



## **Submission on *New models of tertiary education* Issues paper February 2016:**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the issues paper prepared for the Productivity Commission's inquiry into new models of tertiary education.

As the New Zealand Branch of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) we are a national organisation that supports research and development of teaching and learning within the higher education sector. We act as a national body to support pedagogical research in the discipline and be supported by the sector as a central body seeking excellence in both research and teaching. We encourage and disseminate research on tertiary teaching and learning that provides the evidence for effective practice. The future of New Zealand tertiary teaching needs to be anchored in this evidence to further advance educational policy and practice.

In this submission, we focus on four themes that are most directly in our members' areas of expertise and research interest.

### **A. Innovation in higher education**

Tertiary teaching and learning innovation is predominantly funded in New Zealand by Ako Aotearoa, the Teaching & Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) fund, and through internal development grants within institutions. Both Ako Aotearoa and TLRI funding are crucial for the dissemination of many teaching and learning innovations throughout the New Zealand tertiary sector. HERDSA plays a major role in supporting these funding agencies, in particular through the annual HERDSA international conference, and the Tertiary Education Research New Zealand (TERNZ) national conference. Both conferences attract a mix of scholars and practitioners sharing research and research-based practice of higher education teaching and learning innovations. In addition, HERDSA publishes the international highly ranked peer-reviewed Higher Education Research and Development (HERD) journal. [Q63]

There are however several challenges to innovation in tertiary teaching and learning. The current model is risk adverse, being outcomes driven requiring accountability. This stifles innovation. There is also a focus on student satisfaction. Student evaluations of teaching tend to be used summatively for performance management and academic promotions, though not by all providers. As a result, there creates a strong disincentive for educational innovation, as instructors do not want low evaluation scores of their courses if an innovation is not received well. [Q16]

There are limited sources of funding for educational innovation. The amount of funding in absolute terms for research in this area is low. A further challenge is the limited amount of support available for teaching staff at institutions to implement and sustain teaching and learning innovations.

### *Recommendations:*

- 1) More funding required for innovative research on tertiary teaching to ensure that practice is relevant to learners.
- 2) Innovation involves risk and should not be outcomes driven. Funding criteria must recognise these factors and accommodate this to encourage more innovation.
- 3) More support for teaching staff to implement and sustain teaching and learning innovations.

### **B. Support for teaching and learning**

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) lies at the intersection of teaching and research. It is here that research questions are focused on discovering new ideas about teaching and learning, building knowledge about teaching and learning, which can then be shared across disciplines. SoTL research identifies effective instructional practices and provides evidence of teaching excellence. The DART (Dimensions of Activities Related to Teaching) model by Kern and colleagues (2015) provides a structure for academics to move from inquiry-based or reflective teaching to doing SoTL research on their teaching. This progression for academics is desirable to achieve quality improvements and facilitate the sharing and creation of knowledge. Academics require assistance with this progression to achieve rigorous SoTL research.

#### *Strong academic development*

Universities offer limited support for academic development. There are relatively few specialised academics and support staff who assist teaching staff with improving their teaching, and implementing teaching and learning innovations. Though there is some variability in the university sector, most units for academic development have undergone at least one restructuring / downsizing within the last five years, and the reporting lines of these units within the university hierarchy varies considerably. University management treats these units generally as "nice-to-have", rather than "must-have" as part of their duty of care to staff and staff development, and supporting the best outcomes for learners. [Q15]

#### *Recognition of SoTL research*

Many university academics are hired based on their expertise in research, rather than teaching, and research continues to have a higher status within universities than teaching does. Although this is slowly changing, teaching is still not consistently valued as highly as research. In contrast, teaching in Australia is now valued on the same level as research, which has positive implications for employment.

A number of Teaching and Learning centres at universities are now becoming centres of Higher Education research. Their research on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is generally perceived as valid research and is important to help staff teach effectively.

Further changes towards the recognition of SoTL are required within New Zealand universities but also on the national level within the Performance Based Research Funding (PBRF) system to reward engagement in research on the pedagogy of the discipline and not just discipline-related research.

#### *Careful scoping of academic positions*

Traditionally, academic positions have both research and teaching components. Close connections are highly desired and described as either research-led teaching or a research-teaching nexus. Other types of appointments are now becoming increasingly prominent. For example, Professional Teaching and Learning Fellows tend to come from within the discipline and support, and do research on, the teaching and learning in a disciplinary department. These staff members are

often considered low status, as they do not typically do research in the discipline, but many do engage in SoTL research. Professional Teaching and Learning Fellows have a strong positive impact on the attitude toward and practice of tertiary teaching, and assist other academics in the professionalisation of their practice. In some UK universities, teaching Professorships have been successfully introduced as an academic track, which allows for recognition of SoTL research within university departments.

Which approach best facilitates the goals of the New Zealand's university system requires more investigation. Important points that need to be considered are to maintain the distinctive research-based character of universities, the avoidance of a casualisation of the academic workforce, as well as valid career paths for academics, based on both teaching and research.

