

Lifting Our Game:

Achieving greater success for
learners in foundational tertiary
education



Report of the Priority Learners Educational
Attainment Working Group

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Executive Summary



Diverse learners: diverse purposes

Any discussion of our education system needs to proceed from its fundamental aim: to create successful outcomes for learners.

Throughout 2011, the Educational Attainment Working Group (EAWG) has been exploring how we can improve the foundational levels of our education system. This primarily consists of level 1 to 3 programmes, but also encompasses targeted training and bridging programmes to degree-level study.

The EAWG has positioned this work as being about ‘priority learners’. Focusing on learners rather than levels per se highlights the Working Group’s belief that any discussion of our education system needs to proceed from its fundamental aim: to create successful outcomes for the people who take part in it.

Similarly, while there are many terms for the types of learners that are the focus of this report, using the term ‘priority’ emphasises the pivotal role of education at these levels for addressing priorities in the *Tertiary Education Strategy 2010–15* – increasing success for Māori and Pacific learners, supporting pathways and transitions to higher levels of education, and ensuring that level 1 to 3 study is a genuinely valuable option for those not yet ready to study at higher levels.

The learners we are talking about at this level are diverse and want to achieve a variety of different outcomes, from developing employment-ready skills that mean they can start a good job, to developing literacy, language and numeracy skills, to acquiring the competencies necessary to move into a higher level of study. What is common across the board, however, is the notion that such learning is clearly and directly a stepping-stone towards something – be that good employment that leads to a sustainable career (with the possibility of further training down the track), further education, or a significantly better quality of life. If our education system is not supporting these outcomes – or cannot tell us whether they are being supported – then, quite simply, it is not working.

When they work well, these programmes are a valuable part of our education system. Most significantly, they provide a strong pathway back into education and sustainable employment – not just short-term casual work – for those who have had little achievement in these areas. This is of particular importance for Māori and Pacific peoples, many of whom have negative experiences within our school system, and exit with lower qualifications than people from other communities. The EAWG wishes to specifically emphasise the importance of these programmes in the context of our Treaty partnership in addressing issues around Māori disadvantage and development.

The need for a system-wide view

Through this work, however, the EAWG has identified clear problems with the outcomes of our system at this level: low completion and progression rates, low social and economic benefits from qualifications, and a lack of information about programmes and outcomes. However, one of the recurrent messages the Working Group has received from international experts invited to support this work is that we already have many of the features necessary for a high-quality system that creates high-quality outcomes for priority learners. This message is reinforced by the fact that there are organisations working within our existing system that are proving successful at meeting the needs of priority learners. The challenge that faces us is to ensure that our system as a whole realises its potential to create change for these learners.

The diversity of this part of our tertiary education sector means that no single model of delivery will suit every group of learners, every type of programme or every type of provider. However, there are key lessons and principles that all tertiary education organisations can use to improve their performance.

The EAWG believes that we need to ensure that priority learners are served by:

- better advice and support for learners as individuals
- ‘real’, purposeful and personalised courses
- improved use and collection of data
- genuine transparency and accountability within a ‘joined-up’ system.

The Working Group has been encouraged by recent policy developments, such as moves to better link official datasets and an increased focus on student outcomes, which align with its thinking. In many ways, our system is already on a path to increased across-the-board educational success for priority learners. We now need to not just ensure we maintain that path, but also make an effort to widen, support, and extend it further.

Individual advice and support

Better, individualised advice and support for learners

Priority learners often have less experience of the education system than those at other levels, and lower levels of readiness for study – particularly in the less tangible dimensions around *how* to operate in a tertiary education setting. This makes the provision of appropriate advice and support particularly critical for ensuring that priority learners obtain good outcomes from their study.

Because of this, priority learners need to be served by:

- **Effective communication from providers:** Better advice and support begins with effective communication by providers about programmes of study at this level. This starts with clear communication of the purpose of these programmes, but also communication of how the provider will support learners to complete, and a clear statement of what is expected of learners in return.

- **Appropriate diagnostics and pre-assessment:** Priority learners are a diverse group, who vary significantly in their goals, strengths, needs and readiness for study. For this reason, it is important for providers to have a well-developed pre-enrolment process to ensure that a learner is undertaking the right programme for what they want to achieve from their study, for providers to develop a full picture of learners' capabilities, and for an individualised learning plan to be developed.
- **Active learner support within programmes:** Once priority learners have begun a programme, they need to have access to an appropriately supportive environment. This does not only mean access to specific services from the provider, but also a more 'seamless' model involving pro-active engagement by tutors, flexible delivery models and culturally safe learning environments.

