

SUBMISSION ON DRAFT TERTIARY EDUCATION STRATEGY 2010-2015

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1.0 Introduction

This submission reviews the draft strategy as it affects adult learners in general and in particular learners and practitioners in adult and community education (ACE). It is written from the perspective of someone who is committed to adult learning and community education in all their forms.

The submission identifies a number of positive features of the document. However much of the submission focuses on its limitations. These include the lack of recognition of organisations such as the WEAs, the apparent lack of appreciation of the potential benefits and breadth of scope of ACE, the limited understanding of adult learners and their learning, including their achievements in ACE programmes and in formal tertiary studies, and the apparent failure to recognise that the contributions of tertiary education institutions should go beyond the constraints of credentialing and include ACE programmes which are credential-free.

The submission argues that several of these limitations are likely to reduce the probability of achieving the objectives set out in the document and the paper concludes with a summary which includes some key recommendations.

2.0 Positive features of the document

From this perspective the document contains several positive features. It notes that the government places a high priority on learners (including literacy, language and numeracy learners) who have not been well served in the past, as well as giving priority to those forms of ACE which ‘contribute to the overall cohesiveness of the community’.

The document refers to the need to improve the quality of teaching and learning for ‘second-chance learners’ in order to raise completion rates. It also mentions the role of ‘informal education provided by the adult and community education sector’ as well as ‘lower-level tertiary study’ in providing an avenue or pathway back into formal education.

It states that government will:

- ‘reduce the proliferation of provider qualifications .. [and] prioritise qualifications that link strongly to higher-level learning and skilled employment’,
- ‘continue to work with providers to embed literacy, language and numeracy in level one to three qualifications .. [and] continue to support intensive literacy programmes in workplaces’,
- ‘expect adult and community education providers to focus on second chance and foundation learners, including a higher proportion of Māori, Pasifika and speakers of languages other than English.’ (p 8)

Other positive features of the document are the inclusiveness of its vision and its recognition of the importance of assisting more Māori and Pasifika people to achieve

especially at higher levels, encouraging more young people to engage in tertiary education, and assisting more adult learners to gain the literacy, language and numeracy skills for higher level study or skilled employment.

3.0 Limitations

From the perspective referred to earlier, however, the document also has a number of major limitations or negative features. As I see it, these limitations may arise out of a lack of familiarity with the research, practice and provision of adult learning and education in general and adult and community education in particular. In any case one consequence of these limitations is that the government's own objectives are unlikely be achieved. They include the following.

3.1 Lack of recognition of OTEPs

Firstly, OTEPs, which are Other Tertiary Education Providers recognised under Section 321 of the Education Act 1989, are referred to only very briefly in the document in the context of a sentence describing tertiary education organisations in the document (p 11). There is no other reference to them. This seems extraordinary since several of these community organisations including such organisations as the WEAs currently make highly significant and unique contributions to tertiary education and in particular to adult and community education. It is even more extraordinary if it is recognised that many of these contributions by the WEA are closely aligned with the government's own stated priorities and equity concerns.

3.2 Limited appreciation of the potential benefits and breadth of scope of ACE

Secondly, the document fails to identify or recognise sufficiently clearly the wide range of benefits of ACE and the potential breadth of scope of the contributions of ACE providers. The government's statement of priorities for ACE providers is very much narrower than that set by the previous government for the period 2008-2010. Two of the previous priorities - 'encouraging lifelong learning' and 'strengthening communities by meeting identified community needs' - have been dropped, and the current draft document states that the government expects them to:

- 'engage learners who have not been well served by education in the past
- 'increase literacy, language and numeracy skills for individuals and whānau
- 'contribute to the overall cohesiveness of the community.' (p 13)

As indicated earlier, it is encouraging to note that the government places a high priority on learners (including literacy, language and numeracy learners) who have not been well served in the past, as well as giving priority to those forms of ACE which contribute to the overall cohesiveness of the community. On the other hand, any narrowing of the 'curriculum' and the apparent lack of recognition of the value of the diverse benefits of ACE provision is likely to have unfortunate consequences.

