

# Escalator

Growing wāhine leaders who grow Aotearoa  
2026 Information Pack



## Choose Escalator – Leaders shaping tomorrow

Aotearoa's food and fibre sector and rural communities are navigating complex change. This is a time for courageous new leaders to step forward - wāhine who are deeply connected to place, are values-driven, and committed to uplifting others.

### **Escalator is AWDT's 10-month impact leadership accelerator.**

It equips purpose-driven wāhine with mindsets, skills, and connections to create systemic change across the food and fibre sector, iwi, and rural communities.

When wāhine grow, our whānau, whenua, communities, and industries grow. And Escalator develops the leader who carry Aotearoa into the future.

### **A transformative ten months**

Escalator blends face-to-face modules, executive coaching, peer learning, and real-world application, underpinned by Te Ao Māori values and perspectives.

It offers:

- Best-in-class leadership and governance development delivered in partnership with leading experts.
- Personal development and coaching to reconnect with strengths, leadership style, and purpose.
- Cross-sector connections to build a powerful peer group and join a lifelong alumni network.



**2025 Escalator Cohort**

## Impact – GROW You

When we grow, everything around us grows.

Our whānau, whenua, communities, our impact.

Escalator equips you with the skills, courage, and connections to lead with purpose – wherever you are, and wherever you're going.

Escalator is about growing real leadership that's transforming New Zealand's food and fibre sector.

And it starts with you.

### GROW Capability

- Governance, strategy, and financial acumen
- Communication, influence, and decision-making skills
- Critical thinking and confidence at the board table

### GROW Confidence

- Authentic leadership underpinned by self-awareness
- Courage to lead through uncertainty and change
- Tools to coach, inspire and build trust

### GROW Connections

- Lifelong peer network across food and fibre, iwi, and rural communities
- Access to Escalator Alumni influencing in boardrooms, businesses, and communities
- Industry exposure through AWDT's partners, events, and forums

*“Escalator was a gamechanger for me. It gave me a huge amount of self-belief and enabled me to extend my networks. While the journey is a personal one, the growth in your own abilities has a direct and positive influence back at home in your farming business and in board and meeting rooms around New Zealand where you can participate, challenge and secure positive outcomes for agriculture. The learnings and opportunities from Escalator have enabled me to step up to several new roles.”*

**Karen Williams, IrrigationNZ Chief Executive, NZ Farm Environment Trust Trustee. Arable, sheep & beef farmer.**



## Programme activity

Escalator is built around the key insight in AWDT's founding research by Lindy Nelson: "When women recognise, harness and use their strengths and skills, these become the foundation of their growth. By building from their lived experience, they become more likely to succeed, and emerge as sustainable and authentic leaders, able to help others succeed as well."

On Escalator, leading facilitators support participants to combine best-in-class leadership, governance and personal development skills with their lived experiences. The process is centred around 5 face-to-face modules and supported by a variety of other learning activities.



*"My Escalator journey has and will continue to have a huge impact on the way I lead. I now have a deeper understanding of my why and my strengths, and a kete of leadership tools to help me become a greater enabler of the collaboration necessary to create positive change in our sector. I've also gained an amazing bunch of cheerleaders and challengers through my cohort."*

**Kelly Forster –Adoption Programme Manager, AgriZeroNZ**

### Face-to-face modules

Modules provide core group learning experiences with expert facilitators and guest speakers combining theory and practical application.

- **Module 1:** Understanding self – then, now, in the future, 24 – 26 February
- **Module 2:** Governance, strategy, finance, 5 – 7 May
- **Module 3:** Leadership, 23 – 25 June
- **Module 4:** Communication, influence, decision-making, 8 – 10 September
- **Module 5:** Future direction, impact with purpose, 24 – 26 November

### Self-directed learning

Further growth is supported at home between modules with assigned tasks, activities and readings for participants reflection and practising new skills.

### Practical experience

Throughout Escalator practical experiences are woven through all learning and includes board observations, media interview experience, feedback processes and taking big steps to achieve set goals.

### Connection

Participants are supported by the sector, welcomed into the AWDT Alumni and connected deeply as a cohort through guest speakers, leadership panels, networking events, sistering and online sessions.

### Executive coaching

Four individual executive coaching sessions provide 1-on-1 support and encouragement to achieve goals and overcome challenges.

# Timeline

## APPLICATIONS

Applications open to 3:00pm Friday 7th November  
Four-week selection process

## PRE-PROGRAMME

Programme preparation activities and 1-on-1 session with facilitator.

## FEBRUARY

**Module 1:** Understanding self – then, now, in the future  
Event: Sector Welcome Dinner

## MARCH

Executive coaching session 1  
Cohort Zoom session 1  
Alumni Sistering session 1

## APRIL

**Event:** AWDT Governance Forum

## MAY

**Module 2:** Governance, strategy, finance  
Executive coaching session 2

## JUNE

Cohort Zoom session 2  
Alumni Sistering session 2  
**Module 3:** Leadership

## AUGUST

Executive coaching session 3  
Cohort Zoom session 3  
Alumni Sistering session 3

## SEPTEMBER

**Module 4:** Communication, influence, decision-making  
**Event:** Leadership panel

## OCTOBER

Executive coaching session 4  
Cohort Zoom session 4  
Alumni Sistering session 4

## NOVEMBER

**Module 5:** Future direction, impact with purpose  
**Event:** Alumni Welcome  
**Event:** Graduation

## POST-PROGRAMME

Welcome into the AWDT Alumni group

## Value for organisations

When organisations invest in an Escalator participant, they'll gain more than the individual's growth. They'll also gain a catalyst for positive change.