Purposeful learner-centric provision

Real and purposeful courses

Providers that offer these courses need to invest in the staff and learners on these programmes, and hold them to the same expectations and standards of achievement as they would those in other programmes. The models used for programme delivery must also suit the needs of learners. Providers must understand the situation(s) of learners within these particular courses, and develop delivery models that are designed first and foremost to suit the needs of these learners rather than those of the organisation. Beyond these basic elements of programme design, there are two core dimensions to this theme. They are:

- **Purposeful provision:** Programmes should be tied to (and their success measured and reported against) specific expected outcomes.
- **Personalisation of Learning:** Priority learners need to be able to engage in flexible programmes that are designed to fit their goals and pre-existing abilities, rather than being constrained by strict provider requirements.

Better data for all stakeholders

Improved data collection and use

Effective tracking and information is a crucial component of a well-functioning system. This information needs to be both used to develop and reinforce good provider-level practice and system-level policy, and available to potential and current learners to inform their own decision making – thereby giving them the ability to take some control over their own learning pathway and confidence in the likely outcome of their study. There are three core dimensions to better collection and use of data:

- **In-course monitoring:** Once a learner is engaged in studying, a provider must commit to actively monitoring their progress through their programme and supporting learners if they show signs of faltering.

- **Tracking outcomes:** Providers need to be tracking the ongoing outcomes from these programmes, including outcomes related to the specific purpose of individual programmes and learners' own intended goals.
- **System-level information:** While providers need to improve their collection and use of data, so too do the agencies charged with monitoring the system as a whole. We need much better information about the nature of the programmes that are being funded, a better understanding of why learners choose to enrol in these programmes and what they (and/or placement agencies) intend to achieve as a result, and we need to understand what happens to learners once they finish their programmes.

End-to-end transparency and accountability

Genuine transparency and accountability within a 'joined-up' system

A high-quality system that serves learners' needs must be founded on principles of transparency and accountability. These concepts are often treated as referring to funding bodies or the Government, but we need to make a shift and think of them as meaning accountability to and transparency for *learners*. Providers whose programmes are not meeting the needs of priority learners must be challenged to improve their performance, and if they cannot, then they should not be offering those programmes. To accept otherwise is to devalue the commitment that priority learners make when they enrol in a programme. There are two particular dimensions of this that the EAWG wishes to highlight:

- **Sophisticated accountability and defining success:** We must maintain (and use) a robust and effective system of accountability. However, it is also important that we apply this system to the right measures, and recognise what a programme is trying to achieve when we evaluate its outcomes.
- **'Joining up' the system:** All those with a role in achieving successful outcomes for priority learners must work with the same goal in mind even when they are not actively collaborating with each other. One of the most important areas for this principle to be apparent is in the area of government policy, where different agencies can end up putting in place processes or measures that actively conflict with each other.

Solutions are already to be found within the sector

Ensuring that the framework for and provision of programmes for priority learners reflects these principles will require some work on the part of both tertiary organisations and government agencies. However, the EAWG is confident that this is achievable, and that implementing many of its recommendations will require organisational commitment and cultural change more than anything else. The fact that some providers are currently achieving excellent results shows that putting in place approaches and models of delivery that truly meet the needs of priority learners is not something that is beyond our grasp.

Recommendations



We need to place this provision firmly in the context of social policy

The Educational Attainment Working Group recommends that:

- Relevant agencies complete a stocktake of the Government's investment in lifting adult literacy, language and numeracy, and the effectiveness and outcomes of this investment in terms of both direct gain and wider educational, employment and social outcomes.
- There continues to be a strong focus on lifting the achievement of level 1 to 3 learners in the Tertiary Education Strategy and by government agencies.

Effective solutions are learner-focused

Better, individualised advice and support for learners

- Providers of level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging programmes establish relevant pre-enrolment diagnostic and pre-assessment processes for potential learners, leading to the development of dynamic and interactive personalised learning plans.
- Providers ensure that support for learners in level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging programmes is explicitly integrated into approaches to teaching practice and course design, as well as through external support services.
- Providers ensure that modes of delivery, teaching practice and learner support services are designed to suit part-time and extramural learners in level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging programmes.
- The New Zealand Qualification Authority's quality assurance processes for providers – including External Evaluation and Review and accreditation – include evidence that the distinctive needs of learners in level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging programmes are understood and addressed effectively.

Effective solutions are highly purposeful

'Real', purposeful and personalised programmes

- Providers ensure that delivery models for level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging programmes appropriately build on the strengths and respond to the needs of learners in these programmes.
- All level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging programmes are required to include clear and specific purposes, represented by explicitly intended academic and/or employment outcomes.

