



Denise Bradley – where the bloody hell are you?

Kia ora neighbours. Let me introduce myself. I'm Dr Tom Ryan, President of the New Zealand Tertiary Education Union – Te Hautū Kahurangi o Aotearoa (TEU). The TEU didn't exist until a few months ago: we used to be two separate unions, AUS which mostly covered university workers, and ASTE, which mostly covered workers in the polytechnics and institutes of technology (or TAFEs). We believe in working hard for the students in our institutions, and being respected and paid fairly for that work. We believe in a high quality, public education system that gives everyone a chance, and helps to build a strong economy and strong communities. We believe in people working together to make things fairer and better for everyone.

Many older education union members from New Zealand used to head over the Tasman during the 1990s and warn Australians just how bad things could be. With oppressive employment laws and a government that was determined to support private education businesses at the expense of public education we thought things were pretty terrible.

Then, with the next decade, came a respite for New Zealanders and the arrival of an onslaught for Australians. I think many Kiwi unionists wanted to help but, to be honest, we didn't really have the answers even after it had happened to us, and we were just relieved that we had a chance to catch our collective breath and rebuild.

And now the tables have turned again. Tertiary education folk here in NZ have looked on with envy, first at the Bradley Review and then at the billions of dollars your Government promised to tertiary education last month. Sure, it was tagged and targeted and didn't really seem to understand the nature of public education, but at least it was a bold and considered response to the global economic recession, a response that recognised that if Australia is going to find its way out of this recession it must invest in, amongst other things, tertiary education.

Meanwhile our Government thinks it can weather the financial storm by suppressing wages, cutting tertiary education spending, and ignoring the thousands of ordinary working people who are looking to education as their chance to survive. Our Finance Minister recently proudly stated he'd rather put money into corrections than tertiary education – perhaps to let our young people know there will be space in prisons but not in education institutions.

So we are looking around for some similar policy commitment by leaders here in New Zealand that shows they understand that tertiary education is one of the best tools we have to combat the global financial crisis. Or perhaps I should simply express that sentiment in 'Australian'; Denise Bradley, where the bloody hell are you?

For tertiary education to help people in need and respond effectively to the economic crisis, we need to reach people who wouldn't otherwise get a chance at tertiary education. If we educate the same people we have always educated, then nothing changes. The priority must be growth of opportunity.

That means lower fees, more investment in our public tertiary education institutions, and supportive grants that help working families to get by while they take the chance to study.

To meet the demand of increased student enrolments in our tertiary institutions, we need more teachers and other staff to support them. They in turn need workloads that allow teachers to focus on quality student learning.

And importantly, both here and across your side of the Tasman, we all need public tertiary education systems that cooperate to help ordinary working people get the education they need, rather than institutions competing to make a profit off students and households struggling to survive the recession. This is not the time for our tertiary education institutions to be battling over students, looking to grow profits, or privatising their investments. It's a time for us all to work together to give struggling families a fair chance.

Dr Ryan is the National President Te Tumu Whakarae of the New Zealand Tertiary Education Union Te Hautū Kahurangi o Aotearoa. He is also a senior lecturer in anthropology and labour studies at the University of Waikato.

Investing in the future rather than cutting corners is the only way for NZ to survive the global financial crisis. It is crucial that our response as a country is to invest in learning and research to give our economy a chance to lift its way out of the threat of a long-term global economic crisis. TEU National Secretary Sharn Riggs recently said:

Tertiary education has the capacity, if well funded, to move people into new jobs and to move New Zealand's economy in newly sustainable directions. We can choose, like other strong economies and communities, to learn our way out of troubles that were not of our own making. But we need to overcome the current underfunding, and we need to do it now while we still have time.

We need to resist the temptation to cut public services, because investing strategically in public research and education will be one of his best tools for making sure that New Zealand is well positioned to climb above global financial troubles. **A**

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