

New Models of Tertiary Education

Focus Group Evaluation

Prepared for the Productivity Commission by
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Context

The Commission submitted its final report, *New Models of Tertiary Education*, in March 2017 and is now conducting an evaluation of its performance. The evaluation includes: a focus group of inquiry participants; a survey of inquiry participants; an independent expert evaluation; and administrative data.

This report presents the results of two focus groups held on 10 and 17 May 2017 with the following participants:

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| Chris Gosling | Weltec/Whitireia |
| Chris Whelan | Universities New Zealand |
| Murray Johnson | Tertiary Education Commission |
| Josh Williams | Industry Training Federation |
| Karen Vaughan | New Zealand Council for Educational Research |
| Neil Miller | Quality Tertiary Institutions |
| Carrie Murdoch | Business NZ |
| Stanley Frielick | Ako Aotearoa |
| John MacCormick | Ministry of Education |
| Murray Bain | Open Polytechnic |
| Charles Sedgwick | Tertiary Education Union |
| Jo Scott | Tertiary Education Union |

Input was also gathered through separate phone interviews with Grant Klinkum of NZQA and Colin McGregor of ACE Aotearoa (who weren't able to attend the focus group sessions in person).

It is important to note that no attempt was made to reach a consensus among the participants and, as a result, some of the comments conflict with others.

The focus groups and phone interviews were conducted with reference to the Commission's performance measures which are listed below and considered in turn in the body of the report.

1. The **focus** of the inquiry report (the significance of the issues covered, whether they were covered in sufficient depth, and the relevance of information sourced and people engaged with)
2. Satisfaction with the **process management** for the inquiry
3. The **quality** of analysis of information and the quality of the findings and recommendations

4. The quality and effectiveness of the Commission's *engagement* in completing the inquiry
5. The effectiveness of *delivery of message*, as evidenced in the inquiry reports and supporting material (summary reports and supplementary papers).

Concluding comments are set out under the heading "Overall Impact of the Inquiry".

The Focus of the Inquiry

The terms of reference

As the terms of reference are critical to any inquiry, focus group participants made a number of observations about them. The terms of reference established that –

"The focus of the inquiry would be on how trends, especially in technology, tuition costs, skill demand, demography and internationalisation, may drive changes in business models and delivery models in the tertiary sector."

Comments on the breadth of the terms of reference included –

- that the breadth was appropriate and the only thing the Commission did not do was to describe new models
- that the terms of reference were really good
- that it may have been a good idea for the Commission to renegotiate the terms of reference as it progressed to keep the inquiry manageable
- that it was hard for the Commission to look at the whole system if student support was excluded, as this is an essential component of the system.

Although the strength of the comment varied, many had hoped to see more from the Commission about what the sector would look like in 10 years. While accepting there was no 'silver bullet', some participants felt that the Commission could have done more to describe what new models might emerge in future. This could have been done by referencing current developments, or by more analysis of what was likely to emerge if the Commission's recommendations were implemented.

However another view was that the Commission didn't know what the sector should look like in the future and instead had focussed on measures to reduce the current level of government control and let providers and students have a much greater influence.

One participant commented that the inquiry had been a moving feast with the terms of reference signalling a certain direction and the draft report heading in a somewhat different direction, making it unclear what was trying to be achieved.

Issues covered in sufficient depth?

It was acknowledged that to examine every part of what is a complex sector was a huge undertaking for the Commission. However, the inquiry perhaps covered too much, and would have benefitted from more prioritisation and sifting of the issues. Some participants thought that, to deliver advice on the future state of the system, the Commission should have given more attention to the impact of the current system.

One focus group member expressed the view that the report didn't address the basics of the funding system. However others felt the Commission had given considerable attention to funding, the associated incentives, and the way it creates barriers to innovation.

Aspects of the inquiry that some identified as needing more attention were:

- topics raised in the Issues Paper (eg massification) were important but not adequately followed up
- vocational education
- the roles of the government agencies involved in the tertiary sector and whether or not those were being done well. (For example, some felt that the Commission's inquiry would not have been needed if the agencies responsible for policy advice on the sector had been delivering.)
- life-long learning.

Relevance of information sourced and people engaged with

One participant's comment was that the Commission had sourced comprehensive information from the right people. Also, the efforts made by the Commission to engage with staff, instead of relying only on management, were appreciated. It was noted that providing input within an organisation which was then filtered into an organisational submission was not always worthwhile. However the opportunity was there for individuals to make submissions and many did.

However there was a view that the students' perspective didn't come through and that the Commission could have done more to engage with student organisations.

A number of participants had expected to see more consideration of tertiary education systems in other countries and felt that would have been a highly valuable input.

Process Management

Some of the comments on the Commission's process management were:

- it was exemplary with lots of points at which people could comment
- the Commissioners and staff really made themselves available
- the Commission was good at coming back for clarification
- the Commission communicated well with participants throughout the process
- the Commission talked to people about what is actually happening in the sector.

