



**National Council of
Women of New Zealand**

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Wahine O Aotearoa

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**Submission to the Ministry of Education
on the Draft Education Strategy 2010 – 2015**

The National Council of Women of New Zealand (NCWNZ) is an umbrella organisation representing 50 nationally organised societies and national members. It has 26 branches throughout the country attended by representatives of those societies and some 150 other societies as well as individual members. The Council's function is to serve women, the family and the community at local, national and international levels through research, study, discussion and action.

Education, especially for women, has been one of the major concerns of NCWNZ since the Council's inception in 1896, and NCWNZ has a considerable number of policies which have contributed in many ways to Education issues since that time. In the short time available for consultation, NCWNZ canvassed its Education Standing Committee and nationwide membership for their responses to the issues raised. The submission has also been reviewed by a member of the NCWNZ Board and the Parliamentary Watch Committee.

The future of tertiary education in New Zealand is of paramount importance for the on-going economic success of the country. Therefore NCWNZ supports any move to enhance the relevance and efficiency of the tertiary education sector so that it meets the needs of all students, the labour market and the economy. NCWNZ has recent policy, 5.3.9.1 – 'That NCWNZ urge the government to ensure that gender impact assessments be undertaken before planning changes to the tertiary education sector, to secure women from disadvantage.' (2001).

The members of the Education Standing Committee who have compiled this submission, had some difficulty responding to the feedback questions as the draft did not give sufficient information on how much funding would be available, how the funding would be distributed or how improvements would be assessed.

Specific Comments to the questions provided by the Ministry of Education:

Part 1: Strategic direction

1.2 Vision for tertiary education

The aim of the Strategy applies to all New Zealanders. That is commendable but the decrease in Adult Community Education funding deprives some of the poorest New Zealanders of the chance to get to the first rung where their confidence is developed for the next stage. Consequently the aim of providing for all New Zealanders is made impossible at the very start. The proposed approach will help to realise the Governments 3-5 year priorities only if there is adequate funding for staffing and resources.





The strategy has a very limited focus on marketable skills, with no value placed on education as a private and public good, which benefits society by helping people develop as individuals in a community. The approach to education is almost totally utilitarian, with only passing reference to the environment, social issues etc. There is nothing about fostering an enquiring mind, a love of learning, an ability to think “outside the square”. Many people would consider these ideas to be a necessary part of a vision for a tertiary education strategy.

Part 2: Priorities

2.1 Government’s tertiary education priorities for the next 3-5 years

The strategy is too narrow; looking at people under 25 or adults with high literacy needs. Many older people may need to retrain because their job is no longer available. Many adults also take on postgraduate studies after they have been in the workforce and have gained valuable experience. However a focus on more success for young people is to be commended. By getting younger people into higher level qualifications, especially Maori and Pasifika, increased success in transitions from school to tertiary and lifting the basic skill levels of adult learners are fine goals that NCWNZ can wholeheartedly support.

2.2 How the priorities will be achieved

‘Low -quality qualifications’ are to be discontinued to fund those of higher quality. This move begs many questions. Why do some have low completion rates? Is the course poorly taught but important enough to fund better tutoring? The reference to better labour market outcomes suggests that only those leading to paid employment have value. Cost cutting today in education will represent extra costs in the future, in terms of unemployment, hence lower tax revenue, and a higher crime rate with all its associated costs. Only through increased investment can the problem of low achievement at the school leaver stage be addressed.

Question 1: Will the proposed approach to targeting (2.2.1), improving system performance (2.2.2), and supporting high quality research (2.2.3), help realise the Government’s 3-5 year priorities?

This question is difficult to respond to as the paper is very much a set of goals, and there is very little indication of which approaches will be taken and how these goals will be achieved. The current situation and associated factors/problems are analysed, but this analysis often states the obvious and the paper does not go on to what happens next, except in very general terms.

2.2.1 Targeting priority groups

Targeting:

Targeting means a tighter budget. There is, furthermore, a suggestion that student fees will be increased. Putting students under greater financial pressure will drive them to work more part-time hours while they study, jeopardising their ability to complete courses in a thorough and timely fashion. This could impede achievement of the Government’s aim to see qualification completion in the shortest possible time. Also, if students are going to be faced with increased costs, this will be particularly disadvantageous to women, especially more mature women, returning to tertiary study and the trained workforce following time out for family responsibilities.

Achieving qualifications:

Why do Maori and Pasifika students have lower completion rates than others? Are the courses irrelevant to their interests? Are they sufficiently supported by well-trained tutors? Is there enough face-to-face contact with tutors? Are the groups too large for students to feel involved? Many students from these groups feel alienated by large classes, impersonal lecture rooms, and tutorials with too many students for each to have a say. (And many tertiary tutors use tutorials as another



lecture rather than a genuine tutorial.) Family encouragement is another factor and may involve some personal contact between the families and tutors. Smaller classes and personal tutoring implies redirection of funding.

Moving successfully from school:

The fees-free tertiary study for 16 and 17 year-olds is a step in the right direction, though it is feared that funding for this will come at the expense of cuts to some other group.

Greater financial support will certainly help younger students on to community education and/or tertiary study. However to focus too narrowly misses the important point that literacy and numeracy are not necessarily well taught in isolation, but may be greatly improved through purposeful, skills / practical courses such as carpentry, mechanics, tailoring, print-making – which all require measurement, calculation, reading instructions, and so on.

These can then provide essential stepping-stones into trade qualification courses. Through these introductory courses, students can learn life skills and build self-esteem. Tutor training or the employment of trained people alongside the specialist lecturers to support these approaches is also valuable.

