with support from their tutors. Students interviewed confirmed that this approach suited their preferred learning style, and led many to select TLC in the first instance. The increasing number of younger students (those under 25 years) in the TLC cohort may be explained in part by the appeal of this flexible educational strategy.

Since its relocation to the Taita campus, TLC has worked hard to build community interest in its work, and these efforts are beginning to bear fruit. There is a growing awareness among local teachers and careers advisors of what TLC can offer students. TLC has worked closely with Hutt City Council by facilitating events and involvement in community projects including a sculpture for the Taita community. A stakeholder contacted described how the city enjoys having TLC in the community and how effective TLC is at getting innovation into local businesses through 'opening minds to possibilities'.

Programmes are well resourced to support teaching and learning. TLC has a long history of distance education, and programme delivery is deliberately designed to provide distance students with the same experience as on-site students to enable comparable outcomes. Course notes, TLC's set text, *Go! The Art of Change*, an extensive DVD library, teleconferencing, internet resources including the workroom, and the availability of block, evening, or weekend classes complement tutor and mentor contact. The on-campus learning environment at TLC is vibrant, spacious, and well equipped. This was observed by the evaluators during the visit and also confirmed by students and stakeholders interviewed.

1.4 How effective is the teaching?

The rating for performance in relation to this key evaluation question is **Excellent**.

The rating for capability in self-assessment for this key evaluation question is **Good**.

The TLC tutors are all practising artists and maintain networks with the art community within the school, locally, and internationally. Staff noted how their own artistic work enabled them to connect directly with the creative journey being undertaken by TLC students. At the same time, the students themselves commented on how significantly the ongoing creative commitments of their tutors had seemed to influence the quality of the teaching itself.

Teachers at TLC respond respectfully to students' individual learning needs and goals, and adjust the delivery of their classes accordingly. Through interviews and TLC questionnaires, it would seem that staff, students, and external stakeholders agree that a positive and inclusive learning environment is essential to unlocking creativity, and that the programmes at TLC consistently provide such an environment.

Staff described a supportive team or 'family' approach to teaching in which variety of delivery was encouraged in order to respond to the diversity of TLC student goals. Through their own conduct, staff attempt to 'model' the TLC culture by promoting an open and unthreatening style of learning, available to all.

TLC's internal assessment practices are elaborate and carefully monitored, and provide students with detailed feedback on their progress. In addition to the regular formative feedback tutors provide, students are advised on what they need to improve when course criteria have not yet been met. This usually includes technical suggestions, ideas, or advice on areas to research further. Internal moderation occurs at tutor meetings where the work of graduating students is examined, and there are well-managed procedures for appeals, reviews, and re-sits, where required.

External moderation of outcomes is currently less rigorous. Heavy reliance is placed on a well-established routine of public exhibitions, held at the end of each term, which seem popular and help to build students' self-confidence as practising artists. Professional moderation, as this is more commonly understood, remains a work in progress. At the time of the evaluation, TLC was negotiating an external moderation exchange with another tertiary provider of art programmes. The evaluators support this initiative because it attempts to provide a degree of independent professional validation of the quality of TLC's assessments, and therefore the artworks themselves.

1.5 How well are learners guided and supported?

The rating for performance in relation to this key evaluation question is **Excellent**.

The rating for capability in self-assessment for this key evaluation question is **Excellent**.

TLC has developed a comprehensive process for monitoring and reporting against individual learner progress throughout its programmes. According to management and teaching staff, recent changes to TLC's database, and closer monitoring of formative results, have had an immediate and positive effect on learner achievement. For example, at-risk students, such as those who have not sent in work or who have not yet met assessment requirements, are now quickly identified and managed accordingly, with a corresponding improvement in learning outcomes, including student retention and qualification completions.

TLC provides all students with a high level of guidance and support, especially those who require specialist support. This is particularly evident in the prison, deaf, and inclusion programmes which all require greater levels of pastoral care. Students and stakeholders interviewed had nothing but praise for the level of support, both academic and pastoral, provided by TLC.

Staff strive to maintain a high level of contact with the students, from initial enquiry, to enrolment and throughout their period of study. A new initiative, 'Send Us Your Photos', enables staff to gauge the student's likely level of commitment before they enrol, and provides a tool to commence discussion on the benefits of study at TLC. Once enrolled, new students are quickly placed in the same workspace as more advanced students, in order to motivate them from the first and provide models to aspire towards.

TLC faces greater challenges from the need to keep its large number of distance students properly engaged. From feedback received from former distance students, TLC has become more aware of the distinctive barriers such students face, including a sense of isolation and a lack of motivation after initial enrolment.

Recent and apparently successful initiatives to address these problems include the creation of a virtual studio (The Workroom) in 2010, and a pool of mentors to support distance learners. This studio forum provides all students (including those on site) with interactive access to a range of online resources, including TLC's own discussion and news platforms. Staff reported that The Workroom is easy to use and is working well. They are already seeing the benefits of students' interactions and are excited by the prospects of further developments within The Workroom. Meanwhile, every distance student is assigned a mentor to support them through their programme of study. Mentors are selected carefully to ensure their skills and attributes align with the students' personal goals. Early indications are that the distance students appreciate this initiative and gain motivation from the direct interest in their work shown by their mentors.