Some thought that the forums conducted on the Issues Paper and the Draft Report were good but perhaps tried to cover too much. Several shorter engagements on specific issues might have been even better for some groups, especially those with a less detailed knowledge of the sector.

A number of participants thought that the engagement was largely conducted on a bi-lateral basis and that the inquiry would have benefitted from more multi-lateral engagement, such as the groups gathered for the Focus Group process. Bi-lateral engagement, together with the extensive use of submission quotes in the reports, had encouraged each sub-sector to focus mainly on its own perspectives and interests instead of the system-wide picture:

- is our voice in the document?
- what does the draft report mean for us?
- what would make the system work better for us?

Some thought that the reliance on bi-lateral engagement contributed to the final report being focussed at the micro level rather than the system level. It also may have led to the emphasis in the recommendations on removing constraints on providers.

It was suggested that the process would have benefitted from more opportunities for different parts of the sector to come together to discuss how the tertiary education system works as a whole –

"People didn't get in the same room enough."

Another suggestion was for the Commission to test its thinking with one or more expert or reference groups – particularly just prior to finalising the main documents.

A comment was made about the 3-week delay in the publication of the final report – this made people wonder what was going on behind the scenes. It would have been better to allow more time for the final report and ensure the deadline was met.

It was helpful having the document on the history of the sector available early in the inquiry. It would have made it easier if other pieces of work on specific topics were also released along the way. Another useful document was the report on research into ethnic disparities in bachelor qualifications published earlier this year.

Quality of Analysis, Findings and Recommendations

Quality of analysis

Many favourable comments were made about the quality of the Commission's work –

"They dug into the issues and thought them through really well."

"They came back with really good questions about what we had provided. For us, that reinforced they were doing a good job."

"It was the right debate even if I didn't agree with all of the recommendations"

"It will be relevant for the next decade"

"An excellent job – these comments are just tweaks."

The Commission was congratulated on pulling together, for the first time, in one document, a comprehensive description of what is a very complex system. The need to do this before starting to analyse the issues made the Commission's task particularly difficult –

"They've done a really impressive job of describing the whole system."

"It's a resource for the future – people will have it on their desks to refer to."

Several focus group participants agreed that the Commission had done a good job of diagnosing the problems –

"There is a high quality analysis of what is wrong"

"It's the first time I've seen systems thinking applied to the tertiary sector."

One comment was that the Commission had confronted the 'elephant in the room' by saying that the problem was with the system, not the providers.

While participants understood that submitters like to see their voice and submissions reflected back, it was suggested that the Commission should do more to evaluate the material from submissions before including it as quotes in the Commission's reports.

Comment on ideology

A strong comment from one focus group was that the report seemed to rely on a particular ideology and that this should have been stated up-front. The ideology appeared to be that a permissive environment for providers, together with well-informed consumers, would lead to the best outcomes from the tertiary sector. One person described this as a

relatively standard “informed free market approach” – if providers are not shackled and consumers are informed then positive outcomes ensue.

Most participants in that focus group did not seem to share the Commission’s confidence that those conditions were sufficient for a successful sector. While there was an acceptance that the Commission could use whatever ideology it liked, a number of group members expressed the view that the conclusions in the final report hadn’t been established by the evidence in the report.

For example, one participant commented that the Commission placed a lot of reliance on student choice to direct what is provided in what quantity in the sector. However there was a lot of evidence that giving students information, as recommended by the Commission, is not enough for them to play this role effectively.

A contrary view was that each recommendation could be traced back into the report to see what supported it.

Nature and quality of the recommendations

It was noted that the recommendations varied a great deal, with some being very significant and some being very minor, however all appeared to be given equal weight in the way they were presented. It was suggested that the Commission might want to cover fewer issues in more depth, or separate off the minor recommendations so they don’t distract from the key issues.

While agreeing with this point, one participant noted he had already made use of one of the minor recommendations so would not want these to be lost but it would be useful to separate them out, eg in an appendix.

The Commission was given credit for putting forward recommendations that were unlikely to be politically acceptable. Some of the recommendations were challenging and it is to be expected that calls for change will be met with strong reactions. Similarly, the Commission had demonstrated its independence by going beyond its terms of reference, notably in relation to student support (loans and allowances).

Some participants weren’t sure that the recommendations were a coherent response to the problems the Commission identified, and found it difficult to see what the result would be if all of the recommendations were implemented. Another comment was that the Commission had identified the administration and regulation of the system as the problem, but had not addressed how to fix that.

Lastly, there was very little in the way of recommendations for business or other organisations outside government. This could have been useful, although the Commission may have thought it beyond its scope.

Engagement

Many were impressed with the way the Commission had engaged with their organisations and listened to what they had to say –

"This was the best consultation process I have ever been involved in."

"I would score the Commission really highly on engagement."

"The face-to-face meetings, their in-depth analysis of the material we provided... I couldn't ask for more really."

"They were very accessible, it was easy to get involved, and they were good listeners."

"They started with a clean sheet."

