

**PPTA**

NEW ZEALAND POST PRIMARY  
TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION

TE WEHENGARUA

[www.ppta.org.nz](http://www.ppta.org.nz)

# **PPTA Response to the Draft Tertiary Education Strategy**

**November 2009**

## **INTRODUCTION**

The NZPPTA is the secondary teachers' union, representing some 18,000 members in state (including integrated) secondary area and composite schools and manual training establishments.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this document and for arranging the meeting to discuss the background to it. PPTA would make the following points.

### **1 BACKGROUND TO THE STRATEGY**

While we understand the reasons for the issuing of new strategy when the last one was to run until 2012, the absence of any historical detail or references to past experience that might shed light on the new strategy undermines the credibility of the document. The New Zealand tertiary education policy has tacked across the political spectrum resulting in a system that is haphazard and driven more by funding imperatives than student needs or even social needs. Without analysis of what has been tried, what has succeeded and what has been found wanting, there is a risk the new strategy will continue to prescribe responses that won't meet the goals.

### **2 VISION**

PPTA supports the goals as expressed in the vision but would like to have seen a bolder approach to using tertiary education to underpin an economic recovery as has occurred in other western countries. PPTA has reported on this in its own document *Secondary Education and Economic Crisis; Building the educational infrastructure for recovery* (2009)<sup>1</sup>. It refers to a 2008 OECD report which is relevant to this discussion. That report identified the following financial benefits of education:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ppta.org.nz/index.php/resources/publication-list/79-publication-list>

*“In practice, raising levels of education will give rise to a complex set of fiscal effects on the benefit side, beyond the effects of revenue growth based on wages and payments to government. For instance, better educated individuals generally have better health, which lowers public expenditure on provision of health care and thus public expenditure. As earnings generally rise with educational attainment, there is more consumption of goods and services among the more educated, and this gives rise to fiscal effects beyond income tax and social security contributions”.*<sup>2</sup>

It would be helpful if the strategy made greater mention of not just the financial benefits of education but the social benefits as well.

Increased spending as opposed to retrenchment is necessary to counter the effect of the financial crisis which has resulted in some young people losing their jobs and some being unable to finish their apprenticeships.

In this context, the cuts to adult and community education (ACE) are short-sighted because they remove an important and inexpensive means of keeping New Zealanders engaged in learning. It is particularly ironic that ACE provision seems to have been most severely depleted in low socio-economic areas where there is most need for the basic literacy and numeracy courses but continues to be offered in wealthier areas. The strategy needs to consider the implications of this.

### **3 PRIORITIES**

#### **3.1 Qualifications**

##### **3.1.1 Degrees**

PPTA is not opposed to a goal of engaging more students in tertiary education but is not convinced that there should be such an emphasis on achieving degrees. Alison Wolfe (2002)<sup>3</sup> has

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<sup>2</sup> OECD: Education at a glance. 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Wolf, A. *Does Education Matter? Myths about education and economic growth*. Penguin 2002

challenged the view that a university degree necessarily contributes to economic wealth either for the individual or the national economy. It depends on the degree. Applied and vocational qualifications and those associated with a specific profession produce greater value than more generalist degrees.

Professor David Ashton of Cardiff University in a presentation to the Vocational Education and Training Research Forum<sup>4</sup> made this point in respect of a global economy. He observed that the expansion in tertiary education has been such that the number of graduates has almost doubled, from 33.4 million in 1995 to 62.9 million in 2005. He concludes from this that national vocational and education frameworks risk irrelevancy because transnational employers can select the skills they want from a global market. He does think, though, that there will always be opportunities for highly-skilled and creative people, (particularly in the sciences, mathematics and technology) and there will always be a national need for vocational skills. The Tertiary Strategy needs to give closer consideration to the implications of the global availability of qualifications.

### 3.1.2 Level 4

There is good reason to believe that vocational qualifications will have more value in the future than generalist degrees and the strategy would benefit from a greater emphasis on them.

The goal of increasing the number of students achieving qualifications at Level 4 is laudable but:

- Not all Level 4 qualifications are equally useful, either to the individual or the country so some specification may be needed around that. PPTA agrees with the view expressed

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<sup>4</sup> Vocational Education and Training Research Forum organised by the ITF Wellington, 21,22 April 2009

by the Industry Training Federation that there should be a clearer connection in the strategy with workplace skills.

- There is a risk of credentialism with Level 4 qualifications becoming a requirement for some jobs where they are not strictly necessary and for which the employer provides on the job training anyway. Credential creep in this area imposes a cost on the individual and the taxpayer that may not be warranted.
- The emphasis on young people improving their qualifications should not be at the expense of older workers who are increasingly being expected to work well into their sixties, particularly those who need literacy and numeracy assistance.

In this context, the statement about “re-examining the level of assistance for those people who have already been supported to undertake tertiary education” needs clarification.

