



A say in the governance of your workplace

One of the issues that we have been faced with here in New Zealand is a new bill introduced by the Government to reduce the size of councils that govern institutes of technology and polytechnics (ITPs). Polytechnics are roughly analogous to Australian TAFEs. Currently, our *Education Act* provides that all public tertiary institutions should have between 12 and 20 members, including four ministerial appointees, a chief executive, and between one and three representatives from each of the following groups; academic staff, general staff, students, business and unions.

The councils' compositions are also supposed to take into account the ethnic and socio-economic diversity of the communities served by the institution; and the fact that approximately half the population of New Zealand is male and half the population is female. This normally means that specific provision is made on councils for women and local Māori.

The Government, in an effort to prove how much it is into lean, mean efficiency, has decided that 12 or 20 people are too many. It has used some isolated incidents of polytechnic mismanagement to introduce this bill to reduce the size of councils down to just eight people.

The bill focuses only on New Zealand's twenty polytechnics, not other public tertiary institutions such as universities and wānanga.

Reducing community involvement

Many people have looked at the Government's bill and summarised it as simply that: cutting the number of council members at each polytechnic down to a more manageable number. Sure, a few unionists, Māori and women are going to miss out on seats that they might otherwise have held, but these are tough times and we can't all have everything we want, right?

What is less well understood about the bill, however, is the systematic way it removes a community's local representation on their local polytechnic council and replaces it with government-appointed bureaucrats.

Under the new bill, not only does the Crown get to appoint four of the eight council members, it also gets to appoint the chair (who has the deciding vote) and the deputy chair, and has the right to reject other people's nominees. Its appointees get appointed for longer periods of time than community appointees and its appointees can sit on several polytechnic councils at once.

It is a generally accepted principle around the world that tertiary institutions be allowed a certain amount of autonomy to govern themselves. Today that freedom of governance is seen as an important part of maintaining academic freedom and educational independence from political and economic forces and recognises the professionalism and collegiality of tertiary institutions.

It is hard to imagine, even with a benign government that chooses not to misuse the dominant new powers over polytechnics that this bill provides, that councils would not be aware or intimidated by the threat of government power.

Where communities have been aware of the bill they have generally been concerned that four ministerial appointments on a council of eight will remove ITP institutional autonomy. Such a council is likely to lose some of its strong links and relationships with local communities and become overly focused on the ministry's financial objectives at the expense of broader social objectives expected of ITPs.

Displaying a distaste for polytechnics

It's inconsistent, but perhaps not surprising, that the bill focuses only on polytechnics and not universities, wānanga or even private training enterprises which have suffered some of the most public financial disasters in the sector in recent years.

Many of this Government's other tertiary education measures, such as its budget cuts, its limits on student growth during the recession and its pressure on small regional institutions to specialise rather than cater for their communities, seem to have targeted polytechnics more directly than other tertiary institutions. You could almost get the impression, if you were to judge a government by its actions rather than its words, that this Government has a strong distaste for polytechnics.

The explanatory notes to the bill state that polytechnics '...face particular educational and financial challenges, which are likely to be exacerbated by an increasingly constrained funding environment.'

The challenges polytechnics and indeed other parts of the sector face are significant and they include long-term funding cuts.

Placing polytechnic councils effectively under ministerial control and limiting their ability to engage with and represent stakeholders will not address this fundamental problem. **A**

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