



# Social Return on Investment Evaluations on Food and Fibre Work- Based Learning Programmes

Executive Summary

*February 2025*



## Acknowledgements

The SROI evaluation team would like to thank Food and Fibre Centre of Vocational Excellence, and the programmes included in this evaluation for their support with conducting the evaluation. This included providing administrative data, sharing key documents and helping organise interviews.

We would also like to thank all of the programme participants, delivery staff and broader stakeholders for giving up their time and sharing their valuable insights through interviews and surveys that informed the findings of this SROI evaluation.



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## About this evaluation

Aotearoa New Zealand has a range of food and fibre work-based learning programmes, which aim to equip young people (programme participants) with the necessary skills and connect them with their chosen field, and develop work-ready trainees for the sectors involved. Food and Fibre Centre of Vocational Excellence (Food and Fibre CoVE) commissioned the report and were supported by the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) to undertake a Social Return on Investment (SROI) evaluation to measure the impact of five work-based food and fibre learning programmes.<sup>1</sup>

Given the current sustainable funding challenges faced by some of these programmes, the purpose of this SROI evaluation is to understand the impact of each programme, including the calculation of a SROI cost-benefit ratio for each of the programmes. The five programmes selected for this evaluation were chosen based on discussions with the Associate Minister of Agriculture Andrew Hoggard, with whom the findings will be shared.<sup>2</sup>

The five programmes in scope for this evaluation were:

- Growing Future Farmers programme: a programme targeting young people interested in farming that offers qualifications in NZ Certificate in Primary Industries Level 2 and 3, NZ Certificate in Pre-Employment Skills Level 3, NZ Certificate in Agriculture, Meat and/or Fibre Strand Level 3, and the Growing Future Farmers Programme Certificate in Essential Farm Skills.
- Whangarei A&P Farm Internship programme: a programme targeting local young people interested in farming that offers qualifications in NZ Certificate in Agriculture Level 3 and NZ Certificate in Primary Industry Operational Skills Level 3.
- The Generation Programme: a programme targeting local young people interested in forestry that offers qualifications in NCEA in Primary (Forestry) Vocational Pathways Level 2, NZ Certificate in Forest Foundation Skills Level 2, and NZ Certificate in Forest Harvesting Operations Level 3.
- Tokomairiro Training Forestry Pathways: a programme which aims to provide an alternative pathway for young people for whom a traditional school environment is not suitable. The Tokomairiro Training Forestry Pathways programme offers qualifications in NZ Certificate in Forest Industry Foundation Skills Level 2 and Forestry Unit Standards Level 3.
- Ngā Karahipi Uru Rākau scholarship programme: a programme that targeted Māori and people who identify as female a scholarship to complete a Bachelor of Forestry Science degree and a Diploma of Forest Management. Scholarships were also offered for a Bachelor of Engineering (Hons) in Forestry. It was originally offered for Māori and women, but the criteria

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<sup>1</sup> This evaluation has been referred to as a Social Return on Investment (SROI) evaluation as a key focus of the evaluation was to gather evidence that would support the calculation of a Social Return on Investment Cost-Benefit Ratio.

<sup>2</sup> This is not an exhaustive list of all work-based food and fibre learning programmes available in New Zealand. There are a range of programmes across Aotearoa New Zealand, including programmes that serve more mature adults.

was expanded in 2022 to allow all New Zealand residents to apply due to identified skills shortages in this sector.

This SROI evaluation has assessed the performance of the five programmes against four key evaluation questions (KEQs):

1. To what extent does the programme address an identified need?
2. To what extent have the programme's intended outcomes been realised?
3. How effective has the pastoral care been in enabling young people to successfully complete the programme?
4. What lessons have been learned?

Conducting the SROI evaluation involved developing a Theory of Change (ToC) for each programme that established the expected outputs and outcomes.

The SROI evaluation employed mixed-methods for data collection. This included reviewing key documents, programme administrative data, key informant interviews, interviews with a range of stakeholders, and online surveys. The evidence from these data were compared against criteria that reflected aspects of performance in line with each KEQ: appropriateness, coherence, impact and effectiveness.

The analysis of the SROI cost-benefit ratios adopted the 'life course' theory, which promotes early preventative interventions that reduce the need for remedial actions later in life. The process of calculating the SROI cost-benefit ratios involved making a series of assumptions related to the benefits of education, applying the counterfactual of what outcome a participant might have achieved were it not for the programme, accounting for the net impact of spillover benefits, and identifying the costs involved in developing and delivering the programmes. Where possible outcomes were monetised.

## Key findings

All of the programmes returned a net positive SROI cost-benefit ratio that ranged from 3.5 to 17.0 for every dollar invested at a scheme level and 5.9 to 18.9 at a per person level. The vocational programmes that served young people facing social and academic challenges delivered the highest SROI cost-benefit ratio with the Generation Programme returning 10.3, Whangarei A&P Farm Internship programme 7.3 and the Tokomairiro Training Forestry Pathways programme 17.0. Key factors in the higher SROI cost-benefit ratios were the scale of personal and societal outcomes.

The pastoral care formed a crucial component of the success of these programmes, with a focus on providing the support participants needed to be able to successfully complete their programme and become work ready.<sup>3</sup> Without the pastoral care provided, many of these young people could struggle to gain meaningful support to assist them to remain in their education programme. The likely

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<sup>3</sup> The exact investment for the pastoral care cannot be quantified as it cannot be separated from other actions and costs associated with programme delivery. The pastoral care is included as in-kind support in the SROI calculation.

alternative would be a minimum wage job, with some potentially becoming a not in education, employment or training (NEET). The quality of the pastoral care was benchmarked against the Food and Fibre CoVE rubric (the Rubric). This benchmarking showed the quality of pastoral care varied from **Acceptable to Excellent**.

