Tertiary reform in New Zealand: A knowledge society and a ‘new professionalism’

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Abstract: Tertiary education in New Zealand has since the 1990’s been based on consumer choice with little regard to the resulting fragmentation. In 2000 the current Government established a Tertiary Education Advisory Commission (TEAC) to investigate and provide information of and to the tertiary sector. The tertiary sector embraces all institutions and other affiliations that provide post-compulsory schooling options. The resulting change in policy is being heralded as a completely new ‘paradigm’ where educative outcomes are connected to social, economic and cultural policy. The current Government has labelled the connection to broader policy considerations as essential in order for New Zealand to become a ‘knowledge society’. The tertiary sector will need to consider institutional identity in light of the ongoing changes and move towards a ‘knowledge society’. Academic staff will also need to reconsider their role and rather than perceive tertiary reforms as a ‘push-down’ agenda consider claiming a ‘new professional identity’.

Keywords: tertiary education, education policy, identity, scholarship of teaching

Introduction
Ongoing changes have occurred in the tertiary sector in New Zealand since the 1989-1990 reforms based on the Learning for Life reports. While reforms proposed a collaborative and cooperative model for tertiary education a market-place model was installed which resulted in a fragmented system. A change of government saw the establishment of the Tertiary Education Advisory Commission (TEAC) in April 2000 with the express aim of providing information and advice for the tertiary sector. TEAC has produced numerous reports and proposed a strategic direction for tertiary education in New Zealand. On December 3 2001, the Rt. Hon. Steve Maharey in his address at the launch of the Draft Tertiary Education Strategy stated that:

the tertiary education system will no longer be driven largely by the choices of consumers and providers as it was during the 1990s, when it was too narrowly focussed on student demand as the primary determinant of resource allocation. Rather, the focus of the tertiary education system from 2002 will be to produce the skills, knowledge and innovation that New Zealand needs to transform our economy, promote social and cultural development, and meet the rapidly changing requirements of national and international labour markets.

Further, in the preamble to the Draft Tertiary Education Strategy (TEAC, 2001a):
This Government will lead a shift to a co-operative and collaborative sector, unified by a clear vision for the future, which contributes effectively to New Zealand’s development as a knowledge nation.

This draft report informs us that tertiary education needs to be outward looking and responsive to learners and New Zealand stakeholders. If the strategy is implemented institutions in the tertiary sector will be required to meet international benchmarks in research, teaching, management and skill acquisition. Responses to the new strategy have been called for from the varied stakeholders within the tertiary sector. For academic staff a reassessment of both their own and institutional identity within the new paradigm could be required. Academic staff may well ask themselves what will the new vision mean for them especially given that the strategy calls for innovation and flexible methods of teaching. Bennett, Foreman-Peck & Higgins (1996) highlight that “increased ‘consumer’ awareness on the part of the government, students and parents, does require a reformulation of lecturers’ identity to accommodate a more sophisticated understanding of the processes of teaching and learning” (p.20).

Professional identity

Reform of the tertiary sector in New Zealand began in April 2000 with the establishment of TEAC. Since TEAC was established several reports have been released based on analysis and consultation with and of the sector. Further, as part of Government current initiatives to generate discussion and thinking about the tertiary sector The Catching the Knowledge Wave Conference held in Auckland from 1 - 3 August 2001, provided opportunities for business, community, education and government sectors to meet and discuss issues relating to New Zealand becoming a knowledge society. The Knowledgewavetrust (2001) November update reiterates that conversation and action are a key determinant for New Zealand’s economic and social success. Tertiary institutions have a role to play in contributing to the new knowledge society in a deliberate and explicit linking of learning and research to economic and social development. The tertiary sector has the capacity to determine the unique characteristics or ‘special flavour’ of their institutions that will contribute to the ‘knowledge society’ – the kind of country that New Zealand would like to become (TEAC,2001a).

Maharey (2001) informed his audience at the launch of Shaping the strategy that the focus of the tertiary education system will now be to produce skills, knowledge and innovation. New Zealand needs these to transform the economy, promote social and cultural development, and meet the rapidly changing requirements of national and international labour markets. In essence it has been suggested that the tertiary sector will be guided and benchmarked against the following precepts

- Uses inclusiveness, partnership, and intelligent intervention
- Ensures national and local responsiveness
- Promotes excellence and efficiency;
- Ensures a genuine partnership with Maori.

