

FLANZ feedback to the Productivity Commission: New Models for Tertiary Education Draft Report

Introduction

This submission has been prepared by the Executive Committee of Flexible Learning Association of New Zealand, FLANZ (the Committee). The Committee wishes to thank the Productivity Commission for the opportunity to discuss the future of tertiary education in New Zealand.

The Committee has approached the submission through the context of the FLANZ constitutional objective: to foster high standards in the practice of open, flexible and distance learning.

Through the New Models for Tertiary Education Delivery Draft Report (the Draft Report) it is apparent that the Commission is supportive of re-orientating New Zealand's tertiary education system (the System) to place learners in a more central position. Structures, current activity and effects of the System that have led to the Commission's recommendations and relate to the FLANZ objective of supporting open, flexible and distance learning include:

- Increasing relevance by placing learners at the centre;
- Increasing accessibility through authentic learner pathways; and,
- Increasing accessibility through flexible models of learning and teaching.

This submission briefly explores each of these areas and encourages strengthening or reconsideration of the views of the Commission in these areas.

Summary

FLANZ believes access to, and resulting outcomes from, tertiary education can be improved by:

1. Supporting learners to identify a meaningful personal pathway to agreed learning goals (authentic learner pathway), providing appropriate long-term support to achieve those goals, and reducing bureaucratic barriers to achieving those goals.
2. Supporting the System to further develop flexible study options through new models of learning, teaching, partnership, assessment and accreditation (broadly captured in the term 'innovation in tertiary education delivery').

FLANZ supports a re-orientation of the system to place learners in a more central position. This FLANZ submission identifies an opportunity to do this through recognition and support of authentic learner pathways, rather than providing financial autonomy for students.

FLANZ believes that the demand for flexible learning options will increase if authentic learner pathways are supported. Furthermore, the System will be required to support flexible learning options and will necessarily make changes (many of which are signalled in the Draft Report) that support innovation in tertiary education delivery.

The fundamental change sought by FLANZ, and underpinned by introducing authentic learner pathways, is to increase the accessibility of tertiary education by placing learners at the centre of the learner pathway decision-making process.

The intended benefits of supporting authentic learner pathways are:

- An increase in the relevance and financial effectiveness of tertiary education for learners;
- An increase in the relevance of learner outcomes and skills to the workplace, industry and iwi; and,
- An increase in accessibility to tertiary education for part-time, adult and distance learners including priority groups, second chance learners and those re-training.

Increasing relevance by placing learners at the centre

FLANZ supports the Productivity Commission's agreement (p 325) with the recent State Services Commission blueprint for education:

“To reorient the system around the learner, ie, to “ensure that lifelong learners are at the centre, with their journey and outcomes strategically aligned across agencies.” (States Services Commission et al., 2016, p. 9)

However, FLANZ does not agree that this would be best achieved by supporting learners to allocate financial resources through a Student Education Account (pp 326 - 324).

FLANZ believes that supporting learners to identify a learning pathway that achieves goals defined by the learner - in order to be authentic in terms of their circumstance and beliefs - is more appropriate. Maintaining a dialogue with learners in terms of their education goals, rather than their education spend, has been identified as valuable in the way it moves responsibility towards the learner and allows agencies and whānau to support decision making (<https://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz>). For adults it can also benefit their employers who value the upskilling of their workforce.

Authentic learner pathways put learners at the centre of the decision-making that drives other aspects of the System. The System, with learner pathways at the centre, would be required to focus on enabling learners to achieve the goals set out in their pathway. Costs, modes of study and timeframes would be negotiated to best suit the learner's situation and maximise achievement as defined by the learner. The term pathway recognises that students need support to navigate their journey through tertiary education because they do not have enough knowledge to handle full autonomy.

