

Genuine choice for learners is important

By Darel Hall

Published in the *New Zealand Education Review*, 11–17 February 2004

Last week saw a surge in the media in the discourse on the value of different kinds of learning. Chair of the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), Dr Andrew West provided the initial impetus with an urge to students to "give serious consideration to the study choices they make and the careers their qualifications will lead them towards." Timely advice given it coincided with the beginning of the school year.



The Industry Training Federation (ITF) position was made by Executive Director Darel Hall and stated "Dr West is giving a good message about choice to students, including considering trades and technical skilled careers".

Dr West identified engrained perceptions, including those of parents, as an obstacle to students considering the full gamut of options available to them:

Many parents want their children to have a secondary school education that leads to a degree. While that may be a reasonable expectation, we need to ask – is that always in the individual's best interests and how many graduates does this country need?

A key to breaking down these barriers is recognising that many

skilled careers require a high degree of technical knowledge, with the knowledge component of many roles increasing quickly.

National Secretary of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) Andrew Little endorsed this, and Dr West's comments, last week: "A modern tradesperson is a highly trained, skilled person who can find well-paid work in just about any part of the world."

He further noted that a good toolmaker can make \$70,000 a year, a top printer \$85,000, maintenance tradespeople like electricians and fitters working in big plants \$70,000, or even \$100,000 a year.

The Department of Labour has reported pay increases in the trades and technical area for example pay rates for carpenters & joiners rose 4.1 percent in the year to September 2003.

Many industries are doing more to entice workers due to high levels of demand. *The New Zealand Listener* (December 13-19, 2003) late last year highlighted that many of those in a skilled career are outstripping their university-educated counterparts in the earning stakes, and they do not have a student loan.

While the average student loan for borrowers as at June 2003 was \$13,680, the New Zealand University Students Association (NZUSA) calculates an average debt for bachelor degree students of \$21,000.

Debt and income are relevant issues for discussion when considering career options.

Recent New Zealand Institute of Economic Research research shows that for many people the difference in earning increase

between a vocational/ trade certificate and a bachelor's degree is relatively small. This is particularly true for women.

The NZIER research shows virtually no difference between the annual wage increase for single women who were previously non-employed from taking a trade certificate to taking a bachelor degree.

The NZIER report shows, for Maori and Pacific single people who were previously not employed the change in annual wage difference is greater doing a trade certificate than doing a bachelor degree.

These pieces of data suggest we actually don't yet have information in the form to allow very good assessments of earning changes **caused** by qualification types for sub groups of New Zealanders.

The chair of the NZ Vice-Chancellors' Committee, Professor Stuart McCutcheon, took a different angle emphasising the importance of a university degree, urging parents to consider the investment in education rather than the costs, and that the government should increase university subsidies:

The greatest advance this country could make in terms of university education is to increase the level of per student investment by government in order to lift the quality of provision.

Professor McCutcheon is concerned the media stories that resulted from Dr West's comments may in some way detract from people's perceptions of degrees. Professor McCutcheon also stated that the salary premiums made by New Zealand degree holders "should be enough to persuade many school leavers and their parents that university education is in their best interests and well worth the investment".

There can be little argument that higher education is vital to driving the country's growth and innovation strategies. Association of University Staff (AUS) President Bill Rosenberg noted last week that universities "produce New Zealand's doctors, dentists, engineers, scientists and entrepreneurs, all of whom contribute directly to New Zealand's economic growth".

In other words New Zealand needs a mix of skills. It is apposite as high school students return to school and contemplate their futures that Dr West should invite students and their families to

contemplate the opportunities that exist to develop fulfilling careers within this mix.

More recently, the AUS and NZUSA said that they were concerned that Dr West's statement was ill conceived and fell outside the brief of the TEC. "We believe that the role of the TEC should be encouraging people into tertiary education (in all its forms), not discouraging them from certain aspects of it," they wrote.

However the first function of the Commission in s159F of the Education Act is "to give effect to the statement of tertiary education priorities". This is about the strategic use of resources, about making judgements that with limited resources we value some things higher than others. The Commission also has a statutory duty to promote industry training and apprenticeship training (s13 Industry Training Act, s9 Modern Apprenticeship Act).

That said, this debate is not about setting universities against polytechnics, private training establishments, wananga or industry training organisations. This debate is not about saying learners should choose a trade certificate over a diploma, a degree or a PhD. This debate is about giving learners knowledge about the real benefits and costs of their choices.

It seems that over the past week progress has been made in getting this information out to those who could use it to good effect. Dr West needs to be applauded for raising these important questions that will allow learners and their families to make genuine choices for their future.

This article does not necessarily reflect the views of the Education Forum.

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