

March 2016

Methodist Mission Southern Response to The “New models of tertiary education” Issues Paper

The Methodist Mission has run foundation education courses in Dunedin since 1987, to contracts with ETSA (then SkillNZ, and latterly the TEC), episodically to contracts with Work & Income (and its predecessor WINZ), and for the last few years to contracts with the Department of Corrections. The Mission has sustained continuous registration with NZQA since 1992 and received two “confident” ratings in our last External Quality Assurance report.

The Mission is also an employer of graduates of tertiary-level vocational training, specifically Social Workers and Early Childhood Teachers, via our Community and Social Services and Little Citizens delivery arms.

The Mission thanks the Commission for the opportunity to consult on the Issues Paper. Our responses to selected questions are as follows:

Q1 What are the advantages and disadvantages of administering multiple types of post-compulsory education as a single system?

The advantages are the potential for: a strong quality assurance framework; good quality data on participation, achievement and progression; and easy management of the mechanics of funding and accountability. These benefits are considerable from an administration viewpoint.

The downside, as with any standardised mechanism is the tendency to focus on the greater part of the distribution curve with specialist, niche, emergent, or geographically isolated provision / demand likely to be marginalised in policy considerations, unnecessarily complicating the eligibility of and access to provision by potential students and the minimum scale required for provider viability.

The last decade has seen the pathway for adults with low qualifications to return to work or retrain via improved qualifications has been negatively impacted as a direct result of the cancellation of most ACE and all FFTO funding. This spending was an incredibly minor portion of the post-secondary education spend by government (\$7m \$40m p.a. respectively), the cut smoothing the system’s administration, and yet has had noted downstream ill effects, including the closure of the largest Kaupapa Maori PTE in the country.

Administrative smoothing is fine on paper. In practice there are costs to individual’s and whanau aspirations and opportunities.

Q2 Do prospective students have good enough information to enable them to make informed choices about providers and courses? What additional information should be provided? Who

should provide it?

The introduction of fees and loans has seen New Zealand universities produce far more accountants than the country either needs or can bear. Foundation education students of the Mission's experience frequently are not able to articulate a goal more specific than "get a job".

If education is the one transformative good - a position the Mission strongly endorses - then axiomatically, the very nature of learning is that students can only fully understand the costs and benefits of attending any particular course via any particular provider once the experience has been completed.

This is not to say that students are poorly placed to advise on whether the provision meets their needs as learners. But on the matter of whether the learning is fit for purpose, students are only likely to be able to individually advise this once the learning is tested in the real world.

More prosaically, in Foundation Education it is clear that most students are still developing the skillset required for informed choice: that of developing a frame of reference, understanding and legitimising their own needs and motivations.

In regards this question, the Mission asks: over what time period is the idea of "informed choice" expected to apply given the substantial likely changes in the nature of work to come in the next few decades? Acknowledging that the alternative - centralised planning - has substantial if not catastrophic limitations, there are no indicators that the body of prospective post-secondary students are in anyway equipped to forecast the future demands of work.

In fact, it is not clear that *any* body is appropriately equipped to accurately forecast these.

Q7 What are the implications of economies of scale in teaching (and the government funding of student numbers) for the delivery of tertiary education in different types of providers and for different types of courses and subjects?

This is problematic in provincial areas due to low volumes. It is problematic for Foundation Education and (when it existed) Adult and Community Education due to the highly interpersonal nature of the instruction and support. And it is problematic for low-income, low literacy, and/or socially isolated students with low access to the internet where distance learning and MOOCs are the only option.

In Foundation Education, confidence as much as mastery of a particular topic are the hallmarks of educational success. The lack of individual tailoring that comes with scale is contrary to the needs of a population that has, by definition, lower income, lower literacy, fewer resources, and less capacity for self-managed learning.

Q8 How does competition for student enrolments influence provider behaviour? Over what attributes do providers compete? Do New Zealand providers compete with one another more or less than in other countries?

