

Rt. Hon. Jacinda Ardern
Prime Minister
Parliament Buildings
Molesworth Street
Wellington

7 May 2018

Tēnā koe e te Pirimia,

Since you launched Kōrero Mātauranga our members have been working hard to gather ideas and suggestions to help you deliver the government's commitment to quality lifelong learning. This enthusiasm was given short shrift, however, with the recent publication of a Cabinet paper prepared by the Minister for Education, Hon. Chris Hipkins.

Proposals contained within the paper 'Approach to reforms of the institutes of technology and polytechnic (ITP) subsector' (hereafter cabinet paper), not only appear to pre-empt the outcome of your education conversation, but also lack any evidence.

In the paper, Minister said that the collective agreements we negotiate with ITP employers are not flexible enough – that they stop staff from working longer hours and are a barrier to ITPs wanting to reduce staff costs. The Minister went on to say that ITPs should be allowed to renegotiate conditions of work so staff can be used "more efficiently." Alarmed and disappointed by these suggestions, our members want to see the evidence that says using them more efficiently would address the challenges facing ITPs. From recent meetings, we can only conclude that no such evidence exists.

You have asked the public to tell you what the government should do to improve education in Aotearoa New Zealand. To help you, we asked people working in the sector to tell us about the lengths they go to train our future builders, mechanics, nurses, teachers and scientists. Below we present a selection of these personal stories to show that the analysis in the Minister's Cabinet paper is wrong. You will see from each of these stories that tertiary education sector staff are hard-working and dedicated to their jobs, and that they put in huge amounts of time (often outside of duty hours of work) energy and skill into ensuring students get the best possible learning experience.

We urge you discuss these stories with the Minister for Education so that we can all work together to get your government's tertiary education policy back in line with the vision you spoke so passionately about before and after the election.

All New Zealanders deserve the opportunity to access quality, potential life-changing tertiary education opportunities, no matter their background or where they live. Whether it is a young person figuring out their path, someone changing careers later in life, learning new skills or finding their passion, our public tertiary education sector supports them on their way. One way we can help you rebuild the tertiary education sector after the disastrous experiment of the last National government is to tell you first-hand what it is like to work in the sector – after all, staff conditions of work are students' conditions of learning.

Staff voices

Sharing with us their response to the cabinet paper, many staff wanted to tell you of the hope they felt with the election of the Labour-led government – and, in turn, their disappointment at what the Minister is proposing. The Minister’s statements were seen as “demoralising for those of us that put our heart and soul into the job”. Members expect more than a continuation of National’s maltreatment of the sector, and asked why polytechnics and ITPs always get such a “raw deal”.

When asked what they wanted to tell you, Prime Minister, staff members wrote:

“Calls for a more "flexible" workforce are echoes of the neoliberal labour relations policies of the last government, designed to enhance business and corporate profits. They have nothing to do with quality outputs, or quality education. The Minister should know better!”

Academic staff member, University of Waikato

“The working conditions of staff at tertiary institutions are the learning conditions of students at tertiary institutions. Conditions that promote the health and well-being of the staff, promote the health and well-being of the students.”

Academic staff member, Massey University

One contribution we wanted to share in full spoke to the heart of the issue:

“Dear Prime Minister,

I was delighted to see the launch of Education Conversation - Kōrero Matauranga. It is a great opportunity for you to hear from students, staff, parents, iwi and local communities about what they want from education.

I am concerned that a paper recently presented to members of the Social Well-being Cabinet Committee about the future of institutes of technology and polytechnics (ITPs) risks undermining your commitment to listen to a range of voices before making major changes to the way Kiwis work and study.

In the paper, the Minister for Education claims ITP staff are being paid too much and work inflexible hours, which is not true. Also his suggestion that staff conditions of work [should be] renegotiated so they can be used “more efficiently” would destabilise the sector and undermine learning opportunities in communities across Aotearoa.

The working conditions of the people that make learning possible are not an impediment to giving all New Zealanders access to quality tertiary education. Their conditions of work are students’ conditions of learning.

Please tell me if you agree with the Minister's view, which risks undermining your government's commitment to an inclusive, equitable, and accessible tertiary education sector.”