While this strategy may not necessarily provide an immediate boost to the economy, it could serve to prevent a drain on economic resources by dysfunctional members of society at a later date, ensuring that a greater percentage young people will emerge as employed, taxpaying citizens.

2.2.2 Improving system performance

Some of the approaches listed should help to achieve this e.g. enhance quality assurance. NCWNZ also approves the intention to reduce the proliferation of ‘provider’ qualifications, which are often too limited to be portable.

NCWNZ supports the statement that students’ success will improve with ‘higher quality learning and teaching’ but the ‘demands of industry’ can often narrow the focus to short-term utility. There are reported cases where a ‘classical’ education – logic, history, mathematics, philosophy, a foreign language – was preferred over direct ‘relevance’ for recruitment into high-level IT and policy posts, and in British accountancy firms, there are examples of technical and operational skills being integrated with relevant experience. Such broader aspects should be at least part of the mix for anyone going beyond basic skills level.

Provide incentives for providers to respond better to students and market signals:

“The system will reward providers who respond to market signals, including the changing skill needs of industries.” There is wide agreement that jobs that people will do in future have often not yet been thought of! Education should produce people who have sets of skills, knowledge, attitudes etc which will enable them to go on acquiring further and different skills as the need arises. Emphasis on responding to “market signals” will not help the Government achieve the priorities it has set out in this paper. The danger is that courses will be provided for a market that has changed considerably by the time the course has been developed and the student has completed it!

“Linking funding more closely to performance” – what does this mean? Will this approach limit academic freedom and the integrity of tertiary institutions? While we applaud in principle the emphasis on accountability, efficiency and the measurement of quality we are concerned about the ability of tertiary institutions to retain their autonomy and academic freedom in the face of the constraints to be placed on them to achieve accountability, efficiency and quality.



Publishing the findings of external reviews and linking funding to performance needs very careful design, that takes the nature of the 'catchments' and social context into account. Improvements should be measured against the baseline for each institution, rather than by ranking institutions against each other.

2.2.3 Supporting high quality research that helps to drive innovation

Supporting high quality research is laudable but implementing the fruits of research especially in education is enormously difficult and it depends on adequate funding. The people who implement and apply research need to understand it thoroughly and can usually only do that by becoming researchers themselves for which there needs to be funding. Implementing ideas is not as simple as implementing a scientific formula or mechanical invention.

The PBRF, while possibly helping 'promote quality improvements', has also had some negative effects, especially by building a culture of prioritising research over teaching when institutions are compared. There is also a danger of fostering abstract or 'pure' research over applied research. Different disciplines lend themselves to different models of research; 'action research' and case studies, often essential for practical improvements in student-tutor interactions, do not lend themselves to publication in more highly-ranked Journals, and may thus be perceived as less worthy of funding.

Question 2: Do the Government's expectations of providers and industry training organisations (3.1) accurately and fully reflect the contribution these sub-sectors and the sector as a whole, can make to realising this strategy?

There is a limit to what Government can expect of providers and industry training organisations. In addressing the most difficult problem of all – low educational achievement, poor reading and numeric skills among many school leavers – government initiative is required to offer a constructive and comprehensive programme. Introducing National Standards in primary schools goes some way to alleviating this problem.

The Government's proposals to improve provider delivery (p. 9) sound exactly like the policy applied to schools in the late 1980s and 1990. Make educational institutions competitive and the market will sort it all out. It did not work for schools and it will not work for tertiary institutions, which will only select the best students who are already succeeding and create an even more elitist system. Tertiary institutions will no doubt be restricted in the numbers of students they can take. Who will provide for the less able? Students will be disadvantaged with providers not willing to take on students who have a higher risk of dropping out.

NCWNZ notes that the Adult and Community Education providers "will serve learners whose first learning experience was unsuccessful" and "contribute to the overall cohesiveness of the community". But there have been major cuts in funding to this sector! Second chance learning doesn't necessarily start with literacy, language and numeracy. Very often, the learner begins with one of the many programmes that have been derided as "hobby type", but through which the learner gains confidence and moves on to more formal programmes. Restricting funding for ACE programmes to the "3 Rs" will not help these people.



Question 3: Will the early indicators of progress (3.3) provide an accurate indication as to whether or not the system is making progress towards Government's goals for tertiary education?

The early indicators listed are good indicators of progress, but there should be more specific indicators. There is considerable reliance on completion rates as a way of showing effectiveness of the provider, but of course this is likely to lead to lowering of standards in order to achieve completion. There is pressure in this direction already for providers, and it will be exacerbated by this strategic plan.

3.3 Monitoring

If all the indicators showed improved numbers attending and completing courses and qualifications, yes, that would provide early indications of progress. However the people being successful would need to have come from the groups, both female and male who currently are not being successful.

Conclusion

The Tertiary providers can only do what they are adequately funded for which is much less than the Government usually accepts. If the Government is serious about tertiary education, money will be found and excuses about recession will not be made to keep the sector starved of funding to such an extent that the job cannot be done. Under-resourcing, together with undue government interference, especially in universities, could also result in a lowering of standards and consequent loss of international recognition of New Zealand qualifications.

Ideology alone will not be enough to solve the social and economic problems of country and if the causes of the lack of progress are consistently wrongly identified by politicians and policy makers, by 2015 we will be no further ahead. It is important that learning opportunities continue to be accessible; that learning tasks continue to be enjoyable, challenging and successful; and that people, as they mature, gain confidence to engage in relevant lifelong learning and contribute in their personal, social and economic lives to the quality of life in the nation.

NCWNZ members thank the Ministry of Education for the opportunity to make comments on this discussion document.

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