

Tertiary Education Report: Perceptions of vocational education and careers in New Zealand

Date:	15 June 2018	TEC priority:	Medium
Security level:	In Confidence	Report no:	B/18/00388
		Minister's office No:	

ACTION SOUGHT		
	Action sought	Deadline
Hon Chris Hipkins Minister of Education	Note the information about perceptions of vocational education and training	
Enclosure: No	Round Robin: No	

CONTACT FOR TELEPHONE DISCUSSION (IF REQUIRED)				
Name	Position	Telephone		1st contact
9(2)(a)	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	✓
9(2)(a)	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	[REDACTED]	

THE FOLLOWING DEPARTMENTS/AGENCIES HAVE SEEN THIS REPORT							
<input type="checkbox"/> DPMC	<input type="checkbox"/> MPI	<input type="checkbox"/> ENZ	<input type="checkbox"/> ERO	<input type="checkbox"/> MBIE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MoE	<input type="checkbox"/> MFAT	
<input type="checkbox"/> MPP	<input type="checkbox"/> MSD	<input type="checkbox"/> NZQA	<input type="checkbox"/> NZTE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> TEC	<input type="checkbox"/> TPK	<input type="checkbox"/> Treasury	

Minister's Office to Complete:

<input type="checkbox"/> Approved	<input type="checkbox"/> Declined
<input type="checkbox"/> Noted	<input type="checkbox"/> Needs change
<input type="checkbox"/> Seen	<input type="checkbox"/> Overtaken by Events
<input type="checkbox"/> See Minister's Notes	<input type="checkbox"/> Withdrawn

Comments:

Recommendations

Hon Chris Hipkins, Minister of Education

It is recommended that you:

1. **note** that vocational education and training (VET) in New Zealand is often seen as a second-best choice by learners, their teachers and their parents
2. **note** that plausible reasons for this include:
 - a. elements of class prejudice and elitism;
 - b. confusion, complexity, clutter and change in VET qualifications and pathways;
 - c. government and school targeting of VET to disengaged young people; and
 - d. signalling of esteem through the University Entrance standard; and
3. **note** that the Ministry of Education's review of VET, its review of NCEA, TEC's Career System Strategy and associated products and services, and TEC's ITP Roadmap 2020 project will all look at ways of improving people's understanding of the role and value of VET, potentially creating opportunities for strategic intervention by government in 2019.
4. **agree** that the Tertiary Education Commission release this briefing with some personal information withheld.

AGREED

NOT AGREED



Brendan Kelly

Deputy Chief Executive, Information

Tertiary Education Commission

15 June 2018

Hon Chris Hipkins

Minister of Education

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Purpose

1. This briefing responds to your request for information about people's perceptions of vocational education and training (VET) and careers in New Zealand, with a view to thinking about interventions to shift these perceptions.

What do we mean by VET education?

2. As the Ministry of Education has noted (METIS 1115988 refers, 28 March 2018), no single definition of VET is useful for every purpose, and no bright line separates "vocational" from "professional" education. Provider type is no longer a reliable guide; many universities have world-class reputations in the delivery of programmes that involve work-based learning and occupational competence, and are delivering in areas that would once have been considered vocational, such as nursing or teacher training.
3. In general VET is associated with non-university education where learning happens in a practical, applied or technical context, as opposed to an academic or purely theoretical context. For the purposes of this briefing, we take "perceptions of VET" to mean "perceptions of education that is not part of an academic university pathway".

What do people believe about VET education?

4. In New Zealand as in many other western nations¹, the majority of learners, teachers, and parents consider VET to be a second-best alternative to university study. They believe that:
 - a university education is the safest path to a good career;
 - anyone who can go to university would be best-advised to do so, rather than to study for a vocational degree at an institute of technology or polytechnic (ITP) ; and
 - VET education represents a lower standard than academic education, requiring and developing a lower level of skill and knowledge.
5. A typical finding is that presented in a 2016 ERO report on Vocational Pathways, which found "a perception that 'vocational' education is less rigorous or prestigious than the more traditional academic track"². This is reflected in the following quotes recorded by the Ministry of Education in the course of engagement on the VET review:
 - "We sometimes struggle to make student numbers for some VET courses... we believe a shift also needs to happen in changing the views of parents [on VET]." *ITP management*
 - "We need to break down the stereotypes of workers, learners and industries." *Economic Development Agency*
 - "The biggest issue we face in getting learners into VET is the 'wallytech' perception from schools career advisors [that VET is not academic and is second-class to university]." *ITP tutor*

¹ An exception to the general problem of "VET is second best" is a cluster of western and northern European nations (for example Germany, Australia, Switzerland and Denmark) where vocational education is highly esteemed. In these nations, in general, the pipeline of vocational education delivery from senior secondary school level onward is closely managed by employer collectives (eg guilds) to fill regulated occupations in a stable labour market, via apprenticeship training. In these countries, the standard of entry to apprenticeship-track VET programmes is fairly high, and comes with a near-guarantee of employment in a well-recognised occupation. Employers are closely engaged in the design and delivery of VET and see themselves as part of the training system, rather than end-users of it.

