

To: NZ Productivity Commission.
Email: info@productivity.govt.nz

From:
Robert Nola, FNZAH, FRSNZ (Professor Emeritus)
Philosophy, School of Humanities
The University of Auckland,
Private Bag 92019,
Auckland, 1142, New Zealand.
E-mail: r.nola@auckland.ac.nz

Date: 21/11/2016

Submission on NZ Productivity Commission Draft Report “New Models of Tertiary Education”.

I wish to raise the following 5 points.

(1) That the holistic link between research and teaching at universities be maintained.

The title of your Draft Report of September 2016 is: *New Models of Tertiary Education*. However the term ‘model’ is nowhere clearly defined and is loosely used to cover a lot of different “approaches” in tertiary education. It is most commonly applied to teaching. What is lacking is an account of what a model of a university is.

The modern university is based on a generic Enlightenment model developed in Germany from the 1810s by Alexander von Humboldt, the University of Berlin he helped found being the first example. (This is now known as the Alexander von Humboldt University.) The central idea that Humboldt developed was that of a university in which there was, amongst other things, a holistic combination of learning and research; neither can fully take place without the other. Different sub-models of this were developed in Germany and later in the USA. In the 20th century they became the dominant models of most universities. There is much literature on this, none of which has found its way into the Draft Report.

However this Enlightenment ethos found its way into the NZ Education Act 1989 where it says in **S162 4 (a)**:

that universities have all the following characteristics and other tertiary institutions have 1 or more of those characteristics:

- (i) they are primarily concerned with more advanced learning, the principal aim being to develop intellectual independence:
- (ii) their research and teaching are closely interdependent and most of their teaching is done by people who are active in advancing knowledge:
- (iii) they meet international standards of research and teaching:
- (iv) they are a repository of knowledge and expertise:
- (v) they accept a role as critic and conscience of society;

Important here is (ii), the requirement that research and learning be interdependent. And this is a characteristic that all universities must have but other tertiary institutions need not have.

Though this section of the Act is cited in the Draft Report the significance of (ii) is quite overlooked.

In fact the Draft report recommends: **R12.17 Government should relax its statutory requirements for research-led teaching of degrees.**

Does this mean that the Draft report recommends that S162 4(a)(ii) should be removed from the Act? If so, on the Humboldtian model NZ would cease to have universities. This would be a detrimental step to take. And a surprising one to be found in a Draft Report dealing with University education. I hope universities in NZ resist this.

I have taught at the University of Auckland for 47 years and during that time have been active in research. One of my tasks has been to consider how knowledge at an advanced level developed through research can filter its way down to undergraduate courses and even influence teaching at the first year level. And like most other academics I have had some success in this.

What is obvious to me is that those who recommend R12.17 have not been active in research or in teaching at a (Humboldtian) university. They show little active experience of trying to marry learning with research and its results. That these two might be disengaged goes against a view of learning and knowledge acquisition developed since Plato over 2,500 years ago in a dialogue called *Meno* (amongst others). In fact the recommendation goes against the idea of knowledge itself, a concept which is nowhere discussed in the Draft Report (though often mentioned). This is a fundamental omission in a report on higher education.

What evidence is provided for R12.17? We are referred to section 6 of the Draft Report; and only pp. 151-2 address directly the issues of the possible links between learning and research. However there is nothing there that supports such a recommendation. What is cited is anecdotal or irrelevant to the recommendation. I also find it epistemologically barren.

Conclusion: R12.17 should be abandoned and the Education Act 1989 S162 4 (a) (ii) (and other similar sections) not be amended at all.

(2) MOOCs and university “models”.

The Draft Report is quite right when it says (p. 6): Massive open online courses (MOOCs) may never live up to their 2012 hype.” (See also p. 259 on the hype.) Yes, they have been over-hyped. But in some cases MOOCs are appropriate and New Zealand Universities are constructing their own MOOCs. However more recognition about what is being locally done ought to make its way into the Draft Report. They are just one of the many ways in which electronically based learning is being developed in Universities; none of them are without it.

Some of my colleagues have constructed a MOOC concerning Critical Thinking. But one immediate drawback is how to incorporate feedback for individual students and provide the kind of experience one would get in a tutorial or in a clinic or workshop. At the higher level MOOCs are inadequate; they cannot advance research by students or teaching which is research-based.

Box 10.1 says: “MOOCs are an early stage example of the search for new models”. But models of what? Not a university as discussed in (1) above. At best they are offer one of several approaches to teaching and learning (as limited as they might be). Here is one case in which the Draft Report on “New Models of Tertiary Education” is confused about models: models of ... what?

(3) Critic and Conscience Role of Universities.

The Draft Report discusses, in section 9 pp. 236-7, the role of universities as critic and conscience of society. This is specified in the Education Act S162 4 (a) (v) (see above). But nowhere in the Draft

Report is it recommended that this role be continued as specified in the current legislation. Instead the Draft Report raises a few empirical questions about the extent of that role and some issues it might face. This is inadequate. What is required is a bolder stance in which the Draft Report endorses the appropriate section of the Act.

Conclusion: The Draft report ought to correct an omission and recommend support for the current Education Act 1989 S162 4 (a) (v) (cited above).

(4) On R12.5.

R12.6 says: 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.

There is something quite wrong here which displays a lack of knowledge of what goes on at universities. Many students at universities, such as mine (the University of Auckland – AU) have a large number of overseas students who are completing part or all of their degree in AU. Many students come to NZ for a few semesters as part of their university experience. Moreover there is an administrative unit which attempts to assess the equivalence of courses across most of the world's universities so that students can enrol in AU courses. So R12.6 is based on lack of information and is otiose. So drop R12.5 as far as universities are concerned.

(5) The Bogus character of Bowen's Law.

Section 6.2, p 145, talks of "Bowen's Law". In some ways this is a bad joke as what is cited does not count as a law in any sense in which respectable scientists would use the term "law". It is no better than the common talk of, say, 'Murphy's law'. Also such talk fails to recognize the difference between genuine scientific laws on the one hand and generalizations, regularities, uniformities, trends and tendencies on the other; nor does it allow for statistical claims. To remedy this the authors of the Draft Report had better read Karl Popper *The Poverty of Historicism* (see the index on some of the terms mentioned). The first cited Bowen "Law" is not even a law but expresses a goal; so teleological elements are bundled into the confusion. Part of the poverty of this section is a failure to recognize the differences between scientific laws and other claims with which they are confused. Unfortunately sociologists are prone to making these errors; so they are the object of Popper's criticisms.

Conclusion: All mention of Bowen's "law" ought to be deleted from the Draft Report as it is a bogus "law".