1.6 How effective are governance and management in supporting educational achievement?

The rating for performance in relation to this key evaluation question is **Excellent**.

The rating for capability in self-assessment for this key evaluation question is **Good**.

TLC has well-established governance and management structures that generally work well to support the achievement of its learners. There is a clear division of responsibilities across management, academic, and administrative teams, with all staff united in their dedication to building a well-resourced and student-centred environment.

Teaching staff spoke of TLC as a 'family', in which they are actively encouraged to continue their own creative work which, management believes, will enhance their

success and credibility as teachers. Professional development opportunities for staff are numerous.

In recent years, TLC has also demonstrated that it can anticipate and respond creatively to change. Examples include its effective handling of the relocation of its campus to Taita, the engagement with its 'new' local community (described elsewhere in this report), and its bolstering of support for its largest student cohort (distance learners).

In terms of cultural and educational philosophy, TLC senior management is committed to practising a form of self-assessment known as 'Appreciative Inquiry', which aims to build upon the strengths of an organisation and identify positive opportunities for further improvement.³ Several examples of worthwhile improvements resulting from self-assessment activities of this kind were provided during the evaluation, many of which have been reported previously.

However, some challenges remain. TLC's perceived uniqueness, at least locally, as an educational provider makes it difficult for TLC to benchmark its achievements. Several of TLC's self-review exercises confirm the high respect in which TLC's programmes are held, by TLC's own staff, students, and external stakeholders, but they cannot in themselves confirm that this high esteem has an independent validity.

TLC has already begun work on establishing an objective basis for its sense of high achievement. Relatively recent graduate surveys, for example, attempt to assess how sustainable is the 'creativity' that ex-TLC students have gained from their courses. However, these surveys, while interesting in their own right, probably need to be supplemented over time by additional survey tools, in order for TLC to be confident that it has fully explained to itself what the long-term benefits of creativity look like in its students, and how these might be enhanced within the programmes themselves.

³ Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a relatively new approach to evaluation and emerges from the field of organisational development. It is a participative, collaborative, and systematic process that looks at organisational issues, challenges, and concerns in a significantly different way. AI uses positive, affirmative language in contrast to the deficit-based language often used in evaluation methodologies. In this approach, participants and respondents identify what has been successful; from these successes they can create future successes. Problems and issues are still addressed but in a different way to conventional evaluation (Preskill and Coghlan, 2003).

Focus Areas

This section reports significant findings in each focus area, not already covered in Part 1.

2.1 Focus area: Governance, management, and strategy

The rating in this focus area for educational performance is **Excellent**.

The rating for capability in self-assessment for this focus area is **Good**.

2.2 Programme support

The rating in this focus area for educational performance is **Excellent**.

The rating for capability in self-assessment for this focus area is **Excellent**.

2.3 Focus area: Certificate of Art and Creativity (Level 4)

The rating in this focus area for educational performance is **Good**.

The rating for capability in self-assessment for this focus area is **Good**.

2.4 Focus area: Diploma of Art and Creativity (Advanced) (Level 7)

The rating in this focus area for educational performance is **Good**.

The rating for capability in self-assessment for this focus area is **Good**.

Recommendations

There are no recommendations arising from the external evaluation and review.

Appendix

Regulatory basis for external evaluation and review

Self-assessment and external evaluation and review are requirements of course approval and accreditation (under sections 258 and 259 of the Education Act 1989) for all TEOs that are entitled to apply. The requirements are set through the course approval and accreditation criteria and policies established by NZQA under section 253(1)(d) and (e) of the Act.

In addition, for registered private training establishments, the criteria and policies for their registration require self-assessment and external evaluation and review at an organisational level in addition to the individual courses they own or provide. These criteria and policies are set by NZQA under section 253(1)(ca) of the Act.

NZQA is responsible for ensuring non-university TEOs continue to comply with the policies and criteria after the initial granting of approval and accreditation of courses and/or registration. The New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee (NZVCC) has statutory responsibility for compliance by universities.

This report reflects the findings and conclusions of the external evaluation and review process, conducted according to the policies and criteria approved by the NZQA Board.

The report identifies strengths and areas for improvement in terms of the organisation's educational performance and capability in self-assessment.

External evaluation and review reports are one contributing piece of information in determining future funding decisions where the organisation is a funded TEO subject to an investment plan agreed with the Tertiary Education Commission.

External evaluation and review reports are public information and are available from the NZQA website (www.nzqa.govt.nz).

*Information relevant to the external evaluation and review process, including the publication *Policy and Guidelines for the Conduct of External Evaluation and Review*, is available at: <http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/providers-partners/registration-and-accreditation/external-evaluation-and-review/policy-and-guidelines-eeer/introduction/>*

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