

23/07/2025

Feedback analysis

Schedule NZ Consultation

Understanding the context

This analysis examines feedback from consultation hui and written submissions regarding proposed changes to professional competencies for architects in Aotearoa New Zealand. These changes seek to align New Zealand practice with the 2021 National Standard of Competency for Architects (2021 NSCA), particularly in recognising Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations and incorporating Te Ao Māori perspectives into architectural practice. The consultation process included hui held both online and in-person across three major centres — Tāmaki Makaurau—Auckland, Pōneke—Wellington, and Ōtautahi—Christchurch — to ensure feedback from representatives (practitioners, academics, graduates, students, architectural designers & technicians, membership bodies) and iwi from different regions, along with 17 written submissions from practicing architects across the country.

Supportive voices and professional recognition

The hui held across Tāmaki Makaurau—Auckland, Pōneke—Wellington, and Ōtautahi—Christchurch revealed strong support for integrating te ao Māori perspectives into architectural practice, with participants consistently recognising the value of tohungatanga (expertise) and te reo Māori as core professional competencies. Many practitioners shared experiences where incorporating whakapapa and cultural knowledge had enriched their design processes significantly. One submission noted that “te ao Māori and te reo Māori is a gift” that benefits all architectural projects, while another described encountering Indigenous concepts as “profoundly transformational.”

The academic sector showed strong support, with one submission commending the work done to develop these competencies and confirming their appropriateness for teaching and assessment. This aligns with the understanding that architectural education must prepare graduates to practise responsibly in Aotearoa New Zealand's unique constitutional and cultural landscape.

Practitioners recognised that buildings are inherently cultural artifacts that reflect the time and place from which they emerge. The consultation revealed an appreciation that architects have a responsibility to ensure this cultural expression is intentional and informed, particularly given the long-term impact of design decisions on communities. This understanding reflects the professional maturity expected under the 2021 NSCA's recognition of Indigenous rights and knowledge systems.

Implementation challenges and professional development needs

Many concerns raised during consultation centred on practical implementation rather than opposition to the principles themselves. Practitioners expressed genuine uncertainty about how te ao Māori perspectives would be defined, assessed, and integrated into practice across different project types and scales. Questions emerged about whether cultural engagement requirements would apply universally or be contextually determined, and how architects working on smaller residential projects might appropriately demonstrate these competencies.

The consultation revealed significant gaps in current professional development infrastructure. Many architects acknowledged their limited knowledge of tikanga, te reo Māori, and appropriate protocols for engaging with tangata whenua. Rather than rejecting the need for cultural competency, many submissions requested specific support, including pronunciation courses, Te Tiriti o Waitangi education, and facilitated connections with Māori cultural experts. This suggests a professional willingness to develop these competencies when appropriate pathways and resources are provided.

Practitioners also raised legitimate concerns about assessment fairness and objectivity. The request for clear definitions, practical examples, and transparent evaluation criteria reflects professional expectations for competency standards that can be applied consistently and fairly across diverse practitioners and project contexts.

Scope and regulatory authority

Some submissions questioned whether cultural competency requirements fall within the New Zealand Registered Architects Board's (NZRAB) regulatory mandate, suggesting these matters should remain within client-architect relationships rather than professional registration requirements. However, this perspective fails to recognise that the 2021 NSCA explicitly acknowledges the rights of Indigenous peoples and the constitutional obligations that flow from founding documents like Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Professional regulation inherently involves setting standards that go beyond basic technical competence to include ethical practice and social responsibility. Just as architects must demonstrate competency in building code compliance, environmental considerations, and stakeholder engagement, the integration of Indigenous knowledge systems and Treaty obligations represents a legitimate expansion of professional responsibility in the Aotearoa New Zealand context.

The argument that architects should only respond to explicit client briefs regarding cultural considerations overlooks the professional obligation to provide informed advice about all aspects of design that may impact project outcomes and community well-being. This includes understanding the cultural context within which buildings will exist and the potential impacts on tangata whenua and other communities.