This will be achieved by

- Building the quality of learning
- Building stronger bridges into tertiary education
- Enhancing research quality, capacity and linkages
- Developing the skills and environment for a knowledge society

(Maharey, 2001, Shaping the Strategy Launch slide show)
A new paradigm

The knowledge society is heralded as a new paradigm, and tertiary institutions will need now to be concerned with the global economy where knowledge is the new commodity. They will need to reconsider their identity as places of learning within the cultural, social and educational structures that currently exist in New Zealand. Professional identity may well be an issue for academic staff who will need to understand the new thinking and what it will mean for them.

Walker (2001) has labelled the reformulation of lecturers’ identity as the ‘new professionalism’. Walker questions the validity of the current performance-culture climate of the tertiary sector and acknowledges that while there may be conflict with managerialism ethos that redefining professionalism for university teaching is necessary and even strategic for stakeholders. She provides a useful observation of what the ‘new professionalism’ for academics could look like and describes colleagues as ‘learning professionals’ who operate within a ‘learning community’ in tertiary institutions. Although she points out that her colleagues struggle to “practise a professionalism which seeks to develop different forms of agreement-making, through dialogue and action with each other and with students, regarding the ends and purposes of learning in the university “ (p.191). There is no doubt that a contributing factor is the lack of trust between academic, institution and line management. Sincerity and commitment will be required of all stakeholders in order for academics to become ‘learning professionals’ within New Zealand’s knowledge society. Reconsidering the relationship between lecturers, their respective learning institutions and the Government’s proposed knowledge society may well encourage a reshaping of how academics work.

Academics in the tertiary setting have traditionally been known to participate in a variety of tasks that revolve around teaching, research and community service. Although this can be a somewhat simplistic representation of what academic staff actually ‘do’. Tertiary institutions each differ markedly and what one institution expects or requires of its academic staff can vary greatly from another. However, most tertiary institutions still have significant proportions of students who provide income to support expenditure. Institutional commitment to high quality teaching is synonymous with issues of recruitment and public perception of what tertiary institutions do. Quality teaching is claimed in many marketing ventures. Elton (1994) states that tertiary institutions have increasingly become more committed to excellence in teaching, learning and assessment and are moving towards becoming learning organizations (Elton, 1994). Trigwell (2001) observes that many institutions invest “a considerable amount of time and funds in attempts to improve student learning (p.66)” through staff development. There are few tertiary institutions that do not have internal centres that provide support for staff to develop teaching and learning, research and other skills pertinent to there positions.

Tertiary institutions mostly hire lecturers for specific discipline expertise and face a dilemma when presuming academics to be also “experts in others’ learning” (Elton, p.20). It has long been a requirement internationally that teachers in the school sector be trained in teaching. In some countries school-teachers must be registered and have police clearance before entering a classroom. The expectation at a tertiary level has been different. Few lecturers have the luxury of being recognised by their peers as experts within their disciplines without considering their teaching strategies or learning outcomes. This will need reconsideration if the tertiary strategy is implemented.

The strategy suggests that academia should consider an outward focus in alignment with a global economy where innovative teaching strategies such as flexible learning options
amongst others have a significant role to play. Another consideration is the move towards a more vocational skill-based workforce that supports the collaborative paradigm between enterprise and institution. This demands a reappraisal of the lecturer’s role as increasingly lecturers are likely to be expected to have “well informed views on professional issues” (Bennett, Foreman-Peck, Higgins, p.18) of which quality and current state of the art discipline knowledge is combined with consideration of the best teaching for students.

**Professional identity**

One way in which to address such issues for the academic is to explore professional identity. There are many aspects that make up the professional identity of academic staff. Bennett, Foreman-Peck & Higgins (1996), state that one aspect of professional identity is knowing what is trying to be achieved, what students are expected to have achieved, what intellectual skills have been acquired or need to be acquired and what might count as progress and development in particular disciplines. The answers to these questions have amongst others, implications for teaching methods, group size and course design (p.21). Further considerations for the institution and academic alike are the demands of industry and future employers whose concerns may not necessarily be aligned with the subject discipline body of knowledge as valued by lecturers. In reality “the skills connected with acquiring this body of knowledge and the associated forms of thought are not prima facie those represented as industry’s needs” (Bennett, Foreman-Peck, Higgins p.60). As Walker (2001) states the ‘new professionalism’ may well be at odds with a performance culture with conflicting values regarding educational values and professional expectations within institutions (p.192).