The pastoral care generally involved face-to-face visits, support with literacy issues, practical support to develop the necessary skills, monitoring, and broader well-being support. For the Generation Programme, offered by Tūranga Ararau, this also included involving whānau and kaumātua. Some programmes had developed relationships with specialist providers to whom they referred participants who needed additional support. These types of supports ranged from help with developing financial literacy through to helping address mental health, and/or alcohol and drug issues. The evidence indicates that pastoral care was highly valued by participants, host farmers and forestry businesses.

A contributing factor to the net positive SROI cost-benefit ratios was the programmes led to most participants achieving improved educational outcomes. The range of qualifications gained through these programmes ranged from credits towards NCEA Level 2 through to a degree. Further, programme participants developed entry-level knowledge and skills that made them both 'work ready' and 'ready for work'.

The SROI evaluation found that all the programmes helped fill labour shortages in farming, forestry, or allied primary sector roles by improving access to suitably qualified workers. Moreover, indications are that industry valued the knowledge and skills gained with programmes reporting demand from local employers exceeds the number of available programme graduates. Anecdotal evidence also suggested that in some instances these programmes can reduce reliance on immigrant labour, especially for farming.

In addition, the four vocational programmes generated a range of intangible benefits which included improved participant self-confidence, self-esteem, enhanced connections with their community and stronger work ethic. The Generation Programme also supported young people to develop a strong sense of their cultural heritage and identity. These intangible benefits contribute both to the work readiness of participants, enabling them to work independently as required, and improved total well-being contributing to improved personal outcomes.

Although these programmes experience ongoing demand from potential participants and industry, they face some challenges in terms of continued viability. A key challenge for their long-term sustainability is securing continued funding. A contributing factor to this difficulty is they are not considered tertiary education providers and cannot offer apprenticeships. Although these programmes use a mixed funding model, the reliance by some programmes on government funding means they are operating within relatively short-term funding contracts. If further funding is not secured, these programmes are likely to be at risk of closing. For example, the Ngā Karahipi Uru Rākau Scholarship programme is no longer on offer as Government funding ceased in 2023. The lack of secure funding also makes it difficult to engage in future planning and growth.

A further challenge for some programmes is having limited workforce capacity to deliver the programme, making their workforce continuity planning challenging. For instance, Tokomairiro Training Forestry Pathways programme and Whangarei A&P Farm Internship programme rely on two

to three key people responsible for planning, training and providing pastoral care. These vulnerabilities are to some extent mitigated through partnering with other organisations, and/or engaging individuals to support delivery of the programme. In addition, the growth of the vocational programmes is constrained by finding host employers, particularly suitable host farmers. That said, the Growing Future Farmers programme has grown from an initial regional pilot in 2020 to operating in 14 regions.

## Conclusion

All the programmes provided a positive return for participants, industry and society. The SROI cost-benefit ratios for these programmes ranged from 3.5 to 17.0 at a scheme level. The three programmes that provided the most intensive support and served those with the highest level of need delivered the highest SROI cost-benefit ratios. Without these programmes, a portion of these programme participants would probably have at best ended up with minimum wage employment, with some potentially becoming a NEET. Such outcomes have a cost to society such as lost productivity and social welfare costs, as well as personal costs such as diminished total well-being. Instead, these programmes supported participants to successfully transition from school or being a NEET into employment, delivering social and economic benefits over a lifetime.

This SROI evaluation found the pastoral care delivered in these programmes played a crucial role in enabling participants to complete their programme. This was particularly the case for the vocational programmes supporting young people who faced a range of social and academic challenges. The pastoral care provided led to these young people both gaining qualifications and meaningful sustainable employment they may not have achieved otherwise.

Additionally, these programmes are making a positive contribution to filling labour gaps, with the evidence suggesting that industry values the work skills and knowledge generated through these programmes. As programmes become established and develop a positive reputation, indications are that demand typically grows until it exceeds supply. However, for many of these programmes scaling up to be able to meet increasing industry demand is challenging.

One consistent challenge of expanding was the insecure, short-term nature of their funding due to a reliance on government, even when they use a mixed funding model. This problem is compounded as these vocational programmes do not qualify as tertiary education providers which would allow them to receive longer-term funding and offer apprenticeships. While they do not qualify for education funding, some programmes are eligible for funding that target groups such as those who are a NEET. For instance, one programme has received government funding from the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) Flexi-wage subsidy, which target long-term unemployment issues. Accessing this type of funding could lead to a shift from the programme's current preventative approach with a focus on serving young people, often school leavers, to becoming a remedial intervention with a focus on serving NEETs or long-term unemployed. Such a change would reduce the SROI cost-benefit ratios.

Finally, vocational programmes that use an earn-as-you-learn model make education more accessible for young people coming from disadvantaged backgrounds who are more likely to face social and economic challenges. In comparison, programmes that use a model of paying a weekly living

allowance rather than wages, may unintentionally create a financial burden that act as a barrier for some young people to participate in the programme. This is because the financial payment is often too low to cover living costs. The difference in these two approaches, potentially raise policy questions about the purpose of these programmes. If it is simply to address labour shortages then either approach could be desirable. On the other hand, if the intention is to also provide young people facing multiple challenges with accessible vocational pathways to transition into meaningful work, then the earn-as-you-learn model maybe preferred, or the stipend paid may need to be increased to cover living costs. It is worth noting that those programmes that target young people facing multiple challenges return a higher SROI cost-benefit ratio.