### Benefits to your organisation

- A confident, capable, and connected leader ready to drive performance and innovation
- Visible commitment to diversity, resilience, and values-based leadership
- An employee with practical tools, new perspectives, and broader networks that directly benefit your workplace and sector

## Voices from the sector

*"Agriculture is full of exciting opportunities and plenty of challenges, and we need strong leadership to take advantage of the opportunities our incredible products bring and to help us not only to navigate challenges but to thrive. Beef + Lamb New Zealand has supported AWDT's Escalator programme for several years, because we see the value it brings not only in growing and developing our future leaders but also the benefits to the wider sector. We all benefit from having more women equipped with the tools of leadership and the confidence to take their farms, organisations and sector to the next level."*

**Kate Acland | Beef + Lamb New Zealand Board Chair**



*"We need your leadership now more than ever. The complexity and uncertainty of the world we currently find ourselves in means our sector needs to be building greater resiliency and new paths to prosperity. It requires leadership in all spaces and places.*

*My call is for you to be courageous, come forward and immerse yourself in an environment where you can unlock your talent and find fresh, new ways to have impact. The Escalator programme gives you the tools and support to go deep and find that thing you're passionate about - often it's just under the surface but of course there's never the*

*(right) time to pull that thread and explore the WHAT IFs. Now's your chance - Escalator was an amazing experience for me - just go for it!"*

**Lee-Ann Marsh | AGMARDT General Manager, 2019 Escalator Alumni**

*"Over the last few years, we have been extremely lucky to see the benefits of diverse, inclusive and courageous thinking entering our business - a skillset that is embodied in the courses and networks offered by AWDT. We see AWDT as a brilliant platform for giving the future of our industry the confidence and the skillset to continue to grow, driving our industry forward."*

**Chad Huggett | Ravensdown Head of Marketing**



## Programme investment

Escalator is the only leadership and governance programme of its kind in Aotearoa, specifically tailored for wāhine in food and fibre, iwi, and rural communities.

The programme fee is \$15,000 + GST per participant. A minimum payment of \$5,000 + GST is due by 31 January 2026. As part of AWDT's commitment to accessible and inclusive development for women, the balance can be paid in equal amounts of \$5000 + GST due on 30 June and 31 October 2026.

AWDT encourages successful applicants to source and secure funding to help cover the programme fee and may provide some scholarship funding. Options can include a full/partial scholarship from the participant's employer, MBIE Business Capability Vouchers, and other scholarships and funding identified and applied for by participants from any source or provider.

Travel, accommodation and meal costs are additional to the programme fee and are met by the participant.

## Applying for Escalator

### Escalator is for Wāhine

An Escalator wāhine is driven to create positive change for the communities, whenua, and organisations she cares about. While each cohort is unique and diverse, Escalator participants share a common thread: commitment, courage, and purpose.

Escalator wāhine are often:

- Already stepping up in their communities or iwi and ready to lead with greater impact.
- Farmers, growers, professionals, or executives working across the food and fibre sector.
- Community contributors, iwi leaders, trustees, directors, or entrepreneurs.
- Involved across the supply and value chain; from arable, horticulture, dairy, sheep, beef, deer, Māori agribusiness, animal welfare, biosecurity, apiary, wine, seafood, forestry, and shipping, to professional services supporting the sector.

Together they form a powerful and diverse collective of wāhine determined to shape the future of Aotearoa's primary industries and rural communities.

### Programme admission

Admission to Escalator is by online application via the AWDT website. A selection process is undertaken by AWDT trustees and alumni. This may include a short online interview.

Escalator places are awarded to women who can demonstrate a commitment to impact leadership in the primary sector, rural communities or iwi, and who can effectively participate in the programme along with their cohort.

**Applications via our website  
by 3:00pm Friday  
November 7<sup>th</sup> 2025**

*Escalator gave me the confidence I did not have. It gave me the belief that I could do it, that things were worth a try. The most impactful part of the programme for me was the board observation. I chose to observe the Horticulture New Zealand board and this one meeting gave me a glimpse into what it did - it made me realise that this something I could contribute to. It encouraged me to stand in the next election and I did. I was not successful the first time, so I stood again the following year and was voted in.*

**Kathryn de Bruin, Director Horticulture New Zealand, Director Te Tai Tokerau Water Trust, Fellow Chartered Accountant, Farmer**



*"I'd done a lot of leadership programmes before, but with Escalator, working with a group of wonderful, amazing women have me the extra confidence I needed. I've become more assertive trust myself more and am comfortable being the authentic person that I need to be."*

**Andrea Murray - National Account Manager MPI, AsureQuality**

*"Escalator harnesses the leadership power, skills and intellect of the entire talent pool. As women we bring a range of qualities that modern leadership requires including self-awareness, humility and vulnerability?"*

**Keri Johnston - -wife, mum, farming partner, environmental engineer, Irrigation NZ Chair, AWDT Co-Chair**



*"For me the impact of the Escalator programme was definitely around leadership. I came into the programme thinking I really wanted to do governance but the more I got into it the more I realised it was around leadership and testing the boundaries of my own leadership style."*

**Nicki Mackay - Chief People Officer, FMG**

*"I was an Escalator participant in my first year of the mayoralty and I couldn't have picked a better year because it helped me grow into the role that I'd just undertaken. Escalator taught me how to lead, when to listen good governance and most importantly It gave me confidence in myself and my strengths."*

**Tracey Collis – Mayor, Tararua District Council**



**Escalator 2025 Cohort**

**Strategic Partners**

**Sponsor**

