



QPEC

Quality
Public Education
Coalition



Response to New Zealand Productivity Commission. (2016).
New Models of Tertiary Education. Draft Report. Sept 2016

The Quality Public Education Coalition's members are disappointed and somewhat demoralised by your draft report. The report purports to be a full analysis of the tertiary system, but is full of contradictions and opinions not backed up by research. There is some interesting material in this report, but no effective solutions to the sector's problems emerge from it. Instead, the tired old solutions of the past 30 years, which have largely caused the problems you are trying to solve, are rolled out again and again – more fees, more loans, more competition, more market.

The report is far too long for useful comment, especially for those of us forced to work on it pro bono. We are concerned that we do not have the time to test out the assertions you make. Instead we are forced to concentrate on your recommendations. We acknowledge that there is some interesting work in the report itself, but which often does not marry with the recommendations, which seem largely to support the government's view of the efficacy of the tertiary system as a tool to deliver people into employment.

We wish to comment primarily on three areas, as we have limited time and resources to address the full scope of the report.

ACCESS TO TERTIARY EDUCATION AND COSTS

We are opposed to the reintroduction of student loans. They are unfair. Given the current low rate of repayment, it seems odd to support a policy that will escalate the amount of loan repayments. It will push graduates permanently overseas, reduce the ability for that generation to purchase homes and depress numbers in graduate study in particular. It also loads enormous debt onto young people taking lower level courses who will never have the capability to repay their loans. Women earn a lot less than men across nearly all professions and loan debt is inherently gender inequitable – the higher the debt, the more inequitable.

We believe it would be in the best interests of the country as a whole to abolish fees altogether. For that to happen, we strongly propose a commitment from government to fund the tertiary sector appropriately.

The cost of studying and incurring loans is already prohibitive for students. Meanwhile, there are many advantages to abolishing fees. We list some of them here:

- a wider cross-section of the population would get access to tertiary study
- debt would not act as a barrier to study among the poor, Māori and Pasifika



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- women would get a greater chance to attend tertiary education without a lifetime of debt, given women's persistently lower incomes
- students would have more opportunity to complete study sooner if they didn't have to also work their way through tertiary in low-paid service jobs
- the quality of tertiary study would be enhanced: students who could commit themselves to full-time or near full-time concentration would benefit more richly than they would from part-time study – to the advantage of the nation
- graduates would be more inclined to stay and contribute back to NZ, because they would no longer need to go overseas for high-paying jobs to pay down student loans

The tertiary sector provides a bedrock of education, qualifications, scholarship, research and critical inquiry that is an essential, powerful and continuing contribution to the strength of the nation. Access by all groups is vital investment in the future of the country.

INSTITUTIONS

We agree to a great extent that the TEC, NZQA, Vice Chancellors Committee and other agencies are barriers to an effective sector in a number of ways. We support your concerns about some of these agencies in blocking innovation, forcing conformity (and bureaucracy) and loading additional costs onto the sector.

Current outcome measures are far from useful. Making tertiary institutions responsible for ensuring graduates get good jobs is just wrong; tertiary institutions do not and should not control the world of work. It is the job of government policy to grow jobs and undertake economic development.

We are also not convinced that there is a worrying mismatch between type of qualifications and available jobs. With some exceptions, it is not the role of the tertiary sector to teach on the job skills. They rightly focus on underlying principles which can often be transported across professions. For example, a law degree offers highly useful skills, attitudes and approaches well beyond the practice of the law itself. Many of these skills are intangible, and efforts to identify and assess them are doomed to failure.

We think the PBRF as a policy and a funding mechanism has had a very distorting effect on the university sector and on those polytechnics who attempt to play the research assessment game. There must be more creative and equitable ways of enabling constructive research across tertiary institutions and staff, who are in any case eager to engage, but without the coercion of the PBRF.



A mixture of inadequate funding and forced competition has not improved quality in the sector. While it is noted that all NZ universities are in the top 3% internationally, that is achieved by the immensely hard work of a dedicated staff. Quality cannot be maintained forever with current settings.

The drivers of the current system are, we believe, wrong. There is little appreciation of the inherent values of tertiary education in promoting rational thought, citizenship in a democratic society, education for leisure and self-improvement.

The emergence of disturbing trends internationally may be put down in part to a reduction in the values traditionally promoted by the universities. We need a re-emphasis on enlightened, critical education if society, community and the planet are to be saved. There is now a real threat to the future of our society from the proliferation of angry, inadequately educated adults in low-paying, dead-end jobs, who see their future slipping away. The remedy for society is quality public tertiary education accessible to all.

INNOVATION

We think that the tertiary sector is highly innovative – more so than it has ever been. There are more courses and programmes, more research institutes and programmes of international quality, and a striking array of inquiry, including high-quality science. But the humanities are under threat under a regime that believes the only value of the sector is in helping people get jobs.

You comment that learning-related technology, while widespread, has not gone as far as it should. If so, it is because those courses that have been developed at the cutting edge online have been born out of the goodwill of staff working enormous hours because of a commitment to new ways of teaching and researching. There are limited resources in the system for innovation of this kind. And, if there were more, much uncertainty still exists around the best and most effective delivery systems. Significant research is needed in this field.

CONCLUSION

A high quality, fully funded, free tertiary education system, less top heavy with bureaucratic agencies and more committed to collaborative work based on excellent values would produce the innovation and productivity that you are seeking – and save NZ and the world from the Trump/Brexit nexus. The current direction is the route to disappointment and disaster.

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