

3rd May 2016

Submission to the Productivity Commission on ‘New models of tertiary education’

This submission is written by two members of the Ako Aotearoa Academy of Tertiary Teaching Excellence, which is comprised of winners of National Tertiary Teaching Awards. This submission is from us, as individual Academy members, and we do not claim that our views are representative of our employer, the University of Canterbury.

1 Innovation and value: the report has a heavy emphasis on ‘innovation’, which is defined (page xi) as ‘The process of translating an idea or invention into a good or service that has value’. The Commission has been asked to ‘consider how innovative “new models” can help the [tertiary] system respond positively’ to ‘big trends’. The terms of reference ‘suggest that there is currently “considerable inertia” in the New Zealand system, and an unwillingness to try new things’ (page 1).

The definition of innovation used here, and which underlies the report throughout, is therefore instrumental. It suggests that the role of education is ‘linear’: new models produce new ways to produce new outputs. What this model does not do is to discuss what is meant by ‘value’, even though this is the criterion by which innovation is defined.

2 Instrumental and transformative values: the tertiary education system embodies at least two sets of values: those that are ‘instrumental’ (eg preparing students for employment) and those that are ‘transformative’ (eg enabling students not just to learn but *how to learn*). At the heart of this distinction is the question of *whose values?* The instrumental answer is to focus on immediate or medium term benefit; the transformative answer is to prepare students for long-term benefits for individual and societal gain.

Giving students access to as many ideas as possible encourages innovation but not necessarily in immediately measurable ways. It opens up thinking, options, and creativity in ways that training for specific forms of innovation cannot do.

3 Context matters: today’s students are being educated at a time of greater uncertainty and risk than previous generations, when many things that were previously taken-for-granted, such a stable career, and stable supply of good jobs and a stable climate, no longer exist. Students need to be sufficiently flexible to construct ‘portfolio careers’. Training for short or medium term outputs is not sufficient in this context. Rather the traditional educative values of curiosity, adaptability, questioning, analytical ability and self empowerment will be critical for long term personal and societal innovation.

From these starting points, we wish to comment on questions 14, 15 and 16 in particular.

4 Questions 14 and 15. As Academy members we have been celebrated and rewarded for our effective teaching and commitment to student success. The hallmarks of excellent teachers are well documented: passionate about their subject, enthusiastic, communicative, responsive, dedicated,

accessible, confident in learner abilities, and so on. These attributes lead to effective learning because they support inspiring and productive relationships between teachers and learners. The provision of high-value tertiary education relies on effective teaching, with clear learning goals. We suggest that the two most critical means *to make for effective teaching* and *to improve teaching effectiveness* at an institutional level are:

- a package of professional development of teaching that fosters high-quality staff-student relationships, is a centrepiece of institutional culture that staff willingly engage with, and are obliged to report on; and
- the development of clear graduate profiles, that articulate the capabilities that graduates of each institution and programme will have and are backed by learning outcome statements that are assessed.

In our experience, the most effective institutional strategies for measuring, improving and recognizing teaching effectiveness are based on a “peer development” or “mentoring” model. This requires all teachers to engage actively in an ongoing cycle of peer appraisal, reflection, refinement and record keeping. This kind of model results in an active process of improvement, as the obligation to reflect on teaching “closes the loop”, maximizing the likelihood that beneficial innovations are built on in the future. In turn, the recording and reflection also contributes to annual professional development/review conversations, promotion applications, teaching portfolios, and award nominations.

5 Question 16. Student evaluations of teaching (SETs) are widely used in two ways, which can be at odds with each other. For teachers, they are most valuable as a formative tool, giving insight into what is and is not working, and how best to adapt teaching content and style to a particular class. For institutions and (sometimes) students, they can be seen more as a summative tool, to identify strong and weak teachers for purposes of further training, reward or penalty (in promotion rounds, for example).

This summative use of SETs can be problematic for staff who wish to obtain formative feedback on their teaching, which is a critical part of the reflective cycle outlined above. We make this (obvious) remark, because we are not confident that that conflated summative and formative roles of SETs are adequately addressed by all institutions.

6 Conclusion: Questions 59, 60, 62 and 72. Our experience as award winning teachers is that it is critical to recognize not only the instrumental role of education, but also its transformative role. Teaching is a relationship between teacher and learner, and has to be measured/understood in that context. The value that results from that relationship unfolds as a contribution to society and the economy over one or more generations. It is not readily measurable in terms of itemized outputs (in contrast, arguably, to research).

We question what evidence is used to describe the tertiary education system as ‘resistant to change’. Although more can undoubtedly be done, over the last fifteen years there has been greatly improved research productivity at the same time as institutions have given far more attention to recognizing and celebrating teaching quality. In this context, the capacity of staff to continually innovate depends on time, including time for reflection on practice.

We recommend that the most significant contribution to improving teaching effectiveness is to require institutions to have operative graduate profiles (at institutional, programme and course level) against which effective peer-to-peer development of teaching practice can take place, and that this needs to be reported on at each level in order to ‘close the loop’.



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