

TE HONONGA AKORANGA

**COMET**



**Submission on the  
The Terms of Reference for the  
Productivity Commission's inquiry on  
A fair chance for all: Breaking the  
disadvantage cycle**

Submission [108/21](#)  
Prepared on behalf of COMET Auckland, August 2021

## Whakatauāki

E kore e taea e te whenu kotahi ki te raranga i te whāriki kia mōhio tātou ki ā tātou.

Mā te mahi tahi o ngā whenu, mā te mahi tahi o ngā kairaranga, ka oti tēnei whāriki.

I te otinga me titiro tātou ki ngā mea pai ka puta mai.

Ā tana wā, me titiro hoki ki ngā raranga i makere nā te mea, he kōrero ano kei reira.

nā Kūkupa Tirikatene, ONZM, 1934 - 2018

The tapestry of understanding cannot be woven by one strand alone.

Only by the working together of strands and the working together of weavers will such a tapestry be completed.

With its completion let us look at the good that comes from it.

And, in time we should also look at those stitches which have been dropped, because they also have a message.

## About COMET Auckland

[Te Hononga Akoranga COMET](#) is an independent charitable trust and Auckland Council's CCO focused on education, skills and lifelong learning across Auckland and, increasingly, other parts of the country.

Briefly, our work involves:

Sector leadership – mapping data and evidence, working with sector leaders to identify and prioritise the most pressing areas of focus, and connecting people around that common agenda, to plan collaborative action.

That can then lead to advocacy or changes to partners' business as usual, or sometimes to planning and trialling new ways of working (incubation projects).

These incubation projects generally develop through scoping and planning to trialling, and then implementation and evaluation, with the goal of handing them on once they are fully developed so we can move on to focus on another part of the system.

## Contact for communications:

Susan Warren, Chief Executive, COMET Auckland

Email: [susan.warren@cometauckland.org.nz](mailto:susan.warren@cometauckland.org.nz)

Ph 09 307 2101, Mobile 021 757 048, Fax 09 379 5053

PO Box 3430, Shortland Street, Auckland 1140

[www.cometauckland.org.nz](http://www.cometauckland.org.nz)

## Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the inquiry on the Terms of Reference for the Productivity Commission's inquiry on A fair chance for all: Breaking the disadvantage cycle.

This submission has been assembled based on our own collective knowledge and experience, and our ongoing engagement with our stakeholders, including educators, community leaders, employers, parents and learners of all ages.

## Dimensions of persistent disadvantage

The inquiry's focus on persistent disadvantage is important because of the impact long-term disadvantage can have on individuals' and families' wellbeing, especially where disadvantage is intergenerational.

We applaud the use of an indigenous framework and the focus on holistic wellbeing rather than more traditional views of disadvantage. This recognises the aspects that are relevant for people's lives, and it highlights areas where current policy and evidence is weak.

## Research focus

The scoping document does a good job of identifying the key gaps in the research. Recognising that not all the suggested research areas can be progressed, we would suggest the following as priorities, based on their likely feasibility and their usefulness for policy-makers and for services like ours on the ground.

Options for longitudinal data:

- Option 1, using the IDI to track overall patterns of disadvantage for individuals across the life-course – because the data already exists and will give a valuable overview.
- Option 3, drawing on the existing large longitudinal studies to draw out more depth to add to option 1 – again because the data already exists and the two options together would provide a rich picture of the extent to which people move in or out of disadvantage over time. There is also enough rich data in these studies to shed some light on factors associated with either long-term disadvantage or upward mobility.
- Option 6 (second bullet point under additional research), exploring how life events, in singular and in combination, can impact positively or negatively on disadvantage. This needs to be designed to explore the events that actually made a difference for individuals and families (from their point of view), rather than just looking at associations in data (as would be done in Option 3 above). This is crucial information to inform approaches to address long-term disadvantage. The additional research could be informed by the findings from options 1 and 2, so that option 6 could drill into gaps or promising indications from the data. It is important to include a focus on protective factors that mitigate the impact of triggers of disadvantage. Focusing only on triggers could mean these protective factors are missed, yet for the research to be usable on the ground, the protective factors are often more important. It is generally very difficult to prevent triggers, while it is possible to design programmes to increase protective factors.