Academic staff member, Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology (NMIT)



Collective agreements

Members wrote about how collective agreements support fair and safe working conditions and support productive, successful ITPs. They spoke about how important collective agreements are for attracting and retaining quality staff. Members made it clear that their collective agreements do not stop them working long hours, or working in the evenings and weekends. They also spoke about how attacks on collective agreements will lead to a loss of goodwill among staff – goodwill that ITPs rely on to function as well as they do.

One member commented:

“I have seen this occur in the UK. The loss of goodwill increased the costs for the sector, rather than reduced them.”

Some members were particularly worried by the Minister’s interest in changes to the TAFE sector in Australia:

“The commodification of the polytechnic workforce... destroyed the Australian TAFE sector for staff conditions and careers, and students for the depth of academic outcomes - and now we look set to repeat that?”

Academic staff member, WelTec

The Minister said he was interested in two systems in particular – those of Victoria and New South Wales – to help inform the reform of the ITP sector here. A recent report shows these changes led to major cuts in staffing – 44 per cent in Victoria and 35 per cent in New South Wales, and neither resolved any of the perceived problems.

Collective agreements support fair and safe working conditions

“I work in one of the most successful ITPs in the country. The collective agreement is not an impediment to our success. It has maintained a fairness in the way staff are treated and a collective voice in the face of relentless attack on our rights to well-being and fair remuneration. Collective agreements prevent abuse particularly for women.”

academic staff member, EIT

Collective agreements support productive, successful ITPs

Across the board, staff members agreed with the sentiment of the following comment by an Otago Polytechnic academic staff member:

“The current collective agreement forms the very foundation of a quality, accessible tertiary education sector, ensuring students get the best possible learning experience.”



An academic staff member from WelTec added:

“Our collective agreements give us at least a degree of security and comfort. People who feel out of control and marginalised in their jobs do not make good and productive employees.”

Members made it clear that their collective agreements are “a vital and necessary safeguard of professionalism and best practice” which “help protect the academic integrity of our institutions”.

An academic staff member from Unitec observed that “Even when the conditions of our CAs were stronger than they currently are, ITPs were doing very well, at least far better than the case now”, giving the lie to the claim that collective agreements impede success.

In contrast, “Without collective agreements staff working conditions are likely to deteriorate, [and] this will be reflected in student learning which will then damage ITP success”, as an academic staff member from EIT observed.

Other members commented:

“One thing that has been an impediment to the success of my ITP in recent years has been the constant undermining of staff morale, including attempts to downgrade the conditions of our collective agreement and to reduce the strength of union representation. Academic staff have felt under attack by their employers and there has been a consequent loss of loyalty to the institution... A collective agreement that staff feel supports and validates them is a keystone of a successful institute where staff want to stay, want to give their best and want to recommend their workplace to others.”

academic staff member, Unitec

“The ITP sector is suffering from low morale because of years of underfunding and constant restructures. Further erosion of working conditions threatens the viability of the sector.”

academic staff member, Unitec

Staff from outside the ITP sector also wrote in support of their fellow educators:

“Evidence from the US and UK shows that making teaching jobs 'more flexible' (read: cheaper and with more contingent/part-time/'zero hours' contracts) has enormously detrimental effects on our ability to teach effectively and on our students' learning, as well as on staff morale more generally. Let's not repeat the mistakes other countries have made.”

academic staff member, Massey University



Collective agreements and hours

Members made it clear that their collective agreements do not stop them working long hours, or working in the evenings and weekends. Many members found it “outrageous” that this was even suggested:

“I am informed that Chris Hipkins is of the view that we lack flexibility in our hours of work. But when my family complain of my coming home and working into the hours of the evening, and of working most weekends in order to meet the demands of students and the communities we serve, I have little sympathy with such a view.”

A Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology (NMIT) academic staff member commented:

“Under current conditions I could work in classrooms from 8am till 9pm. How could the conditions be made more flexible?” One member commented that you only need to look at the agreements themselves to see how “tertiary education staff have worked with ITP management to include flexibility in working conditions (times and days) to meet the various demands of upskilling New Zealanders”.

A number of ITP staff members spoke of running night and weekend classes, in cases where this was suitable for their courses. Some ITP staff members spoke of their willingness to work outside of ‘9 to 5’ because of feeling supported by their workplaces in other ways.

