Helen Leahy, Pouarahi / Chief Executive for Te Pūtahitanga o te Waipounamu

This is an ideal setting to celebrate the next generation of Māori agricultural leaders; and to cherish the art of story-telling. It was such a privilege to listen to the legacy shared so eloquently by Tā Tipene – a story of six generations of leadership to give us the heart and hope for our future.

Gathered here today we see distinguished leadership across the sectors – from Lincoln University, Careers New Zealand, Ngāi Tahu Farming; Primary ITO, Department of Corrections, the Rata Foundation – indeed an illustrious group if ever there was one.

I am somewhat over-whelmed by the line-up I am following today: two knights; a Doctor; a Professor ….and a Mum – which of course is the greatest profession of all!

They say that everybody wants to go to heaven but nobody wants to die.

Today, I know that Taua Linda (Grennell) and Taua Aroha (Duncan/Wereta) will be watching over us, smiling that we have uncovered their life’s secret in the heaven they grew up in here at Koukourārata.

Koukourārata provides that opportunity for a slice of paradise on earth with which we can contemplate the wonder of life.

And indeed Whenua Kura gives us much to celebrate:

- an 89 percent achievement rate;
- a 92% employment rate –

I want to add our tributes to the fabulous Ngāi Tahu finalists in the BNZ Ahuwhenua Māori Excellence in Farming Awards – Maungatere managed by Hemi Dawson and Te Ahu Pātiki managed by Rod Lamb.
This year is the first time in the 83-year history of the awards that a South Island farm has made it to the finals and so it is only right to celebrate today the precedent established by Ngāi Tahu Farming and the Rakaia Incorporation.

Such is the auspicious honour of this day that I bring with me the best wishes of not just one but three Ministers of the Crown: Hon Hekia Parata, the Minister for Education; Hon Steven Joyce, the Minister for Business, Innovation and Employment and Hon Te Ururoa Flavell, the Minister for Whānau Ora.

Why is this important? Tā Tipene talked about the ‘Pākehā torch of decency’. Last year history was made through a valiant effort led by Tā Mark, to ask Ministers Joyce and Flavell, to change the policy – to lift the age thresholds – and in doing so to enable a broader group of tauira to participation. To our great delight the Ministers agreed and fast-tracked the policy change – and Whenua Kura is better because of indeed.

Indeed, to make such a policy change in record-breaking pace, is a great achievement for this iwi, for the reputation of its leadership, the acknowledgment of Whenua Kura.

These are successes that we must honour as the hallmarks of outstanding success.

Successes which resonate with a previous ērā in this place.

Koukourārata was the largest Māori settlement in Canterbury in the mid-1800s; a key centre of Ngāi Tahu activity; once the home of Tautahi the chief after whom Ōtautahi was named.

And so today, firstly, I mihi to the unique leadership of Tā Mark Solomon – and the wider world view of Ngāi Tahu in seeking to embrace the vision of succession planning in every aspect of life – mō tātou, a mō ka uri a muri ake nei.

It is a leadership which embraces others and stretches across diverse sectors of society. Evidence of that inclusive vision is demonstrated in the fact of fifty percent of this cohort being inclusive of tauira from the North Island.

Another pivotal person in this partnership has been Lincoln University Chancellor, Tom Lambie, who had the foresight to accept the invitation for a Treaty partnership, while at the same time contribute his particular experience as an Environment Canterbury Commissioner and a former Dairy Chair of Federated Farmers.

These experiences, along with the locally own and led education consortium, Te Tapuae o Rehua, and Ngāi Tahu Farming have come together to create something special.

But today is also much more than about four entities.

It is about whānau – those before, and those yet to come.

Today it is right and proper to honour not just the 2016 cohort but all of your whānau who have made today possible. You who have helped to believe in the dream, who have invested in the vision, who have encouraged our cadets, our scholars, our graduates to want for more.
When we look next door at the wharekai, Te Pātaka o Huikai, we are reminded of the tupuna, Huikai, one of Moki’s chiefs, who was one of the first to seek refuge here and settle.