- Providers ensure that level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging programmes incorporate the use of dynamic personalised learning plans.

There is an urgent need to strengthen the evidence base for decision making

Improved data collection and use

- Providers of level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging programmes implement systems for systematic ‘real-time’ monitoring of learner performance during their programmes that allows remedial actions to be taken in a timely way.
- Providers of level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging programmes develop systems to track purpose-specific learner outcomes from these programmes for at least one year following programme completion.
- The Tertiary Education Commission and NZQA assist providers to track student outcomes through improved access to official datasets, including data collected by the Inland Revenue Department and the Ministry of Social Development.
- The Tertiary Education Commission and NZQA develop systems to collect data on programme purpose as part of regular reporting.
- The Ministry of Education commissions and/or undertakes additional research to map the ‘Type Two’ incentives (Keep and James, 2010) that affect learner completion within level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging programmes, and this work feeds into subsequent policy development.

Accountability measures need to be strengthened and more focused on value-add and outcomes

Genuine transparency and accountability within a ‘joined-up’ system

- The Tertiary Education Commission prioritises investing in level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging programme providers that identify specific intended academic and/or employment outcomes, and can provide evidence of successful outcomes over time.
- The Tertiary Education Commission and Ministry of Education work with providers to develop system-level performance monitoring systems that can account for both programme purpose-specific outcomes and the ‘value added’ for learners.
- Government agencies build strong policy development and implementation links between the Department of Labour¹, the Tertiary Education Commission, NZQA and the Ministry of Education, particularly with regard to transitions from secondary to tertiary education, and from education to employment.

¹ Or the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment.

1. Introduction

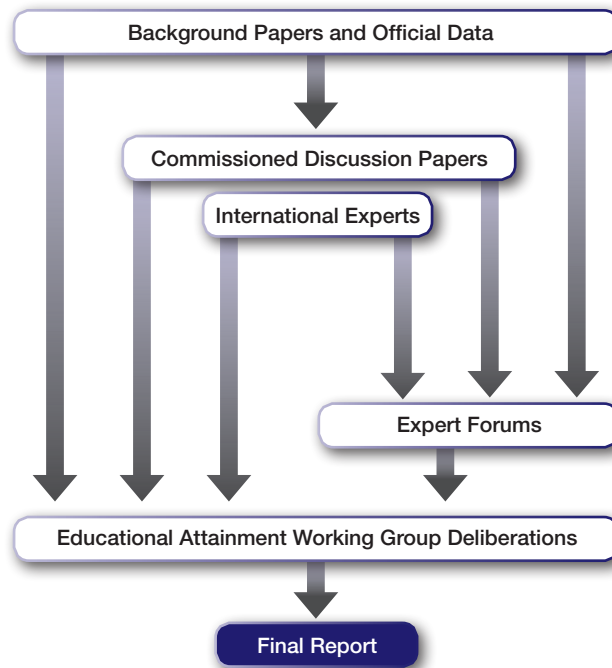
Focusing on levels 1 to 3 of the New Zealand Qualifications Framework

A data-driven, internationally referenced review

This report represents the culmination of work undertaken by the Priority Learners Educational Attainment Working Group (EAWG) throughout 2011. The focus of this work has been to explore how well our system is working at its lowest levels – primarily programmes at levels 1 to 3 of the New Zealand Qualifications Framework, but also targeted training programmes and academic preparation/bridging programmes to degree-level study (that are often above level 3).²

This work has been built on the exploration of official data, several commissioned discussion papers on issues relating to priority learners³ and input from international experts.⁴ These international experts were hosted at a series of ‘expert forums’ throughout the country, at which input on how our system could be improved was sought from those working with priority learners. Figure 1 below illustrates how these different sources have led to the development of this final report.

FIGURE 1: DEVELOPMENT OF THE EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT WORKING GROUP'S FINAL REPORT



² This work has confined itself to provider-based education and training, and has not examined New Zealand's industry training system. This is due both to significant differences between learners, organisations and modes of delivery between industry training and provider-based training, and the Industry Training Review that is currently underway. Nevertheless, the overarching points in this work are relevant to the industry training sector, and the EAWG hopes that both ITOs and the Ministry of Education will consider how the recommendations in this report can be reflected within the industry training system.

³ These discussion papers included issues specific to targeted training programmes (Walbran 2011), transitions (Middleton 2011), and part-time learners (Turner 2011). Summaries of these papers, as well as summaries of the data papers prepared for the Working Group, can be found in appendices two to six of this report.