On the other hand, members also spoke about practical restrictions around working outside of ‘9 to 5’, for example the impracticality of running evening Horticulture classes during the winter. Members spoke about their family commitments restricting the hours they could work, but also the family commitments of their students which sometimes meant that classes during school hours were best.

For example, one academic staff member from Unitec commented:

“75% of our students are parents of young children. Classes after 4 o'clock, and evening classes are not tenable.”

Education under pressure

Members described the pressures they are under in similar language to the 2016 State of the Sector survey report *Education Under Pressure*: chronic underfunding of the sector; unmanageable workloads, caused by under-staffing, increased administrative tasks, and excessive compliance reporting; regularly working more than paid hours, including in the evenings and weekends; efficiency being reduced through “managerial bloat” and through wasting money on advertising because of competition between TEIs; the negative effects of the corporatisation of TEIs; staff making the most of technology, but asserting that face-to-face contact is essential for most forms of education, and that online learning requires more staff input, not less; and a sense of staff not being appreciated for the work they do, reflected in a lack of trust by government.

It is promising to see that the Minister has some recognition of excessive compliance reporting, and of the damage of competition in the sector. However, the Minister still implicitly claims ITP staff need to work longer hours – a suggestion staff find “deeply insulting”.



Staff commented that they “are already working at maximum capacity” and that “The flexibility of the contracts is not the issue. The under staffing is.” Any further extension of hours will be “the straw that breaks the camel’s back”. An academic staff member from MIT commented: “If you want to improve productivity of the whole country (including education), you need to invest more money into education.”

Efficiency

Members had a lot to say about the Minister’s claim that “ITPs would benefit from being able to renegotiate terms of employment to use staff more efficiently”. Many strongly asserted that they are already efficient:

“I am very efficient. I manage my time well. I am a positive, productive worker. I think if any more work was placed on me and my colleagues, our ability to work efficiently would be seriously compromised.”

academic staff member, Unitec

Supporting this, [OECD data](#) shows the effectiveness of the New Zealand tertiary sector as a whole, with annual tertiary expenditure per student of US\$15088, below the OECD average of US\$16143, and noticeably less than US\$18038 for Australia, US\$24542 for the UK, and US\$29328 for the US.

Many members made comments about the lack of respect implicit in the Minister’s claim:

“This suggests ITP staff are currently a bunch of ‘slackers’ or inefficient time wasters!”

An academic staff member from Weltec commented:

“The real problem with the tertiary system today is a lack of trust, and the attitude that teachers are not efficient is a manifestation of that.”

Many staff made comments about being treated like machines:

“We are not machines to be used. We are people and people work most efficiently when they have good working conditions.”

“I’m sick of being seen as a cog in someone else’s ‘efficiency’ programme.”

Members cautioned that efficiency usually means “fast and cheap” and that that’s not the sort of education system we want:

“We need to be effective as well as efficient and as such there must be time allocated to allow for development, innovation and creativity. Having academic ‘hamsters’ going faster and faster on a wheel is not the best way for ITPs to deliver for their students, their communities and for NZ.”

academic staff member, EIT



“People are not 'things' to be 'used' 'more efficiently'... most staff I know already go way above and beyond what is in their contracts and in my experience 'more efficient' generally means letting staff go and then putting their work onto those remaining for no more remuneration or consideration for how overworked they were in the first place.”

staff member, Massey University

Members spoke of the importance of personal relationships in learning, which drives for efficiency fly in the face of:

“Teaching people is not about efficiency. Education is about taking the time with students, listening to them, showing them skills that they can use to get a real job and feel proud to be part of NZ’s society.”

academic staff member, Weltec

“One of the key directives from TEC and government is to improve the success rates of our Māori and Pacific students. From studies undertaken and personal experience we know that these students need to have a positive and supportive relationship with teaching staff and support services amongst other things. Pastoral care sensitive to the individual needs of these students and intensive monitoring and genuine and meaningful relationship development takes time and requires the tutor not only to teach programme content but to open their hearts and give something of themselves that cannot be measured or valued by rates of pay alone but is remunerated in a staff member feeling valued and part of a collective going forward together.