- Option 7 (third bullet point under additional research), looking at the proportion of people who do not access all their benefit entitlements and what factors reduce benefit access or uptake. Again this is crucial information for planning.
- An equivalent of the Australian life-course mobility data (page 13 of the report) would be extremely useful for Aotearoa, to help understand the extent to which people here are able to move out of disadvantage over time. We recognise that the graph is a gross over-simplification – people may be moving across levels between the time periods examined, and there will be significant variability depending on the starting age - but the data is a useful overview in a form that is easily understood by decision-makers in government and the community. Mobility out of the bottom two levels could also be used as a measure of policy performance.

Options for research on “what works”:

- Education is widely recognised as a tool to enable people to move out of disadvantage and reach their own aspirations. There are two periods of life when evidence shows that education can make a particularly strong contribution, and we would suggest gathering evidence first on interventions that focus on these periods:
  - The early years, from before birth to 3 years of age. This is the period of greatest brain growth when patterns of connections in the brain are being established. Language, social relationships, physical coordination, and emotional control all develop rapidly during this period, enabled by and in turn influencing brain development. At this age, most children spend most of their time with their family, so the most impactful interventions in the early years are likely to be those focused on families. Two influences have been shown to be particularly impactful at this age. Firstly, regular “serve and return” conversation builds brain development, language and relationship<sup>1</sup>. Secondly, “toxic stress” (multiple stressors over time) is a very significant negative influence on brain development and current and future learning. Note that toxic stress is much more frequently seen in families that are already experiencing persistent disadvantage. A secure relationship with a caregiver, and serve and return conversation, are protective factors that can mitigate the effects of toxic stress. Interventions that address one or more of the above would be worth prioritising in your research on what works.
  - Adolescence, and particularly the years around the transition from school to training or work. Adolescence is the second-fastest period of brain development and is also a key transition time. Transitions always present both opportunity and risk; the effectiveness of a transition can impact on a young person’s trajectory for years to come. Research in both the USA and Britain found that youth unemployment leaves a “wage scar”. Even six months of unemployment before the age of 23 can lead to significantly lower income ten and even twenty years later.<sup>2</sup> Our experience shows that young people, especially those living with disadvantage, need support to gain the

<sup>1</sup> Practitioner-friendly summary of this evidence: <https://www.talkingmatters.org.nz/talk-builds-brains/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2011/09/10/left-behind>

employability skills needed in order to avoid long-term unemployment and transition successfully to work. Programmes that are most effective to build employability skills have a balance of conscious skill-building and authentic practice in a context that is as similar as possible to where the skills are intended to be used, i.e. the workplace.

- Given the data that Māori and Pasifika communities are significantly over-represented in the statistics of persistent disadvantage, a key area that needs to be addressed is the impact of racism, including in the education and skills system. The Office of the Commissioner for Children's *Education Matters to Me* report<sup>3</sup> shows that a significant proportion of students report experiencing racism at school. Our own small-scale consultation with rangatahi from a range of education settings confirmed these findings. The striking thing in our consultation was that young people who attend kura reported that they did not experience racism in school, and in fact they were shocked to hear that their counterparts in English-medium schools faced racism. Racism is likely to impact on achievement, and therefore later risk of disadvantage, in two main ways. Firstly, teachers' unconscious biases can lead to lower expectations of some groups of students, which in turn inadvertently leads to those students having fewer opportunities to learn complex material, less attention from the teacher and less encouragement to achieve. There is extensive evidence that low teacher expectations impact significantly on students' learning. Secondly, overt and covert racism impacts on students' well-being, their feeling of belonging and their self-concept as a learner, which can have far-reaching effects on their motivation at school and their long-term decisions about education and training, which then limits their future work options. Initiatives that change teachers' perceptions of people of other cultures, and particularly of Māori, and that build their skills and understanding in how to use learners' culture and language as a strength to support their learning, can help address the impact of racism in schools.

## Possible solutions

### The early years

Our early years initiative, Talking Matters<sup>4</sup>, focuses specifically in building the “serve and return” interactions that research shows are most effective in building babies' brains. Talking Matters partners with whānau, communities, practitioners, iwi and government to build and support language-rich environments for children, working to grow the capability of families and practitioners to strengthen communication and language in the first 1,000 days. We design innovative systems that respond to whānau and practitioners' aspirations, using data that drives positive change and measures its impact.