If authentic learner pathways were introduced as a central driver for system activity FLANZ expects there would be an increased uptake in flexible learning pathways. This increase would come from learners wishing to work, raise a family, support their community while studying, wanting to complete part of a qualification, or wishing to study at a distance from a provider. It could also increase opportunities for language learners and for iwi. Expectations of increasing demand for flexible study pathways have been identified in multiple submissions as well as the Draft Report (Section 10, Trends. Pp 239-266). Traditional pathways are also supported through this model. Prescribed degrees, full time study and on campus environments are expected to continue to be a prevalent approach for youth and full time learners.

Increasing accessibility through authentic learner pathways

An authentic learner pathway is one that has meaning for the learner as defined by the learner's values. A learner, for example, may place value of studying with peers in a managed environment as Universities New Zealand pointed out in the Draft Report (p26). Another learner may prefer to learn while working, valuing the experience of associating the knowledge and skills gained with the workplace environment (p 26).

The Draft Report supports this view, saying:

“Different educational approaches and environments have different costs and benefits for different kinds of student, depending on the attributes and resources they bring to the co-production of their education. No one approach works best for everyone. Matching students to the right education for them is important.” (p26)

So, while the Draft Report recognises individual pathways as important and notes that these pathways could be said to be currently available, choosing something that is not prescribed by the System is challenging - leading to higher levels of non-completion for non-traditional pathways. The Draft Report makes it clear that resources are not focussed on supporting a pathway defined by the learner:

“The system makes it hard for students to package up learning from different providers, or switch providers or programmes of learning, because the funding and regulatory models do not take account of their preferences and aspirations.” (p 9)

So, the System does not support learners to change their path or to have their credit or prior learning recognised (p5, p91). Instead, the System slots learners into constrained pathways that the System defines: The Draft Report identifies the inability of the System to support learner pathways through its discussion of:

- TES and support systems' focus on youth and full time (p 103),
- Students' access to information (p 61, 137),
- Inability to cross credit (p 120),
- Inability to recognise completion in terms other than qualification (p 208).

FLANZ acknowledges that support for authentic learner pathways will require considerable System change, including:

- Removing the TES emphasis on youth and full time learners,
- Recognition of credit earned towards a qualification and the ability to transfer that credit,
- Changing the way NZQA defines learning delivery from hours of training to assessment of outcomes,
- Changing to the way the TEC manages funding allocation so that funding follows the learner,
- Providing career advice and support that recognise learner definitions of success.

Barriers to participation will reduce with authentic learner pathways at the centre of the System. Learners will choose pathways that deliver value specific to their needs. Often this will involve the achievement of specific skills needed in the workplace or that the learner can reasonably manage (p 48). Benefits include increased participation, increased ownership or responsibility taken by the learner for their course of study, and more nuanced management of the skills achieved and money spent on achieving educational goals. These benefits support required changes submitters have identified in current learner decision making processes (p 64). There is also the potential to increase support from employers.

Increasing accessibility through flexible models of learning and teaching

The Draft Report explains that the question is no longer whether new models that use technology are as good as traditional education, but how can new models accommodate diverse learner needs and support learners to achieve educational success? (p 27).

The Draft Report recognises that innovation is constrained by the System. Noting that:

- Providers tend to adopt innovations that improve existing delivery and, therefore, does not support transformative change (p 295);
- Innovation is not funded within the System (p291);
- There is some innovative activity led by individuals but little institutional capability to scale this activity (p 291).

FLANZ suggests that new models are already being applied, often in tension with System settings, and that this is driven by learner demand for increased flexibility. In the learner's terms increased flexibility represents increased value and increased chance of success. Our research supports this, including the evidence and guidance in the DEANZ future scenarios for tertiary education (see [the project and its guidance documents here](#); the 'Self Determination' scenario is the most relevant here).

It is clear that we are not debating the relative value of new models of learning and teaching. Rather, we are seeking ways to provide learners with choice (flexibility). FLANZ supports the Draft Report's comment that:

“New models of tertiary education, including (but not limited to) those enabled by new technologies, present an opportunity to increase the diversity of delivery approaches, educational methods and learning environments available to tertiary students in New Zealand. This in turn makes it easier for a wider diversity of students to find a “match” that reflects their goals and resources – provided they have enough freedom to choose.” (p 26)

FLANZ believes that the freedom to choose can be provided by introducing authentic learner pathways and orientating System activity and settings around support for learner pathways.