With free fees my fellow colleagues and I have witnessed an increase of Māori and Pasifika students but also an increase in student mental and physical health issues, financial and social issues, behavioural issues across all sectors of student enrolments. To cope with the challenges these issues present in classroom teaching, staff need a supportive and positive environment where they are listened to so that they receive the help they need to help their students and to feel valued as a member of a collective moving positively forward together. If I am struggling to pay bills or my pay is not keeping up with my cost of living, if I am asked to work more efficiently when I feel I don't have the time to do my job effectively already, my ability to do my job is impaired. My sense of worth is reduced and the ability to instil a sense of worth in our students is diminished or evaporates. What goes around comes around. I would hope our Labour government whom I voted for remembers that what really matters here are "Tangata, Tangata, Tangata" and how they treat each other. It is not just about efficiencies and saving money.”

academic staff member, Ara Institute of Canterbury

Given that the call for efficiency has often in the past been paired with redundancies, members offered cautions around staff reductions and the loss of expertise that comes with this. Others highlighted the need to differentiate between efficiency and “exploitation, inequality, and unfairness”. One staff member commented: “I cannot sustain the current flood of work let alone being used 'more efficiently'.”

Staff members from across the tertiary education sector commented on previous efficiency drives:

“The outcome of employing academic staff on fixed term contracts, taking holidays away and reducing staff numbers has not resulted in an improvement to financial



outcomes of the organisation and it has resulted in substantial deterioration in student outcomes.”

academic staff member, Massey University

“ITPs have tried for years to increase hours and change class times in the name of efficiency. This led to lower pass rates, student dissatisfaction and tutor burnout and higher staff turnover. Is this the Minister’s vision for education under a Labour led government?”

academic staff member, Wintec

Several members spoke in favour of collaboration among ITPs, a point which the Minister will be happy to hear. Seeing mergers as an unquestionable win for efficiency and productivity is misguided, however. One academic staff member from Toi Ohomai noted that “the amount of travelling between campuses at Toi Ohomai is not an efficient use of time”. Furthermore, any mergers need to take into consideration other negative effects of mergers, if not done well. This is highlighted in previous work by the TEU: “The impact of mergers on staff and students in the tertiary education sector”.

Other workers asked why staff would work more efficiently if their working conditions were under attack, speaking both of undermining the good will of staff, and of high stress levels:

“Work stress is a major health and safety issue in the sector and such proposed moves would simply worsen this. Staff are already working at full capacity. It does not serve the students for staff to be stressed, sick and unable to cope.”

The government has made a commitment to lifting social wellbeing – in Grant Robertson’s words, “placing wellbeing at the heart of what we do”. Work-life balance is a well-recognised element of wellbeing, with working hours and job strain being important aspects of this. The OECD’s definition of ‘job strain’ as the experience of job demands exceeding job resources is a perfect fit for the experiences described by ITP staff (and tertiary education staff more broadly). In line with this, staff had advice for improving real-world efficiency:

“The answer is to maintain a well work force and in most cases that means reducing the amount of extra work that staff are expected to do.”

academic staff member, Tai Poutini Polytechnic

“Support, not more pressure, is required if quality education is the desired outcome.”

academic staff member, Northtec

Conclusion

Your national conversation is a vital opportunity for the government to hear a range of voices before changing the way people study and work. Whilst the Minister does say in the Cabinet paper that he wants a discussion about a range of issues – including staffing – by identifying employment conditions as a core problem early on, he is clearly setting the parameters within which this conversation should take place.



The TEU has collated these stories to help you understand how integral good working conditions are to a successful, healthy and dynamic tertiary education sector that meets the needs of students, whānau, and communities. At this stage we have done so with a focus on the ITP sector, but the Minister's plans have also caused alarm in the university sector, not least because they risk setting a precedent that good working conditions are an impediment to success and innovation.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Nāku noa,



Dr. Sandra Grey
Te Tumu Whakarae
National President

CC *Hon. Chris Hipkins, Minister for Education*
Hon. Kelvin Davis, Associate Minister for Māori Education
Hon. Tracey Martin, Associate Minister for Education
Hon. Jenny Salesa, Associate Minister for Education
Tim Fowler, Chief Executive of the Tertiary Education Commission