² [Education Review Office \(2016\). Vocational Pathways: Authentic and Relevant Learning.](#)

6. New Zealand ITPs' own research mirrors these findings, noting views from young people that:
 - Universities have a higher standing in society and are seen as providing better education, to a higher level, that delivers prestige; and
 - ITPs cater to a "lower class" of student and offer less rigorous study.
7. There is little recognition that many vocational qualifications are as demanding as academic qualifications, as economically rewarding, and more aptly lend themselves to developing one's own business.
8. However, not all VET is seen as equal. 9(2)(j) [REDACTED] Others, such as the traditional trades (eg, carpentry or plumbing), are seen as relatively low status, despite a growing recognition that they can result in very good lifetime earnings.
9. The lack of parity of esteem for VET compared to academic education occurs throughout most of the western world. A 2014 UK survey of 2000 18-35 year olds, for example, found that young people regarded as "clever" were actively dissuaded by their teachers or parents from pursuing VET. It also found that those who had chosen an academic path in tertiary education were much more likely to have had their parents' support for that study choice than those who took a vocational path. However, after leaving study, those who pursued vocational paths were just as satisfied with their careers as those who took the academic path.³

Why do people see VET as second-best?

10. Providing evidence for why people hold the views they do is often difficult. However, some plausible causes of people's relatively negative perceptions of VET, drawn from the literature and from officials' professional experiences, are outlined below.

Elements of class prejudice and elitism

11. University-based academic education has long been considered a marker of middle-class status, associated with well-paid and highly socially esteemed white-collar work, whereas VET has long been associated with working-class status and with lower-paid, less-esteemed blue-collar jobs.
12. These perceptions are out of date in terms of the assumptions they make about the earning power of academic versus VET pathways; but they are very persistent because they self-perpetuate through the choices that middle-class versus working-class families make about tertiary education.

Confusion, complexity, clutter and change in VET qualifications and pathways

13. In general, academic qualifications and pathways are clear, well-understood, and fairly stable over time; whereas vocational qualifications and programmes are very diverse (often even within a single field), and have been subjected to numerous reforms and initiatives. The vocabulary of academic study – exams, syllabus, levels, subjects that are "studied" – sits awkwardly in a vocational learning context.
14. Vocational disciplines range over an ever-changing landscape of sectors, technologies, techniques, and working practices. Standard setters and awarding bodies in VET attempt to cover this landscape by creating vocational qualifications that many students and employers often find confusing

³ [City and Guilds \(2014\), *Children labelled 'too clever' for vocational education*.](#)

15. Leaving aside qualifications that are, in effect, a licence to practise, many employers use qualifications as a broad pointer to capability and a measure of “intelligence”. Employers are using qualifications as a proxy measure of literacy and numeracy. NCEA in English and maths meet the criteria, as do easily identifiable standards in some arts and humanities subjects, coupled with some science and maths. Once into the realms of vocational or applied general qualifications, many employers struggle to translate these to commonly understood standards of literacy and numeracy and ‘subject’ acquisition.

Targeting of VET to disengaged young people

16. In New Zealand as in the UK and Australia, government policy has historically used VET programmes to target young people who are at risk of disengaging from school or who are not in education, employment or training. We believe this has contributed to the public perception of VET as being suitable specifically for those who are less able or less motivated to engage in a demanding learning process.

Signalling of esteem through the University Entrance standard

17. The Education Act 1989 provides for universities – but not for any other form of degree-offering tertiary provider – to set a separate standard for entry to their institutions. We believe this sends the signal to students that university education is special and its quality is rigorously protected, whereas VET study is less demanding and its quality less protected.