⁴ Brief profiles of the three experts invited to contribute to the EAWG's deliberations can be found in appendix one of this report.

The EAWG has consciously chosen to use the term ‘priority’ learners when referring to the people studying at this level. There are many terms for the types of learners that are the focus of this report: ‘non-traditional’ learners, ‘under-served’ learners and ‘foundation’ learners. In the Working Group’s view, using the term ‘priority’ to describe this group emphasises the pivotal role of education at these levels for addressing the needs of priority groups in the *Tertiary Education Strategy 2010–15*.

To ensure that more Māori and Pacific peoples achieve at higher levels we need to ensure that the foundational programmes in which many of these learners participate support effective pathways to higher levels of study. We need to do the same for young people who are deciding whether or not to transition from school to tertiary study, and ensure that level 1 to 3 study is a genuinely valuable option for those not yet ready to study at higher levels.

Positioning our work in relation to learners, rather than programmes, highlights the Working Group’s belief that any discussion of our education system needs to proceed from its fundamental purpose: creating successful outcomes for learners

Common across the board is the notion that their learning is clearly and directly a stepping-stone towards something – be it good employment, further education or a significantly better quality of life

The EAWG has identified clear problems with the outcomes of our system at this level: low completion and progression rates, low social and economic benefits from qualifications, and a lack of information

The challenge that faces us is to ensure that our system as a whole realises its potential to create change for these learners

The EAWG has also chosen to frame its work as being in relation to learners, rather than programmes, to highlight the Working Group’s belief that any discussion of our education system needs to proceed from its fundamental purpose: creating successful outcomes for learners. This – rather than serving the needs of providers or policy makers – must be the ultimate goal of policies and structures adopted by both individual tertiary organisations and those who have oversight of the system.

The learners we are talking about at this level are diverse and want to achieve a variety of different outcomes, from developing employment-ready skills that mean they can start a good job, to enhancing their literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) skills, to acquiring the competencies necessary to move into a higher level of study. What is common across the board, however, is the notion that their learning is clearly and directly a stepping-stone towards something – be it good employment that leads to a sustainable career (with the possibility of further training down the track), further education, or a significantly better quality of life. If our education system is not supporting these outcomes – or cannot tell us whether they are being supported – then, quite simply, it is not working.

Through this work, the EAWG has identified clear problems with the outcomes of our system at this level: low completion and progression rates, low social and economic benefits from qualifications, and a lack of information. However, one of the recurrent messages the Working Group has received from international experts invited to support this work is that we already have many of the features necessary for a high-quality system that creates high-quality outcomes for priority learners. This message is reinforced by the fact that there are organisations working within our existing system that are proving successful at meeting the needs of priority learners. The challenge that faces us is to ensure that our system *as a whole* realises its potential to create change for these learners.

For providers to do the best job they can, they must be supported by a policy, social and stakeholder infrastructure that facilitates the achievement of sustainable, long-term outcomes, rather than one that works against it

There is no single solution

Given that our system already contains the elements needed to achieve good outcomes for priority learners, the Working Group has chosen to focus primarily at organisation-level action – that is, what the providers that serve these learners can do to improve outcomes. However, the Working Group also believes it is important to recognise that providers do not work in a vacuum. For providers to do the best job they can, they must be supported by a policy, social and stakeholder infrastructure that facilitates the achievement of sustainable, positive outcomes, rather than one that works against it.

The EAWG does not see this report as providing The Answer to how we can ensure that our system of provision addresses the needs of priority learners: we are firmly of the view that there is no single 'solution'. This report summarises the Working Group's thinking and identifies points for action, but the Group also hopes that the discussion forums, papers and international expert contributions have begun a discussion across the sector and amongst officials about how we can best support priority learners to achieve success within our tertiary education system.



2. Who are priority learners?⁵

Priority learners are the single biggest group of learners in New Zealand's tertiary education system

Priority learners are the single biggest group of learners in New Zealand's tertiary education system. Although numbers have been declining since their high point in 2010, those at level 1 to 3 continue to make up more than a third of domestic tertiary learners – 160,000 in 2010 – which includes the more than 25,000 people engaged in targeted training programmes. To this can be added the thousands engaged in bridging programmes above level 3.

While this group of learners is very diverse, there are several characteristics worth highlighting.

Māori and Pacific peoples participate in these parts of the education system at far greater rates than they do in others

Firstly, many of these learners identify as Māori or of one or more Pacific ethnicities. The text-box below provides additional detail on participation and achievement by Māori and Pacific priority learners, but, in brief, people from these ethnic groups participate in these parts of the education system at far greater rates than they do in others – in targeted training programmes, more learners identify as Māori than as of any other ethnicity.