In provincial areas where ITPs have sought to strengthen the supply chain of students for their level 3 and 4 offerings (as overall market growth has faltered) by entering the Foundation Education market, the quality of those offerings has diminished with the absence of the lifeskills and social work support inherent to the more successful provision (not being a part of the ITP business model in the way that it is for the specialist PTEs).

But it is not just providers that compete. Funders do too. In the case of Work & Income's Training for Work and Skills for Industry courses, not all of which have been provided by trainers who are

NZQA registered and accredited, W&I are effectively competing with ITOs and TEC funded providers.

Noting also that W&I (and their sub-contracted off-shoot, Youth Services) have considerable power as a referral mechanism in the supply chain of foundation education students, any decision by W&I or Youth Services to prefer their own product, or to prioritise part-time and marginal income work rather than training, has a significant impact on the market.

Where there has been contracting of non-NZQA providers, funders have effectively undercut the price point of providers who have had to bear the cost of NZQA registration, accreditation, and EER.

Q17 In what ways and to what extent do employers interact with tertiary providers in New Zealand? Are there practical ways to encourage employers to have greater or more productive involvement in the tertiary education system?

Having been recently involved in an ITO's work on developing new level 3-5 qualifications, the Mission would say: not as much as we would like.

Our experience was that we were heard, and then the agenda of the ITPs - principally, what was convenient for them to *teach* - was allowed to outweigh the voices of employers.

This was despite the agreement of the ITO with employers that significant improvements in the qualifications and the teaching were urgently required.

With providers no longer able to establish "local qualifications" on the framework, there is a much reduced opportunity for market-led innovation in delivery, and a much stronger emphasis on consensus-led quality. Where the discipline being taught has strength and maturity, this is fine. Where it does not - and arguably social services stands out for this - it is most definitely not.

Q29 What factors best explain the discrepancy between growing levels of tertiary education attainment without a significant productivity dividend?

The Mission can speak to our experiences with Early Childhood and Social Work qualifications, the benchmark standard qualification for both having migrated from two-year Diplomas to four-year Bachelors with concomitant salary increases, in the last 20 years. These changes have been driven by an activist workforce seeking appropriate recognition for difficult work.

Also during this period, the teaching of the Early Childhood Qualification has moved from dedicated providers (Colleges of Education) to Universities with their greater focus on research.

While the two Bachelors are now either mandated and/or preferentially subsidised by funders (respectively the Ministries of Education and Social Development), there is no evidence of improved effectiveness or efficiency.

Anecdotally, in the Mission's experience, the reverse is true. Graduates are now better grounded in the (often untested) philosophical traditions of their ostensible profession, than they are in the practicalities.

Getting recent graduates work ready is expensive and time-consuming. For example: the Mission was recently informed that Year 3 social work students were just starting to learn basic communication skills; graduates' understanding of the Privacy and CYFS Acts is generally woeful; and they have infrequently been exposed to the practicalities of abuse notifications and care and protection issues - and as a result often have an unrealistic expectation of the work.

When challenged, providers (Universities) will state strongly that it is not their job to train workforce, that graduates won't necessarily use their qualifications vocationally but instead treat them as one might a general undergraduate degree.

And yet, these are the mandated qualifications for both professions! It is a deeply unsatisfying situation and one with quite real consequences for the vulnerable clients these workforces are supposed to be transforming.

Separately, there has also been a migration of ITPs from vocationally oriented provision to more academic, research-informed delivery, along with the promotion of "tutors" to "lecturers" and "senior tutors" and even professorships.

It is hard to escape the thought that, simple snobbery has been the principal driver: the desire of these three workforces (ECE teachers, Social Workers, and ITP Tutors) to be better recognised, better rewarded, and seen as equals with those in the "more senior" Universities, and in putting the focus on themselves, have taken it off the eventual clients the workforce should be preparing to help.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Laura Black', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Laura Black
Director