It is important for me to be clear at the outset, that I am presenting a personal view here. From the advantaged position of working for an independent centre, I am privileged to be party to a wide range of discussions about effective skills training and engage with some very intelligent, highly committed people who are struggling with some highly complex issues. I am very excited by some of the work being done, by some of the ingredients being assembled, but I’m far from convinced that everything is ready to plate out.

Why the focus on skills and training in New Zealand? There are three major drivers. Firstly the role tertiary education plays in supporting New Zealand’s future prosperity – usually headlined as skills shortages. Secondly, the recognition that Māori and Pasifika are underserved by New Zealand’s education system as a whole. Thirdly, there is a growing concern that 74,000 (11.5%) of New Zealanders aged 15-24 are NEETs (Not in Employment, Education or Training). It is hugely important that any government addresses all three of these issues.

As a result, a wide range of interventions have been initiated within the New Zealand system over the past few years. These include setting explicit government targets (not to be underrated), improving access, supporting learner choice and progression, increasing the accountability of providers and industry training organisations for educational performance and addressing literacy and numeracy barriers to success:

- Two of our 10 Better Public Service Targets are about boosting skills and employment
  - #5: 85% of 18 year olds achieve NCEA Level 2 or equivalent by 2017 – 2014 data: 81.2%, tracking to target from 74.3% in 2011, and
  - #6: 60% of 25 - 34 year olds will have advanced trade qualifications, diplomas and degrees (at Level 4 or above) by 2018 – 54.2% in 2014, from 52% in 2011, but now showing signs of plateauing.
- Fees-free tertiary education for learners up to the age of 19 who have not gained NCEA level 2 or equivalent
- Māori and Pacific Trades Training initiatives
- Vocational Pathways: supporting students’ choices in schools
• Review of all pre-degree qualifications on the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF), reducing the number down from ~6,000 to less than 1,500 and making each qualification explicitly outcomes focussed
• Career Education Benchmarks
• Engineering: Education 2 Employment; ICT Graduate Schools
• Increased accountability for Educational Performance for tertiary education organisations
• Rationalisation of industry training organisations and concurrent initiatives such as NZ Apprenticeships
• A self-evaluative quality assurance system that focusses on outcomes
• Continuing strategic investment in literacy and numeracy education at study Levels 1-3.

All of these are potentially exciting initiatives. Some, in a New Zealand context, are radical and some, I believe, are ground-breaking. They potentially cover the bases well: so we do have all the ingredients on the kitchen bench. Why, then, am I less than overwhelmingly optimistic about the meal in prospect?

Firstly, each of these initiatives seems to have been developed in a relatively piecemeal (no pun intended) fashion. New Zealand government officials will reasonably assert that all these work streams cascade down from our Tertiary Education Strategy. However, this document (and their predecessors) are, as you might expect, high on aspiration and very brief on implementation. We have leapt straight from macro-level strategy to micro-implementation without a co-ordinated implementation plan in between.

Secondly, I think there is an underlying assumption or presumption that this is a problem (or range of problems) that education can ‘fix’ by itself – if we just get the education sector to do things better, then all our problems will be solved… Keep and James (2010) talk forcefully about the fact that to incentivise NEETs to succeed, interventions in education will have limited success unless the labour market itself recognises, rewards and incentivises educational achievement. These external incentives are just as important as intrinsic adjustments to make the education system more accessible and more inclusive.

But it is by no means all an externally driven problem – parts of our system are innately conservative and resistant to change. There is a great deal we can do to make our vocational programmes more attractive to students, to engage and maintain their enthusiasm and build their confidence towards becoming highly skilled and innovative trades people or professionals. At the nub of this is how we think about vocational education. All too often we refer to it solely as training (and work within a competency-based model) when we should be talking about both education and training and focussing on helping learners build the essential capabilities they require for successful careers as well as the competencies which provide an essential platform for their skill set. In a very real sense we tend to work to stock-pile the skills identified today, at the expense of equipping our learners with the capabilities to develop the skills of tomorrow.

Then there is the problem of uneven funding across the initiatives I’ve listed. While New Zealand has had a strong history of investment in Adult Literacy and Numeracy, our Vocational Pathways, and to some extent our qualifications reform have been developed on a shoe-string. There has been little investment in the capability or capacity of the various
parts of the education system to pick up and run with the initiatives – however good they are. You can't run the system by glossy brochure. People will go where the money is.

Finally, we are, I'm sure, starting on the back-foot by confounding two separate problems: we are looking to improve successful access to tertiary education and strengthening vocational education as though they are the same problem. *A priori* they are not. To conflate the issues makes some damning (and incorrect) assumptions about the status of vocational education as somehow the default choice for those not succeeding academically. Practice shows they are not one and the same issue either. We are now finding we that we still have a significant progression problem from Level 2 on the NZQF to higher levels of study. Are we trying to prepare two dishes that don't entirely go together on the same plate?

Peter Coolbear
24 August 2015

Notes

1. Ministry of Education (2014) Education Counts: Course completion rates for courses completed in 2013. At Level 4, Maori, Pasifika and European Course Completion rates are: 77, 72 and 80% respectively; over all levels, the equivalent percentages are 77, 73 and 86% respectively.
7. I would like to acknowledge Nyk Huntington (Ako Aotearoa) for his critical and constructive review of an earlier draft of this presentation.