That background is really important in thinking about what Whenua Kura offers in its quest to build a centre of training excellence for Māori land based development.

Whenua Kura is about a lot more than dairy, sheep and beef, organic horticulture, agribusiness, farm management – as important as they all are.

Whenua Kura, at its best, is about believing that tangata whenua – literally the first people of the land – have an inherent right to live on the land, to work the land, to be of the land.

It is about providing that refuge – that site of safety in which to explore the meaning of excellence in a farming and agricultural pathway which is inherently Māori.

At a very basic level, we all recognise the vital role that agriculture and farming play in putting kai on the table, creating a sustainable future; a wealth creation pathway for whānau. It is well known that the Maori dairy sector owns over $100 million Fonterra dairy shares. And so the foundation skills will give all of our cohort today a great start in to employment pathways.

But Whenua Kura goes one step further to seek to grow Māori leadership in the agricultural sector.

So one might ask – why would the Whānau Ora Commissioning Agency, Te Pūtahitanga o Te Waipounamu – want to invest in sheep and beef, in food marketing, in farm management?

To answer that question, I want to share a story from these last few days. My own whānau whakapapa back to Ngāti Rangi, to Ohakune in the central plateau of the North Island – and so it was to the land of Koro Ruapehu that we spent this last weekend.

Many of our nephews and nieces have taken up opportunities at Ngā Mokai Marae in a joint initiative between Atihau Whanganui Incorporation and Land Based Training.

The initiative has been about connecting our next generation with dairy farming and beef breeding, while at the same time training them on their tribal lands and home marae.

While developing skills in stock-feeding, or ATV safety, it is also about strengthening their connections to their own whānau, their histories, their lands.

We might call this cultural competency; we might call this Whānau Ora; we might also call it the added edge to anticipate success in the new agricultural economy.

But as an aunty the most important thing it has given me is the confidence that knowing our next generation have a secure foot-hold in to the future.
There is nothing more rewarding than to look into the faces of your own, and to feel the excitement that stirs them to aim high, to believe that they are travelling a path to excellence.

And that was exactly the feeling we all had as we were welcomed at the gate with such respect; as we experienced the passion of the wero, as we became immersed in the pride of the haka pōwhiri. Ka mau te wehi!

And so today, at this very special day, we celebrate not just the remarkable recipients of this 2016 cohort – but we celebrate also all their taua and pōua; their aunts and uncles, their brothers, sisters, cousins, the mokopuna to come - all of you who have invested in a collective future.

All of us when we look at the land around us will see something different.

The farmer will notice the crop; botanists the flowers; artists the colour and contours of the land.

For our women and men in black; for our Whenua Kura champions – Renata, Rā, Eru, Letitia, they see that fuller vision, that wider worldview – to welcome the connections that come from whakapapa; to honour tribal ownership, to learn from the legacies of Māori landowners before them.

It’s not just about economic return, it’s about kaupapa – the values that drive us; it’s about caring for the natural environment, it’s about growing crops but most of all it’s about growing the people.

Ultimately then the answer to my question around the relationship between Whānau Ora and Whenua Kura comes from the words of one of the greatest intellectual champions of our time, from here in Heaven, the late Dr Irihapeti Ramsden.

In response to the myth-making that was emerging out of the ‘Once were warriors’ branding being associated with Māori, Irihapeti challenged us to never forget a wider identity; a collective history to be proud of “Once were gardeners, once were astronomers, once were philosophers, once were lovers”.

To that, we might just add, and once were farmers. Whenua Kura provides us all with an opportunity to appreciate that leadership resides within us all; that whānau transformation can come out of any sector, any age, any experience – and to truly honour the sacrifice, the dedication and the inspiration that we have in front of us – in the form of the next generation of Māori agricultural leaders.