Addressing resistance and constitutional obligations

While the majority of feedback expressed support for integrating te ao Māori perspectives into architectural practice, a minority of submissions conveyed concerning attitudes that appear to be in breach of New Zealand's constitutional framework and the recognition of Māori rights established through Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Arguments dismissing Māori cultural perspectives as irrelevant to architectural practice or suggesting that cultural competency requirements constitute “woke racism,” demonstrate a fundamental misunderstanding of New Zealand's legal and constitutional obligations.

The characterisation of te ao Māori perspectives as merely “beliefs” that should not be imposed on professionals fails to recognise that these represent sophisticated knowledge systems developed over centuries of sustainable interaction with te taiao — the environment. The 2021 NSCA's recognition of mātauranga Māori acknowledges these as legitimate professional competencies rather than optional cultural preferences.

Some submissions expressed concern about “privileging” Māori culture over other ethnic groups in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, this perspective conflates the specific constitutional relationship established through Te Tiriti o Waitangi with general multicultural considerations. The special status of tangata whenua as partners under the Treaty creates specific professional obligations that differ from general cultural responsiveness, just as other professions have recognised in their competency standards.

The concern that cultural competency requirements might lead to deregistration of architects reflects a misunderstanding of professional regulation. Competency standards exist to ensure practitioners can practise safely and effectively within their context. In Aotearoa New Zealand, this necessarily includes understanding Treaty obligations and appropriate engagement with tangata whenua, just as practising in other countries requires understanding local legal and cultural frameworks.

Practical ways forward

The consultation identified several practical steps needed to support successful implementation and transition. Educational infrastructure must be developed to bring all practitioners to a baseline level of cultural understanding, regardless of their starting point. This includes not only te reo Māori and tikanga education, but also practical guidance on when and how to engage appropriately with tangata whenua throughout project development.

Resource development emerged as a critical need, with practitioners requesting comprehensive glossaries, practical examples, and clear protocols for different project types and scales. The consultation suggested that a phased implementation approach would allow time for these support systems to be established while enabling practitioners to develop competencies gradually over time.

Connection facilitation between architects and Māori cultural experts was identified as essential infrastructure. Many practitioners expressed willingness to engage appropriately, but lacked knowledge of protocols or pathways for meaningful consultation. NZRAB's role in supporting

these connections could address both practical needs and ensure engagement occurs respectfully and effectively.

CPD

Successfully integrating te ao Māori perspectives into architectural practice requires understanding these as evolving, dynamic knowledge systems rather than static cultural requirements. Participants acknowledged that Māori culture, like all living cultures, continues to evolve and that architectural responses must be similarly adaptive and responsive to contemporary expressions of cultural values.

This understanding aligns with the 2021 NSCA's recognition that mātauranga Māori offers valuable insights for contemporary practice, particularly in areas such as environmental sustainability and place-based design. The consultation showed that practitioners are beginning to recognise these connections and their relevance to professional practice.

The feedback emphasised the need for continuing professional development rather than one-time competency demonstration. Cultural competency, like technical knowledge, requires continuous learning and reflection as practitioners encounter diverse projects and communities throughout their careers.

Conclusion

Next steps

Feedback has shown a profession that is largely supportive of incorporating te ao Māori perspectives into practice, with the majority of practitioners recognising the need for cultural competency while seeking practical support for professional development. While a minority of responses expressed resistance, much of the broader concern reflects uncertainty about implementation rather than opposition to fundamental principles.

The alignment with the 2021 NSCA provides a clear framework for moving forward, recognising that professional practice in Aotearoa New Zealand must acknowledge Treaty obligations and Māori rights. The challenge lies in developing implementation pathways that support all practitioners in developing these competencies while maintaining professional standards and public protection.

Success will require sustained commitment to education, resource development, and ongoing dialogue between the profession and tangata whenua. The consultation has provided valuable insights into both the opportunities and challenges ahead, establishing a foundation for thoughtful implementation that honours both professional excellence and constitutional obligations in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Acknowledgements

The synthesis of this feedback was generated by AI and reviewed by NZRAB and our Ngā Aho facilitators to ensure this is an accurate account of feedback obtained throughout the engagement and consultation process.

Dr Fleur Palmer, July 2025