Priority learners also have distinctive age profiles when compared to other parts of the tertiary system. Level 1 to 3 learners are noticeably older than those at other levels – in 2009, 38 percent of level 1 to 3 learners were aged 40 or older, compared to 22 percent of learners at levels 4 and above. Conversely, participants in bridging programmes are noticeably younger – in the same year 51 percent of bridging programme participants were under 20.⁶

Far higher proportions of those who come into these programmes have previously been part of the 'NEET' population

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of priority learners, however, is the paths that they take into tertiary education. Far higher proportions of those who come into these programmes have previously been part of the 'NEET' population (Not in Education, Employment or Training) before beginning their programme, and many enter their education with comparatively low levels of previous educational attainment (or none at all). Targeted training programmes are specifically aimed at this group. Bridging programmes are also designed for those who do not have the necessary skills for successful study at higher levels.

In 2009, 58 percent of level 1 to 3 learners had lower than NCEA level two-equivalent school qualifications – 37 percent had no school qualification. These figures are particularly high for Māori and Pacific learners, pointing to both the poorer outcomes for Māori and Pacific peoples from the compulsory education sector, and the valuable role these programmes can play in building skills among these communities.

⁵ A full description of priority learner demographics can be found in Ako Aotearoa (2011a; 2011b). Unless otherwise noted, data in this chapter are drawn from these publications.

⁶ Compared to 20 percent of level 4 learners, 14 percent of level 5 to 7 learners and 26 percent of degree-level learners.

Focusing on Māori priority learners

Foundation programmes are a key component of Māori participation in tertiary education, with more than a quarter of learners in level 1 to 3 and level 4 bridging programmes identifying as Māori (compared to 17 percent of learners at other levels), and Māori having historically been the largest single ethnic group in targeted training programmes. In 2009, the age-standardised participation rate for Māori at level 1 to 3 was 8.7 percent – the highest of any ethnic group.

Overall, Māori priority learners are younger than those from other ethnic groups, and they also tend to enter with lower levels of prior educational achievement. Although full-time completion rates are lower than those of most other ethnic groups, Māori who complete programmes are more likely to progress to higher levels of study. Key points from official data relating to Māori priority learners at levels 1 to 3 include:¹

- 36 percent of Māori learners at level 1 to 3 are under 25, compared to 33 percent of all level 1 to 3 learners.
- 75 percent of Māori learners at level 1 to 3 had no qualification or the equivalent of NCEA level one, compared to 57 percent of level 1 to 3 learners as a whole.
- Five-year qualification completion rates for Māori at level 1 to 3 who study part-time are similar to those for Pakeha and Pacific learners (at just under 40 percent).
- Five-year qualification completion rates for Māori at level 1 to 3 who study full-time are comparable to Pacific learners (just under 70 percent), but are noticeably lower than Pakeha and Asian learners (around 80 percent).
- Annual rates for the completion of individual courses within level 1 to 3 programmes are noticeably lower for Māori than other ethnicities (64 percent, compared to 68 percent for Pacific, 70 percent for Pakeha and 77 percent for Asian learners).
- Māori learners who complete level 1 to 3 programmes have noticeably higher rates of progression to entering higher-level programmes than do other ethnic groups (49 percent, compared to 42 percent for Pacific, 37 percent for Pakeha and 35 percent for Asian learners).
- Although we have little data on specific outcomes for Māori priority learners, according to Earle (2010), possession of a level 1 to 3 qualification has a smaller positive impact on employment for Māori than for other ethnic groups.

¹ All data relates to 2009 or a time-period that finishes at the end of 2009.

Focusing on Pacific priority learners

Learners from Pacific backgrounds have a strong presence at levels 1 to 3, with 9 percent of level 1 to 3 learners and 15 percent of those in level 4 bridging programmes identifying as of Pacific ethnicity (compared to 7 percent of learners at other levels). The age-standardised participation rate for Pacific learners at level 1 to 3 (at 4.9 percent) is the second highest after Māori learners. In targeted training programmes, Pacific trainees have consistently been the third largest ethnic group, and the number of Pacific participants has remained reasonably consistent over the past decade.

Pacific priority learners are dramatically younger than other ethnic groups, and tend to enter with lower levels of prior educational attainment than Pakeha or Asian learners. Although full-time completion rates are lower than those of other ethnic groups, Pacific learners who complete programmes are more likely than Pakeha or Asian learners to progress on to higher levels of study. Key points from official data relating to Pacific priority learners at levels 1 to 3 include:¹

- 46 percent of Pacific learners at level 1 to 3 are under 25, compared to 33 percent of all level 1 to 3 learners.

