Response to the Review of Vocational Education

Who are we?

The *Council for Social Work Education in Aotearoa New Zealand* (the Council) has been active for over 20 years. We exist to represent and advance the interests of social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand. Our membership includes the heads of school, or programme leaders, from all eighteen tertiary education institutions (TEIs) recognised by the *Social Workers Registration Board* (the social work regulatory body) to deliver graduate[1] and postgraduate education programmes. Ten of those TEIs are institutes of technology and polytechnics (ITPs), five are universities, two are wānanga and one is a private tertiary institute.

The government's proposal for a single *New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology* would have a major impact on our sector, collapsing ten of our ITPs into one and reducing membership of the Council by half. During 2017 our members accounted for 3,310 student enrolments (SWRB, 2018a) with 41% of that number (n=1,368) attending the ten ITPs affected by the proposal for the new Institute. The merger would make the Institute the largest provider of social work education in New Zealand[2].

In the remainder of this submission we comment on several key aspects of the proposal that are of concern to the ITP members of the Council.

Embracing collaboration

The Council celebrates the government's proposal to end the use of public funding to promote needless competition between ITPs. From the perspective of social work education we see no advantage in this stance and welcome the opportunity provided by the single Institution to build staff capability, foster collaboration and promote joint research and development amongst staff at the ten existing institutions. The single Institution offers exciting possibilities to harness the talent of academic staff to work collectively across Aotearoa and to create innovative educational offerings that support social work students who are not only fit for the transition to work but also prepared to become confident and capable problem-solvers and future leaders of the social work profession.

[1] The Social Workers Registration Board stipulates that the base level qualification required by a registered social worker is a four-year degree programme that meets their programme recognition standards.

[2] Currently, the largest provider of social work degree level education is Te Wānanga o Aotearoa with 543 enrolments in 2017, the new Institute would be significantly larger.

Working in partnership with others

> Employers need to be given, and must take on, a greater leadership role in building more effective partnerships with education specialists, so that people in the current and future workforce benefit from on-job training, and high quality teaching and support. (Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 12)

We also welcome the opportunity to continue to work with colleagues from social service agencies in regional groupings. In our own case we would seek to extend this partnership beyond employers to include professional associations, trade unions, service-user advocates and the regulatory body. As educators we are also active members of social work professional organisations, nationally and internationally. We are clear that partnerships with stakeholders needs to be based on mutual responsibility and trust, and not on one partner having the whip hand. The International Federation of Social Workers (2014) has defined social work as a

> …practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.

Social work educators have a dual responsibility to prepare social work graduates to be competent and confident practitioners; and, secondly, to enable them to think critically and practice ethically even when that means confronting agency practices and/or challenging government policies that have negative impacts on the citizens with whom they work. Critical thinking and ethical practice are important capabilities for workers in all industries that study within the polytechnic sector.

Learners as critical citizens

> Government policy and regulatory decisions since the mid-1980s have led … to a focus on tertiary education as a commodity, an economic output rather than the position that tertiary education is the foundation of a good society. Changes in tertiary education policy since the 1990s have seen the sector narrowed to an increasingly user-pays model emphasising heightened competition between institutions which risks losing sight of the value of tertiary education as a public good. (New Zealand Council of Trade Unions, 2013, p. 11)

We agree with this assessment of contemporary tertiary education by the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions. Neoliberalism and new public management have shifted the values and culture of tertiary education away from the idea of education as a public good. This is especially pertinent in relation to forms of professional education, like social work, where the vast majority of graduates work in the public

sector or in government funded NGOs. However, it is an issue that has relevance for all learners in ITPs.

The formation of a single Institute provides a unique opportunity for government to steer the guiding principles and values of vocational education back towards education for critical citizenship. It is, in our view, a serious error to reduce ITP's commitment to vocational learning to a "skills pipeline" for industry. Whether they are on a career pathway into writing code for a private company, assessing water pollution levels for an environmental agency, or using judgement to protect children from harm in a child protection agency, our graduates need to be critical, reflective and ethical practitioners.

Government should not underestimate the opportunity they have to create a ground-breaking educational ecosystem driven by progressive values that supports learners to become knowledgeable and skilful practitioners with a strong sense of public ethics and a commitment to social inclusion. With the right values and design principles, the Institute has the potential to become a uniquely well-rounded vocational education system that would be the envy of the world. Unfortunately, there is also a more dystopian view of the future state.

Educational structures, processes and culture

Ending competition in the ITP sector is necessary to improve the quality of tertiary education, but it is not sufficient. The competitive environment enabled by previous government policy encouraged the growth of a cohort of educational managers who have been raised on new public management approaches to educational design and delivery. Disconnected from democratic educational values, many have openly espoused a business model that prioritised rationalisation, promoted low-trust workplace cultures, indulged in excessive performance measures and reduced student participation to the completion of endless customer satisfaction surveys. We reject the idea that students should be regarded as customers or consumers of learning. These are metaphors misappropriated from a private sector business context that does not reflect the reality of the relationships between students and educators. If students could simply be characterised as customers, the problem of student engagement in learning would not be the issue that it is. Students are better characterised as producers of learning (Neary, Saunders, Hagyard & Derricot 2015) who need to be supported to engage with each other, with tutors and with learning materials, and whose labour is creative and productive.