The Draft Report recognises that while there are many barriers to the development of flexible models of learning and teaching there is also increasing demand. Many inquiry participants believe that retraining, part time and second chance education will occupy an increasing share of future tertiary education provision (p 75, 239).

The Draft Report also recognises the need for increasing flexibility: in pathway, in learning and teaching practice, and in recognition of success (p 255). The Draft Report clarifies that technology can add value to learning and teaching and is best integrated into programmes of learning, teaching and support, rather than added to or replacing current programmes. Respondents suggest that, over time, all models of delivery, including the traditional lecture are likely to be augmented with technological enhancements that improve the learning experience. FLANZ agrees with the Draft Report in recognising that there are clear opportunities for online learning to expand access to tertiary education, supplementing and enhancing rather than supplanting traditional modes of delivery (p 283).

The Draft Report makes recommendations that aim to free providers to pursue different strategies, allowing a more diverse range of models to flourish and better equip the system to respond to exogenous change (p 239, 268). FLANZ supports this approach including supporting recommendations such as:

- 12.3 The Ministry of Education should design a new quality control regime for tertiary education that encourages innovation, takes a risk-based approach, and enforces minimum standards of quality.
- 12.5 The Tertiary Education Commission should change the way it measures completions so that provider performance is not penalised if a student transfers to continue learning at a different provider or moves into work.
- 12.6 Students should be able to mix and match courses from different providers. The funding and regulatory system should not penalise providers for participating in such arrangements.
- 12.10 Government should consolidate and improve the array of official information sources about study and career options aimed at prospective (and current) tertiary students.
- 12.22 Government should: extend funding eligibility to students who do not intend to pursue [full] qualification.
- 12.30 The Government should alter the definition of an equivalent full-time student (EFTS) to allow alternatives to the input-based “learning hour” as a basis of calculation.

The Draft Report notes System constraints to sharing practice and content (p 183). While the Draft Report explores the Government’s many roles it is relatively silent on the potential for the Government to support learning and teaching practice centrally. One example is support

for a platform that underpins the sector's ability to build communities of practice and share content. Until now the concept of a collaborative platform has been something that individual institutions or providers have had to deal with alone. FLANZ believes that a collaboration platform as a service, provided centrally, will emerge as a key enabler of a more open, connected and agile tertiary learning and teaching provision.

Conclusion

While the Draft Report acknowledges and supports placing learners at the centre of the System and goes on to support changes to Systems settings that enable learner mobility and TEO innovation, the Draft Report does not recognise the opportunity authentic learner pathways represents or identify learner's educational desires as the key driver for System activity, be it traditional or alternative approaches.

FLANZ believes access to, and resulting outcomes from tertiary education can be improved by:

1. Supporting learners to identify a meaningful personal pathway to agreed learning goals (authentic learner pathway), providing appropriate long-term support to achieve those goals, and reducing bureaucratic barriers to achieving those goals.
2. Supporting the System to further develop flexible study options through new models of learning, teaching, partnership, collaboration, assessment and accreditation (broadly captured in the term 'innovation in tertiary education systems and delivery').

FLANZ supports a re-orientation of the system to place learners in a more central position but identifies an opportunity to do this through recognition and support of authentic learner pathways - rather than providing variants of financial 'autonomy' for students. The term pathway recognises that students need support to navigate their journey through tertiary education because they do not have enough knowledge to handle full autonomy.

FLANZ believes learners' educational goals, as defined by the individual learner, should be the central motivation for the System's educational and support provision. FLANZ broadly supports the Draft Report recommendations that increase learner voice in the System, remove barriers to innovation, and support increased flexibility, mobility and access.

DEFINITION: Authentic Learner Pathways

An agreed course of study that the learner has controlling authority over and is meaningful in the context of that learner's situation.