- 61 percent of Pacific learners at level 1 to 3 had no qualification or the equivalent of NCEA level 1, compared to 57 percent of level 1 to 3 learners as a whole.
- Five-year qualification completion rates for Pacific learners at level 1 to 3 who study part-time are similar to those for Pakeha and Māori learners (at just under 40 percent).
- Five-year qualification completion rates for Pacific learners at level 1 to 3 who study full-time are comparable to Māori learners (just under 70 percent), but noticeably lower than Pakeha and Asian learners (around 80 percent), and have consistently been the lowest of all ethnic groups.
- Annual rates for the completion of individual courses within level 1 to 3 programmes are lower for Pacific learners than Pakeha and Asian learners, but higher than those for Māori (68 percent, compared to 64 percent for Māori, 70 percent for Pakeha, and 77 percent for Asian learners).
- Pacific learners who complete level 1 to 3 programmes have higher rates of progression to entering higher level programmes than Pakeha and Asian learners (42 percent, compared to 37 percent for Pakeha, and 35 percent for Asian learners).
- Although we have little data on specific outcomes for Pacific priority learners, according to Earle (2010), possession of a level 1 to 3 qualification has a smaller positive impact on employment than it does for Pakeha and Asian New Zealanders, but a larger impact than for Māori.

ⁱ All data relates to 2009 or a time-period that finishes at the end of 2009.

Many priority learners face significant challenges when entering programmes

These factors mean that many priority learners face significant challenges when entering programmes. Their last personal experiences of the education system may have been many years ago, and are quite likely to have been negative. These experiences may in turn be the product of – or have led to – significantly lower literacy, language and numeracy skills than are common at other levels.⁷

It needs to be recognised that these learners are more likely to have fewer of the skills needed for success in tertiary education than those at other levels.

These learners may come from communities where undertaking tertiary study is unusual; many may be 'First Generation Learners', who are the first in their families and peer group to enter tertiary education. Anecdotally, these learners also often face significant external demands on their time from family or community responsibilities.

This distinctive profile means that programmes need to account for fundamentally different types of learners than those at other levels. This is not simply a case of course content being pitched at any appropriate level. Rather, it needs to be recognised that these learners are more likely to have significantly less of the overall skillset needed to experience success in tertiary education than those at other levels. Conley (2008) identifies four dimensions of 'college' readiness:

- *Content knowledge*: Understanding key concepts in a particular area.

⁷ Levels of literacy and numeracy skill are strongly associated with levels of educational achievement (see, for example, Satherley, Lawes and Sok, 2009).

- *Cognitive strategies:* Such as how to formulate and solve problems, or how to communicate ideas effectively.
- *Academic behaviours:* 'How to study' skills, such as effective time management.
- *Contextual awareness or 'college knowledge':* How to function and learn within an education environment, including feeling comfortable with institutional processes and understanding the expectations that a provider will have of its students.

When they work well, these programmes provide a strong pathway back into education and a successful career – not just short-term employment.

By definition, priority learners will have low levels of content knowledge – the point of a level 1 or 2 certificate, for example, is to provide the learner with foundational knowledge and skills in an area. However, as a group they are also likely to have low levels across the remaining three dimensions: a poorer understanding of how to go about successfully learning than learners at other levels, and a lack of familiarity and comfort with the processes and expectations of tertiary providers. They possess little cultural capital, making it more difficult for them to access and effectively participate in tertiary education.

This profile also points to the important role of lower-level education programmes. When they work well, these programmes are a valuable part of our education system that provide a strong pathway back into education and a successful career – not just short-term employment – for those who have had little achievement in these areas, as well as a strong platform for future skill development. This can then flow through to address inter-generational deprivation, as increased skills and education on the part of parents flow through to better economic, social and health outcomes for family and whānau as a whole. Some programmes embrace this potential by taking a collective approach, in which multiple generations participate together.

This feature is of particular importance for Māori and Pacific peoples, many of whom have negative experiences within our school system, and exit with lower qualifications than people from other communities. Clearly, improving this situation will require direct and urgent action in compulsory education, social and economic spheres. However, we also need to provide for those who have already been failed by our system, and well-functioning level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging programmes are critical to developing the capability of Māori and Pacific young people and adults. Developing links between these programmes and specific employers can also be a vehicle for increasing participation in industries where Māori and Pacific peoples are under-represented, such as health and education.