*Recommendations:*

- 1) Facilitate strong academic development units and programmes across the university sector.
- 2) Recognise the importance of SoTL research within New Zealand tertiary institutions and at national level within the PBRF system to reward engagement in SoTL research of the discipline and not just discipline-related research.
- 3) Maintain the distinctive research-based character of universities; avoid casualisation of the academic workforce; provide valid career paths for academics based on both teaching and research.

### **C. Research-informed and research-led teaching**

The Commission asks about the merits and drawbacks of outputs being produced together (Q10) and in particular the bundling of research and teaching (Q11) as is currently required for universities in the Education Act. As a Higher Education and Development Society, we strongly value the bundling of research with teaching. Hattie and Marsh (1996), as cited by the Commission, found no relationship between the quality of academics' teaching and the quality of the research. In the same paper however, they called for an exploration of how universities could integrate teaching and research more effectively, rather than decoupling research from teaching.

One can be research active in various ways. The most obvious and traditional way is to be research active in one's discipline. However, being active in SoTL research within the discipline should also be viewed as research-active. This type of research, in which HERDSA members actively engage, examines (among other things) how people learn in a discipline in tertiary settings, and has the potential to directly inform teaching practice for the benefit of learners. This type of research is closely related to the notion of Pedagogical Content Knowledge (Shulman, 1986), the specialist knowledge of making a content area accessible to a particular target audience. It is also closely related to the German concept of *Fachdidaktik* (content didactics), the study of teaching the discipline. In many German and Dutch universities, departments will have a separate research group in this area (e.g. Physics Didactics or Mathematics Didactics). Being informed by the latest research is a cornerstone of the principle of *Ako* as described in the Ministry of Education's *Ka Hikitia* document. One of the most effective ways to be, and remain, research-informed is to be active in research oneself. However, it is important that discipline-based higher education research is both acknowledged and valued by the discipline and the institution. Members have reported that colleagues who engage in discipline-based higher education research are discouraged from listing these publications as part of the PBRF or for academic promotion.

As well, students report positive experiences if a research culture exists (e.g. Spronken-Smith, Miroso & Darrou, 2014) and positive effects of lecturer research on student learning (Lindsay & Jenkins, 1998).

Decoupling research and teaching is likely to set New Zealand down the track of increased casualisation / adjuncting of teaching staff with limited job security, a situation that has already developed in the United States and in Australia. The increasing casualisation of tertiary teaching is a quality assurance issue. It is unhealthy for the tertiary system as a whole as it creates a divide between casual and full-time academics. It is likely to be a damaging factor in the achievement of learning outcomes and retention. It also carries the risk of teaching innovations and teacher professionalisation stalling. Decoupling runs the additional risk of diminishing New Zealand's ability to recruit and retain high calibre academic staff.

Consequently, rather than unbundling, it would be more appropriate to provide academic development to strengthen lecturers' teaching skills. In several jurisdictions lecturers are already either required or strongly encouraged to obtain formal training in tertiary teaching. A number of universities in New Zealand have their own accreditation schemes for lecturers, which are rigorously evaluated and highly valued by those institutions. As an alternative accreditation scheme, a pilot project started in 2015 to introduce the Higher Education Academy (HEA) accreditation is underway at the Auckland University of Technology, Massey University, and Unitec. Having professional recognition / accreditation provides numerous benefits for teachers, learners and employers:

*Benefits for the accredited teachers*

- a. Having documented and portable recognition of teaching capability.
- b. Providing teachers the opportunity to reflect on their practice, view its successes, and identify areas for attention.

*Benefits for learners*

- a. Providing a consistently higher standard of teaching and enhanced learning opportunities and success as a result of greater teacher expertise.
- b. Giving individual learners confidence in their choice of learning organisation by providing them with tangible and credible evidence of teacher expertise and competence based on the accreditation metrics of the teaching workforce and the credibility of the accreditation process.

*Benefits for the employers of teachers*

- a. Enabling tertiary employers to demonstrate to teachers and learners that they value and nurture the expertise of their staff in meeting the needs of learners, thereby promoting their institution as an organisation that is fully committed to the highest quality of teaching and learning.

*Recommendations:*

- 1) Consider both discipline research and SoTL research as valid and necessary practices of research in higher education.
- 2) Discipline-based higher education research can and should be included in the disciplinary review panels for the PBRF.
- 3) Promote the interdependence between teaching and research to recruit and retain high caliber academic staff.
- 4) Provide more academic development for staff to strengthen their teaching skills and develop their teaching.

- 5) Nationally recognise a professional accreditation scheme for tertiary teachers, to promote effective teaching, increase engagement in professional learning, and realise the clear benefits for the sector.