There is strong research evidence which points to the considerable benefits to be gained from broadening rather than narrowing the scope of ACE. These benefits, which are even more important in difficult economic times than in times of full-employment, include the following: social & cultural benefits (including family & community benefits), educational (including inter-generational) benefits, health (including public health and disease prevention) benefits, benefits in relation to crime prevention and reduction (including the rehabilitation of offenders), economic

benefits (including employment creation) and political benefits (including those of active citizenship and participation).

These benefits, some of which are explicit, direct and planned while others are implicit, indirect and secondary, derive from a wide range of programmes and activities. These include literacy, language, numeracy and other foundation programmes but they also include programmes some of which may be labelled as 'hobby and personal interest classes'.

3.3 Limited understandings of adult learners and their learning

Thirdly, the document betrays limited understanding of the nature of adult learning and of the needs and interests of the learners with whom the government expects ACE providers to engage. As a consequence the strategy as drafted here is unlikely to succeed in meeting the government's own objectives.

There is, as we have seen, a focus on targeting certain categories of learners and potential learners. Some levels of targeting of resources may indeed be necessary. However, as mentioned in the previous section, the evidence suggests that there are real dangers in relying on targeting population groups on the basis of alleged deficits which all-too-readily become self-fulfilling prophecies. There is a substantial body of research which highlights the fact that people's learning motivations, interests and approaches to different kinds of learning as well as their perceptions of themselves as learners are all too varied and contextual to conform readily with any simple stereotypes or models of provision determined at a national level or by other authorities. People develop their own learning priorities which do not always fit with priorities ascribed to them by external authorities. Moreover people's interests, attitudes and perceptions change in the course of participating in programmes, making it problematic to define in advance satisfactory performance levels or even course completion rates.

Special literacy, numeracy and foundation classes of various kinds are badly needed if 'second chance' or even 'first chance' adults are to achieve their goals. But these will never be enough. Researchers and practitioners have long since recognised that there are many different literacies and that a range of approaches including a diversity of content and themes is essential even to achieve the limited goal of promoting 'literacy, numeracy or foundation skills'.

3.4 Limited recognition of achievements of older adults in tertiary education

Fourthly, with regard to formal studies, it seems that the achievements of adults may be underestimated in the document which contains little acknowledgement of the relatively high levels of achievement of adults over 25 or 30 who return to formal studies.

The government wants to have more young people engaged in tertiary education. This is well and good. However, the document goes on to compare older and younger students. It is argued that 'those who enrol in tertiary education directly from school are more likely to complete a qualification than students who enter from the workforce or unemployment ... Targeting young people can therefore improve the return on public funding.' The evidence on this is however not convincing. There is in fact considerable evidence to suggest that adults over the age of 30 who return to study are likely to perform almost as effectively (and with some academic support and training) even more effectively than their younger counterparts straight from school.

3.5 Limited recognition of the potential scope and contributions of tertiary institutions

Fifthly, in my opinion, the view of tertiary education reflected in the draft strategy is a limited one. It is based on an understanding of tertiary education which is almost entirely dominated by its credentialing and labour market functions. It assumes that almost all forms of state-funded tertiary education can and should be based on a qualifications framework which reflects a hierarchy of knowledge and skills.

Clearly these credentialing and labour market functions of tertiary institutions are extremely important. The vast bulk of resources are devoted to programmes which provide the knowledge and skills required in the labour market and which lead to certificates, diplomas and degrees. However other forms of tertiary education which are free from the constraints of credentialing are also extremely important. With this in mind I want to suggest some significant modifications to the institutional descriptions and priorities contained in the document.

(a) Universities

The document states that universities have three core roles: to undertake research that adds to the store of knowledge; to provide a wide range of research-led degree and post-graduate education that is of an international standard, and to act as sources of critical thinking and intellectual talent.

In general I endorse this. However I think the statement could be strengthened by rewording (a) the second role as follows 'to provide a wide range of research-led degree, postgraduate **and adult** education', and (b) the third role as follows 'to act as sources of critical **and creative** thinking and intellectual talent'.