**Operating in a new context – a case study**

The tertiary sector is encompassing of learning institutions providing post-schooling or post-compulsory schooling options. The sector is broad and encompasses colleges, polytechnics, training companies, industry representatives and universities amongst many more. It is a fragmented sector where some institutions are funded privately, others are cushioned on public funding or a mixture of both. The term higher education in the tertiary environment has come to refer to the university sector of which there are 8 in New Zealand. The newest university, Auckland University of Technology is building and establishing its unique identity amongst the higher education group of universities. The professional identity as defined by Bennett, Foreman-Peck & Higgins (1996) is explored for the academic and the university using the context of AUT.

There are many stakeholders at AUT that influence the professional identity and practice of lecturing staff in achieving excellence in teaching and learning. Policies provide lecturing staff with the underlying values and ethos of what and how disciplines are to be taught. This is not unusual practice as universities are required to have well developed policy to meet the requirements of the New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit. Internal and external groups of others also influence practice and expectations. They include those such as the Ministry of Education, industries, employers, faculty and departmental regulation, staff qualifications and experience and not least the body of knowledge that represents the disciplines themselves. Auckland University of Technology (AUT or the “university”) is the newest university of 8 in New Zealand and has a distinctive and unique history as the largest of 25 polytechnics prior to being awarded university status in 2000. The university provides a wide range of vocationally and professionally oriented programs with a:

   distinct approach to education: students learn about the theoretical while engaging in the practical, acquire skills and knowledge which are immediately appropriate for use in the
workplace. Programmes are designed at different levels with different modes of learning to assist those who seek to continue tertiary education throughout life (AUT, Quality Portfolio, 2001, p.5).

The university’s commitment to developing excellence in teaching, learning and assessment is well documented across institutional policy documents. The University encourages improvement of teaching and learning and states in the Strategic Plan (1999-2003) that the University commits itself to “…provide learning opportunities of quality and relevance which help people for vocational roles: by providing staff with educational and development opportunities to enable them to maintain the highest standards of teaching, research, scholarship and skill…” (AUT, Strategic Plan, Goal 1). AUT has quality internal and external management procedures that allow it to be responsive to review and feedback.

One way in which AUT is responsive to teaching and learning is through the seeking of feedback from appropriate stakeholders (such as students, staff and employer). AUT has made available several quality systems that provide staff with scope to evaluate teaching and learning. One such system is the Student Evaluation of Modules (SEM). Further, that when promotion is sought evidence that is provided by such systems is required. The data received from the SEM is essentially statistical in nature and necessitates that the staff member explore reflectively and critically the ‘why’ and ‘how’ something is the case in regards to the course/teaching being evaluated otherwise the data is reasonably meaningless outside of the context (Punch, 1999, p.14-15). Viewing teaching and learning without the ‘why’ and ‘how’ weakens the developing professional identity of the lecturer within the culture of the university and is essential to ease the subsequent conflict between what university policy dictates and what lecturers ultimately understand this translates to. Many departments have their own specific evaluation procedures that can be used by lecturing staff. Evaluation of programs, courses and lecturing is perceived as a professional responsibility to ‘oneself’ and the university.

**Towards Defining AUT’s expectations about professional practice**

AUT is fundamentally a ‘teaching’ institution that pursues a research-informed and research-based University model as much of AUT’s operating costs are derived from teaching. However, the link between teaching and research is inseparable at AUT and following is an extract from the policy document *AUT Research and Quality Processes* approved by the Academic Board, 27 April, 2001:

Scholarship is an enterprise in itself and entails keeping abreast of the literature pertaining to each individual's field and contemporary pedagogical practices that relate to its delivery, learning and assessment. Boyer* describes four different types of scholarship: discovery; integration; application; and teaching. The scholarship of discovery is closest to traditional notions of research as revealing new knowledge without apparent or intermediate application being possible. The scholarship of integration formulates research problems and questions around the central question of "what do the findings mean?" New understandings and insights are arrived at by placing information and original research in context. Connectedness and wider or new implications are sought through interpretation, critical analysis and evaluation. By implication this type of scholarship also encompasses cross and interdisciplinary work. The scholarship of application acknowledges that new insights and understandings develop through investigation and analysis of practice. The scholarship of teaching is research that evaluates both teaching and learning practice, is a valuable
contribution to the state-of-knowledge for all academic disciplines and constitutes an essential activity for anyone engaged in the provision of knowledge. At AUT, in addition to other kinds of research, we expect staff to participate in studies of teaching, learning and assessment methods that pertain to tertiary institutions own and other related disciplines (pp. 4-18)