The education system perpetuates mistaken perceptions of VET

18. The persistence of inaccurately informed attitudes has historically been fed through the education system by careers information, advice and guidance that does not counter the prevailing prejudices within society. Many players within the education system contribute, often unintentionally, to maintaining prevailing attitudes:

- Educational policy makers and strategists overwhelming have little or no direct experience of vocational areas of learning, whereas they nearly all have experience of university-based degree-level academic study. This inevitably informs their perspective on questions of educational system design and what a “good quality” education looks like.
- Teachers and school-based career advisors are often unable to provide professionally informed advice and guidance to the learners about VET options (other than teaching – much of which is now university-taught), generally having had no experience of VET themselves.
- Employers experience difficulties in assessing the value of the multitude of vocational qualifications that exist and too often experience problems gauging applicants’ ability and employment potential, falling back on “known” signals of academic attainment.
- Parents continue to strongly influence their children’s choices, and are often captives of their own educational background or the aspirations they inherited from their own parents.
- Learners often have insufficient access to impartial, up to date, informed, advice and guidance about courses and careers. The VET programmes they do see are often marketed to them as solutions to the problem of educational disengagement, rather than as “rigorous, challenging and well suited to anyone who learns best in a practical context”⁴.

⁴ Quote from David Harborne, Director of Policy and Research at Edge Foundation. Quoted in [Daily Telegraph \(2014\)](#), [Stigma attached to vocational qualifications is unjust](#).

What is the impact?

19. Learners' perceptions of VET as second-best are likely to be contributing to skill shortages in trades such as plumbing, building and construction. They are also likely to be part of the reason why a majority of VET learners at trades training providers in New Zealand are aged 25 or older – speculatively, it may be that students are coming to recognise the value of VET only after spending some time in the workforce.⁵
20. Perceptions of VET are also driving the behaviour we see in the Engineering Education to Employment (E2E) programme, where promotion of engineering as a pathway has greatly increased the number of young people seeking a four-year BEng (Hons) qualification delivered by universities, even though the workforce need is concentrated at the BEng Tech technician level offered by ITPs.
21. ITPs in general struggle to attract students whose other viable option is degree-level study at a university – even when an ITP degree would, in all likelihood, be a better choice for the student. This is one contributor to ITPs' reducing enrolments and consequent financial challenges.

Is the word “vocational” a problem?

22. It has been suggested to TEC that some people may be put off by the word “vocational”, and that changing the label might help to change the “brand” of VET.
23. We have been unable to find market research on people's attitudes to the specific word “vocational”. However, given people's perceptions about VET are more driven by what it's not (a university pathway) than what it is, we think it would be surprising if changing the label made a big difference to their assessment. We can call it anything we like, but people will still see that it does not send their children to university.
24. The challenge is not just to promote the value of VET but also, crucially, to tackle the assumption that university is always a better choice. We think this kind of messaging will be required to prevent parents and learners coming to see VET as “a really great high-quality option – for those who can't get into university”. Admittedly this would be an improvement on them seeing VET as a low-quality option; but the critical message is that VET is a *better* option for some learners, including some of the best and brightest.

Next steps

25. Clear value exists for New Zealand in shifting people's perceptions of VET pathways and careers. This would deliver substantial benefit to learners and employers, allowing more learners to reach their potential in a learning environment that suited them, and making it easier for employers to access the skilled workers they need.
26. The Government has multiple projects underway relevant to this goal, including the Ministry of Education's review of VET (which incorporates a demand-side view from the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment), its review of NCEA, its work on a School Leaver Toolkit, TEC's work on a Career System Strategy and associated products and services (which again seeks to leverage MBIE's demand-side perspective and levers), and TEC's ITP Roadmap 2020 project.

⁵ For Student Achievement Component funded learning under course classifications 21 (Trades 1), 22 (Trades 2) and 22.1 (Vocational Training for Industry)

27. All these projects recognise the critical importance of VET to New Zealand, and the barriers that must be overcome to encourage more young people – and their parents – to choose VET. Some of these barriers are purely perceptual; others are areas in which the system genuinely needs to improve its value proposition in order to attract learners.
28. We expect that these existing projects will identify opportunities to change the perceptions of VET. We think the best value will come not from a standalone communications campaign, but from a campaign that accompanies policy and operational changes in the education sector aimed at delivering clear improvements on the status quo.
29. ITPs have already expressed interest in partnering with Government on a campaign to improve public understanding of and perceptions of VET. It may be that industry training organisations or other industry groups would also be interested in participating in the design and delivery of aspects of such a campaign.
30. We think that, to avoid mixed messages to the public, any government campaign promoting VET should follow, rather than precede, public announcements about how government intends to address issues of ITP sustainability (and the related issue of lack of investment by some ITPs in modern learning facilities) through the ITP Roadmap 2020 project. The announcement and implementation of change in the ITP sector arising from the Roadmap project, [REDACTED]
31. We suggest you revisit these ideas with officials and sector participants in early 2019.