We completely accept the need for an educational system that focusses on achieving better outcomes for learners (especially for Māori, Pasifika and other underserved groups), but this cannot be achieved through the mass production of centrally developed educational packages. It is pedagogy that makes learning effective, not its packaging, whether digital or otherwise. We have known for decades that media do not impact learning, as Clark (1983) put it:

> The best current evidence is that media are mere vehicles that deliver instruction but do not influence student achievement any more than the truck that delivers our groceries causes changes in our nutrition. Basically, the choice of vehicle might influence the cost or extent of distributing instruction, but only the content of the vehicle can influence achievement. (p. 445)

From a pedagogical perspective, and based on an analysis of research into student engagement in tertiary education in New Zealand, Zepke (2017) argues for a pedagogy of student engagement founded on four critical purposes: exposing ideological dominance, developing critical consciousness, fostering empowered learners and acting to change society (p. 143). These purposes resonate strongly with our argument for students as critical citizens.

However, Zepke (2017) also argues that neoliberal and managerial institutional structures and processes have "elective affinities" (p. 85) with some pedagogical approaches and constrain the development of others. For example, a commitment to the values and purposes described above is aligned with a pedagogical approach that conceives of student as producers (Neary et al, 2015). Implementing this approach requires: democratic educational relationships between staff and students; open learning activities and assessment tasks; and spaces, technologies and timetables that support staff and student collaboration. These requirements can all be undermined if, for example, centrally prepared learning materials and learning management systems have been designed to support instructivist paradigms that conceive of the learners as individual consumers of packages of self-directed learning.

Centres of Vocational Excellence: Mondragon or McDonalds?

> The development of courses and programmes would be consolidated, freeing up resources to expand front-line delivery. There will be more sharing of expertise and best-practice, and more use of on-line, distance, and blended learning. (Consultation Discussion Document, p. 5)

A new Institute developed along the lines suggested in the consultation document would find that it inherits ten different social work programmes. However, since our separate degree programmes have all been designed to adhere to the programme recognition standards[3] of the Social Workers Registration Board (2018b) there are many common topics in our curricula, even if they are currently designed into courses with quite different learning outcomes[4]. There are also courses that represent unique, diverse, local innovations: these courses reflect local cultural imperatives, knowledge and issues.

[3] All degree programmes recognised by the SWRB are subject to an external re-recognition event every five years year, with mid-cycle reviews in addition to routine yearly monitoring.
[4] The common aspects of curricula are also shaped by global standards for the education of social workers (IASSW & IFSW, 2004) and the desire to produce graduates who can have their professional qualification recognised in other jurisdictions.

The opportunity to work collectively to create a single high-quality programme including the best features of our existing programmes would be very welcome. A common curriculum might include the best of our core courses combined with a significant proportion of electives that capture unique local offerings and shares them across the Institute. However, moving towards a common curriculum would, in our view, require careful negotiation and engagement with the community of educators and other stakeholders.

Imposing a new curriculum from above would be a recipe for educator alienation and would not make the best use of our existing pool of talent. In this context, we recognise and welcome the idea of Centres of Vocational Excellence as sites where programme and curricular development could be coordinated. However, we are concerned about how such a centre for social work might be structured and organised. There are at least two quite different visions.

A centre might function as a participatory hub for members of the relevant academic community to contribute plans and ideas for curriculum innovation, research and development. It could adopt a community led, cooperative model that ensures a strong sense of common ownership and active engagement with other key stakeholders. We call this the Mondragon model with reference to the cooperative, Mondragon University in Spain (Wright, Greenwood and Boden, 2011).

On the other hand, a centre might adopt a more managerial, command and control model where specialist staff outsource the development of curricular materials, design content with limited input from academic staff and rely on digital delivery systems designed to lock out local control. This industrialised and rationalised model has more in common with the phenomena described as McDonaldization in education (Ritzer, 1993; Hayes and Wynyard, 2002).

There are serious risks that the second approach would lead to the unbundling of academic work: dividing academic labour into different functions (such as teaching, assessment and research) and allocating these functions to different specialist actors. This model would de-professionalise and alienate academic staff preparing the way for a deep casualisation of the academic workforce. Aspects of this model are hinted at in the Consultation Discussion Document when it states that: “Most New Zealand Institute of Skills & Technology staff would spend little or no time designing curricula and assessment from scratch, as these would be centralised.” (p. 29)

Conclusion

The success or failure of the Institute depends critically on the structures, processes and educational values with which it is given shape. As social work educators we welcome the end of competition across the ITP sector and urge government to take the next step and bring an end to an inappropriate new public management regime that has alienated academic staff, and marginalised students

and other educational workers. The new vocational education system needs to value the input of academic staff and recognise students as active, co-producers of learning, not the passive consumers of packages produced on an educational assembly line.

In this context, we note the "The Future of Work" report (New Zealand Labour Party, 2016) and its commitment to "new models of 'workplace democracy', which give workers more of an opportunity to participate and feel valued." The proposed Institute offers a hugely significant opportunity for government to give effect to that commitment.

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