### 3.1.3 Rationalisation

PPTA applauds the strategy’s aim to “reduce the proliferation of providers” and to “prioritise qualifications that link strongly to high-level learning and skilled employment” but sees these goals as reasonably difficult to achieve in the current structure.

## 3.2 Achieving the Priorities

### 3.2.1 Quality

PPTA strongly agrees with the need to move away from low-quality courses though we do not agree that completion rates can serve as a proxy for judgements about quality. It’s equally possible that a low-quality course could achieve a high completion rate because the requirements are not demanding. The belief that

increased course completions demonstrate efficiency is an equally magical assumption. For this reason the push to give greater emphasis to full-time students may be based on flawed logic. It may be just as effective to focus on getting better support from employers for those who undertake part-time study.

### 3.2.2 Funding

It also seems optimistic to assume that improved results can be achieved with reduced investment particularly when that investment is scattered across multiple institutions. The reliance on competition to deliver better and cheaper outcomes has failed New Zealanders before, why should it succeed this time? It puts one in mind of the Einstein quotation that insanity consists of doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. New Zealand would be better to look to rationalising the number of providers and maximising the synergies between them because the current system is more fragmented and expensive than it might otherwise be.

Another reason the tertiary education system is costly in New Zealand is that, with some exceptions, businesses no longer take any responsibility for training though they are often the beneficiaries of it. Instead this cost has been transferred to taxpayers who now contribute to business profits by funding their training requirements.

We are concerned about the proposal to “give institutions greater flexibility to raise revenue.” This may give rise to a conflict of interest in respect of the goals of the institutions and a loss of focus around their key function. Educational providers should be supported to do just that and not be encouraged to embark on potentially risky financial adventures that may compromise the quality of learning. A number of secondary schools have suffered considerable financial losses because they were seduced by the

notion that they should be “entrepreneurial.” Parents and students who had no input into those decisions are now wearing the costs of them. We have a concern, too, that the invitation to tertiary institutions to actively pursue the international student market will not necessarily be in the best interest of the international students or of New Zealand students.

### **3.3 Transition from schools to tertiary education**

#### 3.3.1 Youth guarantee

PPTA has long been interested in this issue and prepared a position paper on it in 2008, entitled *Secondary Forward*.<sup>5</sup> It argued that secondary schools should be the hub institution monitoring and mentoring students as they move from school into work, education or training.

We are not convinced that the approach the government has taken via the youth guarantee is the best model for managing transition. It is axiomatic that the institution that already knows the student is best placed to support them in the next phase of their lives. We refute the romantic notion, largely perpetrated by providers who compete with secondary schools, that students need to be “saved” from secondary schools. The data is clear that students who do not succeed at secondary school do not progress in the more expensive, less supportive tertiary institutions either. That is because the problem has usually begun well before the student enters secondary and tertiary education. A better approach is proposed by the yet to be released Ministry of Education *Behaviour Action Plan* which proposes to focus resources on addressing the problem at the point when success is most likely – the first few years of the child’s life.

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<sup>5</sup> Secondary Forward <http://www.ppta.org.nz/index.php/resources/publication-list/79-publication-list>

The Youth Guarantee may potentially undermine secondary provision because the tendency will be for tertiary providers to endeavour to justify the \$4,500 extra they receive by concentrating, not on the youngsters who have disengaged from education but on those already who are likely to succeed whatever institution they are in. While PPTA has supported the changes in s17 of the Education (Polytechnics) Amendment Bill because of the focus on all institutions working collaboratively, we expect that extensive monitoring will be necessary to ensure that good collaborative practices develop around the youth guarantee.

PPTA does not support the awarding of youth guarantee places to for-profit private providers for the reasons mentioned above. It is poor value for the taxpayer to be subsidising the profits of private companies in the name of education when there are state institutions capable of providing the same courses.

### **3.4 Improving system performance**

#### **3.5.1 Public/Private**

The phrase “public tertiary providers need to ensure they are financially viable” reads like a threat and is particularly inappropriate when this document is signalling that they will be expected to do more with less (something not usually associated with financial viability) and when successive governments have undermined the state tertiary providers by actively encouraging private provision.

### **3.5 Quality**

As mentioned earlier, PPTA supports the notion of reducing the plethora of qualifications as a means of raising standards. We remain unconvinced, however, that competition and de facto league tables will raise quality. Too much faith is being put in the

capacity of inexperienced young people to make judgements about the relative merits of institutions and, as we know from the recent round financial institution crashes, even very experienced individuals can struggle to get an accurate picture from an institution's own data. The popular neo-liberal myth that "free" movement of "customers" creates quality provision should have been dispensed with. The responsibility for ensuring tertiary providers are competent and honest is being transferred from the funder (i.e. the State) whose responsibility it should be, to the student who is least able to make that judgement.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this document. We look forward to the final draft.