#### **D. Technologies to support teaching and learning**

In relation to MOOCs and online learning, we note one of the recommendations in the recently released report of the MIT Online Education Policy Initiative was to:

*"Promote Online as an Important Facilitator in Higher Education...*

*... we conclude that there are a number of significant and unique affordances provided by online education. These affordances allow for customization of learning, remote collaboration, just-in-time scenarios, continuous assessment and blended learning. They also importantly have the potential to support teachers, and to provide them with valuable insights into their students' learning.*

*We find digital technologies can play a significant role as an education enabler by providing a dynamic digital scaffold..... We do not imply here that technology should or will replace teachers. In fact, we find that the evidence supports the intuitive sense that teachers are essential to learning in ways that a computer program can never be: by providing context and mentoring, and fostering reflection and discussion. We argue and recommend that new technologies should instead be used to support teachers and allow them to free up time from conveying content to focus on high-value in-person interactions with students. This approach aligns with the principles of blended learning, where technologies and teachers cooperate across online and in-person spaces. We find that blended learning can enhance learning, and requires reorganizing the learning experience to apply the different strengths of online and face-to-face learning." (Willcox, Sarma & Lippel, 2016, p.10)*

This (and many other studies and reports) provides convincing evidence of the potential of online / digital education to enhance the on-campus experience and enable learner engagement, when used appropriately in the context of innovative pedagogy and adequate support.

*Recommendation:*

- D1) Provide more support and funding to institutions for the development of blended learning to enhance student engagement and shift teachers towards high-value, in-person interactions with all students.

#### **E. Challenges for NZ higher education**

The international student market is mobile and quite volatile. New Zealand, with its high level of exposure to natural hazards, is particularly at risk of international student flight in case of an event (as evidenced after the Christchurch earthquake). Given that international student fees are now an integral and critical part of a university budget (rather than an extra) this is a substantial financial risk. International students have a significant impact on student support services. [Q28, Q44]

Harmonising with international systems, in particular the Bologna system would be beneficial. Currently, the New Zealand undergraduate workload is 3600 hours. In Europe, this is 4500 hours. There is a distinct risk that the newly introduced one-year, 180-point Master's degrees will not be considered equivalent to a European Master's degree. [Q52]

In terms of academic diversity, student enrolments determine the offerings. Low enrolment courses are cut as they are deemed too expensive. A disadvantage is that small specialties are being starved, and new course and programme offerings inhibited, as worth is solely determined by monetary factors. [Q71] The value-added of a qualification is increasingly determined by (externally imposed) economic factors. However, what determines student success is ultimately decided by the student him or herself. In that respect, examining data from the Graduate Longitudinal Survey New Zealand is very valuable. [Q30]

The focus on Educational Performance Indicators (EPIs) by the government, and its associated use in league tables, has the potential to pit the economic interests of the organization against maintaining high academic standards. Three out of four EPIs for universities (successful completion of courses; completion of qualifications; student progression to higher level study; students retained in study) can in theory be mitigated by grade inflation. Though there is no evidence of this actually occurring, members have reported increased pressure to pass students.

Dr Barbara Kensington-Miller, Chair  
Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia  
New Zealand Branch  
[b.kensington-miller@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:b.kensington-miller@auckland.ac.nz)

Branch committee members:

Rob Wass (Secretary)	<a href="mailto:rob.wass@otago.ac.nz">rob.wass@otago.ac.nz</a>
Erik Brogt (Treasurer)	<a href="mailto:erik.brogt@canterbury.ac.nz">erik.brogt@canterbury.ac.nz</a>
Jennie Billot	<a href="mailto:jbillot@aut.ac.nz">jbillot@aut.ac.nz</a>
Nell Buissink	<a href="mailto:nell.buissink@aut.ac.nz">nell.buissink@aut.ac.nz</a>
Tanya Evans	<a href="mailto:t.evans@auckland.ac.nz">t.evans@auckland.ac.nz</a>
Stanley Frielick	<a href="mailto:stanley.frielick@aut.ac.nz">stanley.frielick@aut.ac.nz</a>
Nikki Going	<a href="mailto:lsm@freedom-ihe.ac.nz">lsm@freedom-ihe.ac.nz</a>
Clinton Golding	<a href="mailto:clinton.golding@otago.ac.nz">clinton.golding@otago.ac.nz</a>
Julia Hallas	<a href="mailto:jhallas@aut.ac.nz">jhallas@aut.ac.nz</a>
Tony Harland	<a href="mailto:tony.harland@otago.ac.nz">tony.harland@otago.ac.nz</a>
Eva Heinrich	<a href="mailto:E.Heinrich@massey.ac.nz">E.Heinrich@massey.ac.nz</a>
John Milne	<a href="mailto:J.D.Milne@massey.ac.nz">J.D.Milne@massey.ac.nz</a>
Chris Naughton	<a href="mailto:chris.naughton@nztertiarycollege.ac.nz">chris.naughton@nztertiarycollege.ac.nz</a>
Kathryn Sutherland	<a href="mailto:Kathryn.Sutherland@vuw.ac.nz">Kathryn.Sutherland@vuw.ac.nz</a>

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