Ensuring that we have an effective system for priority learners is not simply a moral imperative – and in the case of Māori, some would argue a Treaty obligation – but also a key method for ensuring that our economy has sufficient skill available to meet its needs in the future, and that all New Zealanders are able to participate fully in our society.

3. What are the issues?

Our tertiary education system appears to be failing more priority learners than it should

Taken as a whole, our system is not working well for priority learners. While there are individual examples of good work occurring within our system and good outcomes from level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging programmes, across the board our tertiary education system appears to be failing more learners than it should.

There are four core issues with our system's performance:

- low completion rates⁸
- low progression rates
- low inherent social and economic benefits
- poor information.

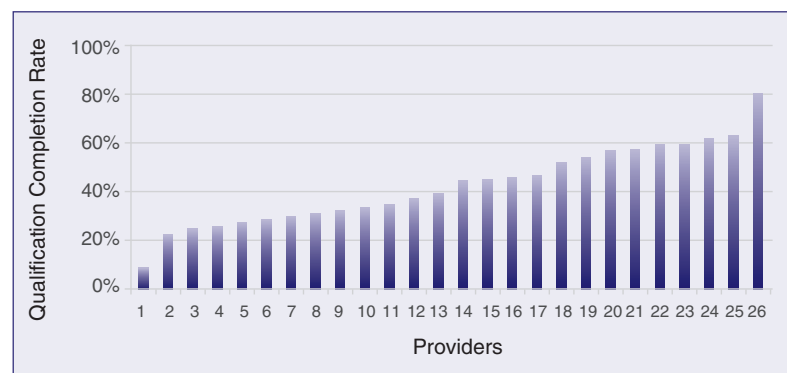
By the beginning of 2011, less than 39 percent of learners at levels 1 to 3 who began studying in 2006 had completed a qualification

Low completion rates

The most basic indicator of educational success is completion rates, and for priority learners this indicator is poor. For example, by the beginning of 2011, less than 39 percent of learners at levels 1 to 3 who began studying in 2006 had completed a qualification. Individual providers may be undertaking excellent work, but this is not consistently the case across the sector.

Figure 2 below draws on Tertiary Education Commission Education Performance Indicator data for public providers as an example of the range of performance that exists within our system; equivalent data for the large number of private providers in this area shows even more significant variation. While some of this variation might be explained by specific situational factors or quirks of methodology, looking at the data collectively it is clear that some providers are able to achieve excellent results in the current environment, while others' completion rates are clearly below acceptable levels.

FIGURE 2: 2009 LEVEL 1 TO 3 QUALIFICATION COMPLETION RATES AT INDIVIDUAL PUBLIC PROVIDERS



⁸ Unless otherwise noted, information in this section is sourced from Ako Aotearoa (2011a; 2011b).

Completion rates of part-time learners studying at levels 1 to 3 are 10 percent lower than for full-time learners

This low completion problem is particularly apparent among part-time learners. While part-time learners consistently have lower completion rates than full-time learners in all parts of our system, this gap is particularly evident at lower levels. For example, there is currently a 10 percentage point difference in part-time and full-time five-year completion rates among level 1 to 3 learners, compared to seven percentage points at level 4. This does not mean that part-time learning is inherently problematic, but it does point to there being specific problems with the way programmes at this level are addressing the needs of part-time learners. This is particularly concerning given the high proportion of priority learners who study part-time (54 percent in 2010).

Possibly less than one in five learners who complete these programmes go on to complete a higher qualification

Low progression rates

In addition to low completion rates, most priority learners do not appear to progress to further study, which is one of the key rationales for publicly funding programmes at these levels. Rates of progression to higher-level study among level 1 to 3 learners are both low and appear to be falling over time – by the end of 2010, only just over a third (35 percent) of those who enrolled in 2005 had subsequently enrolled in a higher-level qualification. As noted earlier, progression rates are noticeably higher for Māori and Pacific learners (50 percent and 42 percent respectively), but we should still be aiming for significantly more than half of those who complete to move into higher-level programmes within a reasonable timeframe.

We do not have a good understanding of the achievement of those who do go on to further study

Furthermore, we do not have a good understanding of the achievement of those who do go on to further study. If their achievement rates are even simply ‘as good as’ other learners, we may be looking at less than one in five of those who complete these programmes going on to actually complete a higher-level qualification.

