



Green Gown Awards
Australasia

Benefitting Society

2020 Case Study



EASTERN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
TE AHO A MĀUI

Connecting our Communities through Learning in Nature

EIT, is committed to continued education for staff, learners and wider community in relation to their decision making and how this affects the environment. To achieve this, we have developed a unique project within the tertiary sector immersing our communities in a learning in nature space. This is part of a regional, collaborative ‘Learning in Nature’ project which was initially proposed by a local government agency, Cape to City, with a focus to support EIT’s Bachelor of Primary and/or Early Childhood Education students and local practising teachers to use nature in the context of learning. It is part-funded by the Air NZ Environment Trust with significant financial and staff resources from EIT and includes partners from the local iwi (Ngāti Pārau) (local guardians/kaitiaki), Department of Conservation and Hawke’s Bay Regional Council.

The Ōtātara Outdoor Learning Centre (OOLC) is located on the EIT campus, nestled between the built environment and Ōtātara Pā, which is now managed by the Department of Conservation. It once formed part of one of the largest historic Māori settlements in NZ, (Ngāti Pārau connections date back 600 years). The land area which includes the OOLC is approximately eight hectares.

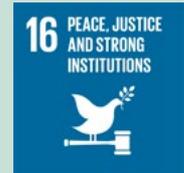
An internationally respected arts college flourished here during the 1980s and practised an innovative and creative approach to learning, embraced by the local community.

Over a decade, a complex of buildings including a log cabin was physically built by tutors, students, and members of the local arts community. Building materials were mostly recycled, and clay was dug from the hillside to make hand-fired bricks for paving. In addition, harakeke (NZ flax) plants were gifted from different marae (meeting houses) in the region for use in weaving. In 2004, the Arts Centre was moved and all buildings, except for a log cabin were removed. Many of the hand-fired bricks and harakeke remain. In 2018, EIT committed to revitalising the Ōtātara site and this current project began to connect with the culture and history of the landscape through learning in nature. The project has resulted in the log cabin being refurbished to become a unique teaching space surrounded by native plantings, and a wooden outdoor shelter and eco-toilet have been constructed. “Working bees” involving staff, students and members of the community have revitalised the harakeke, created a rongōa (indigenous medicinal) garden, extensive native plantings and a network of walkways.

EIT students from several programmes now have part of their curriculum delivered in an immersive outdoor space. EITs Bachelor of Early Childhood and Bachelor of Primary

teaching students are maximising the outdoor environment as a source of inspiration for learning across multiple disciplines. EIT is teaching future students how to use nature literacy, which will have far reaching long-term effects as they graduate and share their knowledge. In addition to EIT's own students, the OOLC is also utilised by local schools, providing individuals with the opportunity to connect with nature and understand how they can impact the environment and benefit society by their positive actions.

FIND OUT MORE



Environmental & Social Benefits

The project has already created several environmental and social benefits from the way we work together, the way we engage with nature and the way we think about sustainability within an educational institution including:

Community connections: The restoration of the site, has enabled new connections between EIT, the community and schools and is a catalyst for conversations around sustainability and behavioral changes. The space and resources enable the education community to work across the curriculum for the benefit of all learners from all levels. We are leading environmental-education initiatives which positively impact communities.

New programmes: The OOLC has stimulated new programmes: In 2020 a 2-year Diploma in Environmental Management was launched; the final year of the degree will be offered from 2022.

Enriching health and wellbeing: New walking tracks (including an historic gully planted by EIT students), enable people to take a break in nature reaping the associated physical and mental health benefits.

Enriching learning in a contemporary space: Several educators are using the site for different teaching opportunities. One example includes a Bachelor of Nursing workshop on managing depression in the community. The educator said, *“from the moment the students begin their journey to the OOLC they are transported into the realms of a ‘real community visit’. This enhances their attitudes to holistic health and positive health promotion begins.”*

Connecting with culture and history: Planted by a weaving rōpu (group) in the 1980s, the harakeke is historically significant. Using a kaupapa Māori (Māori philosophy) research methodology, a project entitled, *Poipoia te kākano, kia puawai. Nurture the seed, and it will blossom* is being undertaken, which will benefit the environment, local Māori and weaving communities.

Ensuring an integrated, sustainable approach to land management: An integrated management plan, focusing on enhancing the ecology, spaces for health and well-being and acknowledging the history and cultural significance of the area, is currently being developed in consultation with Ngāti Pārau.

Developing sustainable teaching practices: External partners provide specialist advice enhancing our teaching, research and best land management practice.

Leading a national ‘Learning in Nature’ community of practice: We will be able to showcase how Learning in Nature spaces can be incorporated into the campuses of all 16 Te Pūkenga NZ Institute of Skills and Technology subsidiaries and create more learning opportunities for students studying a wide array of disciplines.

Leadership & Engagement

There are several unique and innovative aspects which make the project distinctive including:

- | The project is a regional collaboration involving mana whenua, Department of Conservation, and the Regional Council with EIT taking the lead to develop mana whenua (local hapū) opportunities to educate teachers about how to maximise the use of the environment in the context of learning, mana whenua inspiring cross-curriculum projects.
- | The project is a catalyst for lifelong learning and changing views and behaviours relating to the environment, ultimately supporting individuals to become kaitiaki (guardians) of our natural environment.
- | We are working together with community partners towards a common goal, to benefit society through connecting people with nature, and enabling people to become innovative and responsible global citizens.
- | We are building the knowledge, capability and confidence of educators bringing learning in nature into the mainstream curriculum enabling them to underpin knowledge and resources for their own schools.
- | We are connecting educators across the region (and nationally in the longer term) to build a community of practice, developing resources collaboratively, connecting educators, breaking down traditional education silos.

Wider Societal Impact

The project has far reaching implications for society. By enabling educators to gain confidence and skills to teach their learners using nature, we embed the principles of sustainability and kaitiakitanga into mainstream education. By ensuring future generations connect with and care for our natural environment, this will improve health, wellbeing and resilience. It will encourage learners to be more active, reducing nature deficit disorder amongst children. It creates opportunities for research and reduces silos in disciplines, encouraging cross-curricular working.



Top 3 Learnings

Communities connect in new ways with local heritage using a culturally significant contemporary learning space, designed in partnership with tangata whenua (people of the land)

Collaboration and regional partnerships are integral to this project, learning together, and developing resources which engage and connect the community

Enabling the community, staff and students to drive their own initiatives has led to greater engagement and inspirational outcomes for the Centre users