A language-rich environment is vibrant and contains all the languages of a family, community or setting in spoken, written, cultural, gestural and artefactual form. It is the space where children in their first thousand days of life can develop the communication skills they need to

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<sup>3</sup> Experiences-of-Maori.pdf (occ.org.nz)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.talkingmatters.org.nz/>



thrive as thinkers, talkers and readers. “Serve and return” is a key indicator of a language-rich environment. It is a process of connection and responsive back-and-forth communication that promotes brain development and enhances child and whānau wellbeing.

### Youth transitions

For the past seven years we have been working with secondary schools, youth service providers and employers to develop and deliver the Youth Employability Programme: License to Work (YEP)<sup>5</sup>, which is designed to build and assess the competencies in a workplace context, through interactive workshops, volunteering and work experience.

Based on our youth employability experience, COMET Auckland is also leading a collective impact approach, Youth Employability Aotearoa (YEA) to develop a cross-sector NZ employability model. This work includes representatives from multiple government agencies, sector groups and other key stakeholders. YEA aims to support and build on community employability models and to provide collaborative leadership towards a vision that every 14-24-year-old in NZ is employable. As part of this work we have compiled a database on organisations that are supporting employability skill-building for young people across Aotearoa. This database<sup>6</sup> can be found on the YEA website (yea.org.nz) and may be of use in your

### Addressing racism

Given the feedback from the rangatahi we interviewed, with Māori young people in mainstream schools experiencing racism at school, while none of those in kura reported experiencing racism, one way to address racism for Māori children and young people would be to establish and better support more kohanga reo and kura and to encourage Māori whānau to choose this option for their tamariki and rangatahi. NCEA data shows that students who come through the kura system achieve at a significantly higher level than Māori students in mainstream schools so this intervention would have a double benefit.

There is also opportunity for the English-medium system to learn from the values, attitudes and practices that kura use to celebrate young people’s identity, culture and language and to support positive relationships between teachers and students. One way to do this is for Te Reo Māori, as our national language, to be offered for all children in Aotearoa as part of core curriculum from year one. This would assist with inter-racial understanding in Aotearoa, while also equipping children with language and cultural skills will enable them to more easily understand other cultures and languages.

### Bilingual education

One of the most effective ways to ensure that diverse children and young people achieve to their full potential in education is to use children’s first or heritage language as a medium for learning – i.e. Bilingual Education. Evidence shows that learning in and through a first or heritage language results in improved long-term learning outcomes in both the heritage

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<sup>5</sup> <https://cometauckland.org.nz/our-campaigns/yeep>

<sup>6</sup> <https://yea.org.nz/the-collective/>

language and English, yet ERO has identified<sup>7</sup> that only 58% of the Auckland schools surveyed intentionally promoted learning by using children's home language or cultural lens.

Bilingual and Immersion education in te reo Māori has been available for many years, though it is still under-resourced. As discussed above, even with this under-resourcing, kohanga reo and kura still deliver valuable benefits for learners.

This year the government announced funding for Pasifika Bilingual Education, which will provide much of the support needed for schools that already have bilingual units. Informal feedback indicated that a number of other schools are planning to establish Pasifika Bilingual units now that the funding is available, so this provision is likely to expand significantly over the next two years.

The greatest benefits of bilingual learning are seen when children have access to quality learning through the language for at least six years. Even where bilingual or immersion education is not possible (for example because there are only a few speakers of a particular language in a community), schools and ECEs can do a great deal to enable children to use their first or heritage language in their learning.

Initiatives that encourage and support families to speak their strongest language (usually their first language) at home are also likely to contribute to breaking cycles of disadvantage because this supports language maintenance and provides the best possible environment for children's language development and for their wider learning.

#### Language and culture in the workforce

Many of the groups that are currently over-represented in unemployment and low-wage statistics (Māori, Pasifika and recent migrants) have language skills that could contribute significant value to employers, but these skills are often not recognised as valuable by the people themselves or by employers.

Employers need awareness-raising on the value language skills could add to their business, and skill-building on how to better recruit for, and gain value from, the language skills of their employees.

Interventions that support migrants to build strong oral and written English language skills, such as those delivered by organisations like English Language Partners, enable migrants to engage in the workplace and gain employment at a level that befits their qualifications and prior experience.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://ero.govt.nz/our-research/responding-to-language-diversity-in-auckland>