With reference to expectations I think that this too could be strengthened by the inclusion of the words highlighted below.

'The Government expects universities to:

- enable a wide range of students to successfully complete degree and post-graduate qualifications **and to enable a wide range of adults to take part effectively in ACE programmes which draw on universities' strengths**
- undertake internationally recognised original research
- create and share new knowledge that contributes to New Zealand's economic, **cultural** and social development, and environmental management.' (p 10)

(b) Polytechnics

The document states that Polytechnics have three core roles:

- to deliver vocational education that provides skills for employment
- to undertake applied research to support vocational learning
- to assist progression to higher levels of learning or work through foundation education.

The document states that government expects polytechnics to:

- enable a wide range of students to complete industry-relevant certificate and diploma qualifications
- enable local access to tertiary education

- support students with low literacy, language, and numeracy skills to improve these skills and progress to higher levels of learning
- work with industry to ensure that vocational learning meets industry needs.

This description and these priorities for polytechnics are extremely limited. They focus almost exclusively on education and training for the labour market with little recognition of the important potential role of polytechnics in relation to ACE. Thus at the very least I would like to see the second expectation strengthened by the inclusion of the phrase highlighted below.

- ‘Enable local access to tertiary education **and enable a wide range of adults to take part effectively in ACE programmes which draw on polytechnics’ strengths.**’

(c) Wānanga

I would like to see the roles and expectations of wānanga include a more specific commitment to promoting community learning. This is contained in the core roles. However it could be strengthened there and I would certainly want the government’s expectations in this area to be strengthened.

(d) Industry training organisations

More attention needs to be given to this statement of roles and expectations. In particular I would like to see the expectations stated more broadly to include the education and training of working New Zealanders which would go beyond that which is qualification-driven. It should include the promotion of nonformal and informal education and training.

4.0 Conclusion and Summary of Recommendations

As I hope will have become apparent in the above paragraphs, I believe that in these times of economic difficulty there are good reasons to incorporate a new approach to ACE and its funding in the TES for 2010-2015.

4.1 This new approach would, however, not be narrower and more restrictive than in the past, but would instead be broader. It would recognise and make explicit the diverse contributions and potential contributions of OTEPs such as the WEAs to ACE and to tertiary education generally. It would also recognise and make explicit the contributions and potential contributions of schools, REAPs, universities, polytechnics, wānanga and ITOs to ACE and to tertiary education generally.

4.2 The new approach would entail the addition of new priorities. These would include not only the five priority areas contained in the previous tertiary strategy but would add new priorities in some of the areas referred to above in the discussion of the wider benefits of ACE in 3.2 above.

4.3 Following the lead of the draft TES document the new approach would continue to place a high priority on learners (including literacy, language and numeracy learners) who have not been well served in the past. It would do so however by seeking to embed literacy, language and numeracy learning within a diverse range of ACE programmes and activities designed to meet the diverse needs and interests of people in a wide range of contexts and situations.

4.4 The new approach would celebrate the diversity of people’s motivations, interests and approaches to different kinds of learning as well as their perceptions of themselves as learners. It would also recognise that people’s interests, attitudes and

perceptions can change as they participate in programmes making it problematic to define in advance satisfactory performance levels or even course completion rates (See para 3.3 above).

4.5 In the light of this I recommend that:

- (a) the level of ACE funding be restored to that which existed prior to the recently announced cuts to school funding for ACE and the projected ACE cuts to tertiary institutions, and
- (b) a new approach to ACE funding be set in place which would be based on a broad rather than narrow conception of the nature, purposes and potential benefits of ACE. This new approach would include the following:
 - I. statutory recognition of ACE in all its forms with special reference to the statutory protection of community learning initiatives;
 - II. at the level of the state closer co-ordination on ACE policy between the TEC and Ministry of Education; and
 - III. endorsement of a model of ACE provision based on minimal regulation by the state at the national level (subject to the requirements of overall policy direction and sound financial practices), and maximum levels of self-determination and self-regulation by communities of interest, recognised agencies & institutions, and local & regional networks.

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