The Commission was also complimented on its website, presentations and willingness to participate in forums. Judy Kavanagh, the Inquiry Director was complimented on the way she emailed regularly to keep in touch and by one participant for her impressive presentation to a group representing a subsector. Sally Davenport also received praise for her presentation about navigating the system from the student perspective.

On the other hand, one person thought that while the Commission was very open and engaging, the discussion they had with the Commission did not translate through into the final report.

One person had a less positive engagement meeting, with confusion over what was to be discussed, who should attend, and what the desired outcome was for the meeting. With better communication beforehand, the meeting could have been much more useful.

Delivery of Message

Final report

There were a range of views on the final report, with some saying it was overly-long, one person likening it to a background document, and another saying:

"The final report was way too long and detailed. If the Commission wants to make a difference it needs to make the material more accessible. It needs to prioritise what goes in and what's left out."

One participant said they had expected the final report to be shorter than the Issues Paper as the Commission came to a view on the key findings and tightened-up on key conclusions and recommendations.

Some thought that the length of the report would not suit government ministers and two people talked about having to summarise the material for others in their organisation because they felt the summary documents didn't do this job.

However others were quite satisfied with the final report with several people having read the entire document. They were comfortable with the length of it and thought it was quite easy to find particular topics of interest. The colour-coding worked well to help navigate the report. A number of people had found the 1-page 'At a glance' and the 'Overview' useful for certain audiences, including for briefing management.

To appeal to more audiences, the Commission could consider:

- doing more upfront to emphasise systemic issues – such as that education is co-produced by students and teachers – and to tell a story about the rigidities in the system that inhibit innovation
- adding more interest to the overview by including some of the good diagrams in the final report
- breaking the content up into specific issues using communities of interest, or themes to make it easier for people to engage, particularly those with less knowledge of the sector
- releasing these progressively
- using stories of students with different backgrounds to illustrate various pathways through the system, and life-long learning
- adding hyperlinks to the online version to make navigation even easier.

It was noted that different chapters had different authors and some thought this had affected the coherence of the reports, with no single lens across all of the issues. It was suggested that an independent editor be used to help address this.

While the Commission intended to take a comprehensive view of the system, some noted that the definition of 'system' was not used consistently through the reports. Sometimes it meant 'tertiary education providers', sometimes it meant 'tertiary education organisations', and sometimes it meant 'the system as a whole'. This was a bit confusing and meant people had to go back and check exactly what was intended. It also reinforced the problem of the parts of the sector not being seen together as a whole system.

On the positive side of that issue, the Commission was congratulated on gradually bringing ITOs into their considerations. The fact that they were initially left-out highlighted that ITOs are classified as a separate group and not always seen as part of the tertiary education sector. Ultimately the ITOs were pleased to be able to see themselves in the final report.

The graphs worked very well for colour-blind readers – which is apparently not usually the case.

Media coverage of the inquiry

Focus group members thought the final report was not media-friendly and one person commented that the Commission didn't seem to have thought about what they wanted the media to do with the inquiry material.

The size of the report and the short timeframe that commentators had to respond also meant that the press releases from the sector were predictable and narrowly focussed. There wasn't enough time to digest the report and formulate a more considered response, and this was unhelpful for getting the most out of the inquiry.

As it turned out, the press focussed on aspects that were most likely to be of interest to the public – interest on loans, abolish UE – and missed the more substantive findings:

"The student loans issue took up all the oxygen".

Sequencing the release of the recommendations might have avoided the attention being diverted away from the main substance of the report.

A group member was appreciative of the embargoed copies, together with the list of which journalists had received them.

Wider dissemination

One person felt there needed to be a wider debate –

"What does the public make of it? This affects all New Zealanders."

However another person commented that they didn't think it was really the Commission's job to engage the general public.

Overall Impact of the Inquiry

Regardless of what changes are ultimately implemented, many people thought the inquiry had already made a positive impact:

- by presenting a comprehensive description of the system as a whole which would be a resource for years to come
- by highlighting the need for people from different parts of the sector to work together
- by holding workshops where people could debate the issues, and stimulating discussions in ministers' offices and in the media, the inquiry had given people the opportunity to think about the issues differently -

"Taking stakeholders on the journey is the real prize".

The members of one focus group spent time discussing what happens after the Commission delivers its report, ie the government's response and how the work would be taken forward. The inquiry was a big investment, not only of the Commission's time, but the time of all those who engaged, read reports, made submissions and so on. There were a number of very good recommendations and things that could be done, but it was unclear what would happen next. A conference, to be convened after the government responds, was suggested as one way to take the Commission's work forward.

Another suggestion was that it would be helpful to clarify the status of the Commission's report, as some in the sector are under the impression they now need to implement the recommendations that apply to them.

One person had a sense that unfortunately nothing much would happen as a result of the inquiry. He thought the inquiry could have had more impact if the Commission had prioritised the issues, dropped a lot of the detail, and made the report more cohesive.

Some participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to provide feedback through the focus group process, and another person wanted to thank the Commission for its work on the inquiry.

A final comment was that the value of the inquiry would be measured in the future, by the difference it makes to students.