



Ominous budget looms in New Zealand

Three months away, and the Government's Budget is already looming here in New Zealand. In the last month, the tertiary education sector here has had a new Minister appointed and the Prime Minister, John Key, opened Parliament with a speech that claimed there are 'increasingly urgent problems' in tertiary education.

Mr Key said universities suffered from an inflexible and bureaucratic funding and policy framework, and that many sub-degree level programmes have drop-out rates he considers to be too high. His Government will focus its tertiary education efforts this year, he said, on ensuring that courses are relevant to the job market and of a high quality.

The Government seems intent on running down the sector and those who work in it, not just with critical words but with a long term plan to cut away at various streams of funding, one by one.

Such negativity towards our tertiary education sector is undermining the world-class teaching and research being done by staff and students in our universities, polytechnics, wānanga, and other providers.

WITT funding slash a mark of things to come

A clear example of the impact of this Government's policy is what is happening to the Western Institute of Technology in Taranaki (WITT). WITT has released a consultation document to its staff identifying a significant reduction in revenue that will occur in 2011 as a result of changes to government funding.

The report notes that funding to New Zealand's twenty polytechnics is scheduled to drop by over NZ\$44 million, or seven per cent, next year. Funding specifically for WITT is scheduled to fall by NZ\$2.17 million, or 13 per cent of WITT's previously planned funding for 2011.

WITT's proposal to address this reduction in government funding is to grow as much as it can, identify alternative revenue streams (such as more overseas students), to increase fees, and reduce costs, including staffing costs.

It proposes to save NZ\$615,000 in direct staffing costs next year. WITT also plans to make savings by reducing its health and safety payments to third party suppliers, reducing its contingency budget and reducing its training costs.

The Government needs to own up to the damage it is doing to New Zealand polytechnics.

WITT's 'Sustainable Future' proposal is anything but that. It is a desperate attempt by a small, regional polytechnic to stay afloat in the face of an increasingly hostile Government. And the whole situation reflects particularly badly on a Government that claims to be the defender of the interests of rural constituencies.

So, with the whole tertiary education sector, and especially polytechnics and institutes of technology, still reeling from last year's

Budget and the Government promising more to come, no wonder this year's Budget looms so ominously.

Equity funding at risk

One area we are particularly concerned about is the equity funding which the Tertiary Education Commission currently provides to institutions with Māori, Pasifika and disabled students. There are widespread rumours that this fund may not be renewed, or may be phased out in this year's Budget.

Equity funding, which was introduced 10 years ago, provides institutions with \$133 for each Māori or Pasifika student studying towards a diploma, \$320 for a degree, and \$444 for a postgraduate qualification. It also provides \$28 for each student with a disability.

The Tertiary Education Commission states that equity funding helps tertiary education institutions to improve equity of access and achievement for Māori students, Pasifika students, and students with disabilities.

Funding currently is used in a range of ways by the various institutions. For instance, the University of Auckland's Tūakana Programme links senior Māori students with new students, providing targeted assistance, mentoring and support to the new students. The university notes that, overall, participants in

the Tūakana Programme have significantly higher retention and pass rates than those who do not participate.

The current round of equity funding expires this year. People working in tertiary education are looking for some assurance that, given its importance and success to date, it will continue. The Government recently has been expressing concerns over retention and success rates in tertiary education. Hopefully the Minister will decide that the equity fund has proved its worth and so should be continued.

The Government says that it urgently wants to get more people who would not usually undertake a tertiary education into study. Yet it is showing the scantest respect to those people who can most help it attain that goal: the hard working staff in polytechnics, universities and wānanga who are trying to give young people the opportunity they need to learn and develop new skills. **A**

Dr Tom Ryan is National President/Te Tumu Whakarae, New Zealand Tertiary Education Union/Te Hautū Kahurangi o Aotearoa

TEU  www.teu.ac.nz