The scholarship of teaching is stated in the policy documents as ‘research’ and ‘essential activity for anyone engaged in the provision of knowledge’. Staff are expected to ‘participate in studies’ of ‘others learning’ alongside discipline based research. A nexus is evident in Boyer’s (1990) ideals and one which Melrose (2001) points out that encourages the synthesis of knowledge where staff are scholars who participate as learners, researchers and practitioners at a teaching and research meeting point. Policy supports and encourages university staff to embrace the concept of a ‘scholarship of teaching’ one which encompasses the varied details of what academics ‘do’. As Boyer (1990) states the ‘scholarship of teaching’ is not removed from the fluid dynamic of “four separate, yet overlapping functions” of the academic. The term “scholarship” replacing the tired and worn out debate regarding “teaching versus research” providing the collegiate with “legitimacy to the full scope of academic work” (p.16). There is recognition here for the academic that teaching is not separate to discipline knowledge but that it is “acquired through research, through synthesis, through practice, and through teaching” (Boyer, 1990, p.24). Academics need to come to terms with the notion of two fields of knowledge that are informed by research - their own and that of teaching and learning.

**Looking forward**

AUT has a forward-looking vision that sits comfortably with the tertiary reform proposed by the Government in New Zealand. However, the paradigm shift could be compromised if lecturing staff remain embedded within their subject knowledge base “…solely an expert in a discipline rather than as an expert additionally in others learning” (Bennet, Foreman-Peck, Higgins, 1996, p.20). Some lecturers may feel that tertiary institutions will ‘push-down’ reform and may be reluctant to be told ‘what’ they should do as lecturers and ‘how’ they will do it. Other staff will be uninterested in engaging in a reconceptualising of their identity or exploring Walker’s (2001) notions of a ‘new professionalism’. While still more will consider it unnecessary to explore ‘others learning’ whether to inform their own practice as teachers or to contribute to the discipline. This notion finds support in the meta-analysis of 58 studies and 8 models undertaken by Hattie & Marsh (1996) who revealed that the relationship between teaching and research is weak. There is a suggestion in this study that academics do not intentionally pursue research of and about their teaching and that this pursuit is considered irrelevant. This is despite the declared value of linking teaching and research from various stakeholders such as governments, tertiary leaders, academics who believe the link is demonstrable.

One of the legal and audited requirements of being a university in New Zealand is that there is a positive relationship, or nexus, between teaching and research. This nexus is a necessary attribute of any New Zealand organisation, which offers degrees. The 1990 Education Amendment Act requires every tertiary provider to demonstrate that “research and teaching are closely interdependent” and that degrees are taught mainly by people engaged in research (Melrose, 2001, p.9)

Tertiary reform may result in a push-down effect and be perceived as such unless institutions and their stakeholders contribute to the debate. The responsibility for understanding the proposed paradigm shift lies with all stakeholders. Professional dialogue and recasting of the ‘political’ and ‘professional’ roles of lecturers is an issue that Sachs (2000) defines as the
‘activist professional’. She suggests that academia could benefit from exploring new ways in which to work collaboratively together and to take charge of their professional destiny. This is a notion which Walker (2001) states is in direct opposition to managerialist notions of professionalism characterized by ‘efficiency’, control, fragmentation and the loss of autonomy and morale among many academics (p.197).

Conclusion

There is a need for the reformulation of the professional identity of academics to emerge in tertiary institutions. Much institutional policy has identified the goals and objectives, outlined expectations and provided support structures to this end. Tertiary reform is an ultimatum that is outward looking and nestled in political reform agendas that places knowledge as a commodity within the social, economic and cultural structures within New Zealand. However, it will inevitably be to the advantage of both lecturer and institution to define what role teaching and learning will take in the construction of both institutional and academics’ ‘professional identity’.

There has been a suggestion that tertiary institutions need to become ‘learning communities’ something that TEAC would fully recognise as being fruitful for all stakeholders concerned in the sector. While this discussion has highlighted the role that the institution plays in providing academic staff scope to understand their ‘professional identity’ it could be in lecturers’ best interest to be concerned of developing their own understandings of tertiary policy. They could consider the notion of becoming ‘learning communities’. True collaboration and cooperation across institutional markets requires a rethinking from management as well in order that they avoid a ‘push-down’ of policy.

In conclusion, there are many changes ahead of the tertiary sector in New Zealand with reform unstoppable but necessary. All stakeholders will need to reconsider their roles and as suggested the colleague will need to rethink their professional identity as the paradigm shifts into a new collaborative era at macro and micro levels.

References

http://www.talktertiarystrategy.minedu.govt.nz/Preamble.asp

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