According to Mahoney (2009), targeted training programmes have historically reported high rates of positive outcomes amongst participants, but many of these outcomes involved returning to participate in another such programme, and crucially there has been no analysis of longer-term outcomes (beyond two months after completion). Changes have recently been made to targeted training programmes – *Training Opportunities* being split into two programmes and *Youth Training* being incorporated into the Youth Guarantee scheme – and it is too early to draw clear conclusions about the effect of these. However, many providers do have concerns about the effect of these changes, in particular that new funding and accountability regimes will continue to incentivise short-term outputs rather than long-term positive outcomes for participants.⁹

⁹ See Walbran (2011) for an overview and discussion of the context, issues and potential lessons for the future development of targeted training programmes.

What data we have suggests that gaining these qualifications per se does not compensate for lack of success at school

Low inherent social and economic benefits

Low progression rates might not be as concerning if the qualifications from these programmes led to positive outcomes in their own right, but this is far from clear. Scott (2009) identifies a small benefit to income from completing a level 1 to 3 programme compared to not finishing one, but Earle (2010) shows that while having such qualifications is associated with better social and economic outcomes than having no qualifications at all, the relevant measures are often lower than those who only possess school-level qualifications.

This lack of benefit for priority learners is a key problem not just in-and-of-itself, but also in terms of its implications for learners' motivation to engage with and complete their learning (and move on to further and higher levels). Keep and James (2010) identify two different types of incentives that affect educational success: internal ('Type One') incentives that exist within the education system itself, and external ('Type Two') incentives that relate to how education interacts with other spheres, such as the economy or culture. The text-box below provides examples of these types of incentives.

Examples of Type 1 (internal) incentives

- Intrinsic interest and pleasure in learning, with curriculum design and pedagogy fashioned to deliver and enhance this.
- Forms and methods of assessment that are designed to encourage further participation rather than to sort students or ration access to the next level of learning (i.e. formative rather than summative assessment).
- Opportunities for progression in education and training that are relatively 'open' and are not tightly rationed.
- Institutional cultures within the education and training system that nurture potential and celebrate achievement.

Examples of Type 2 (external) incentives

- Wage returns/premia to particular types and levels of qualification.
- Other benefits to particular professions and occupations with high qualification requirements (e.g. intrinsic job interest, opportunities to travel, etc).
- Career progression and promotion opportunities within particular occupational labour markets or employers.
- Increased social status from particular qualifications or careers.
- Cultural expectations within society as a whole or particular communities, concerning the value of learning and qualifications (and, for young people, associated parental pressure to achieve).
- Labour market regulation that makes the acquisition of certain levels and types of qualification a prerequisite for access to particular occupations.
- Satisfaction/enjoyment in family life and sporting, cultural, political and voluntary activities, which can be gained through applying new skills, knowledge and expertise.

Taken from Keep and James (2010), pp6-7.

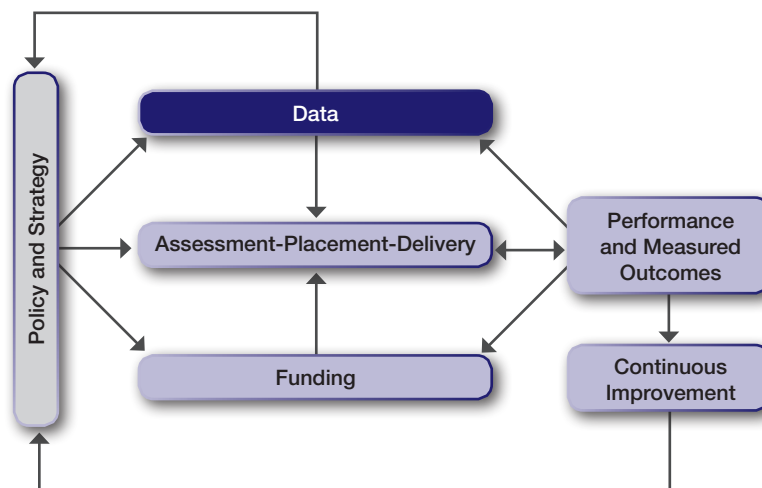
Social and economic benefits are precisely the sort of external incentives that priority learners should be able to experience once they complete their qualifications. If priority learners are unlikely to experience – and perhaps more importantly, do not see others experiencing – these social and economic benefits, then their motivation to complete these qualifications is likely to fall, as is their motivation to use these programmes as a springboard to further education and training.

Good quality information is an integral part of any good quality system; information about and for priority learners is inadequate

Poor information

Beyond outcomes for learners, there is also a fundamental issue with our lack of knowledge about this area as a whole. Good-quality information is an integral part of any good-quality system. In the education sector, information is needed to inform practice at individual providers and by practitioners, and the reporting and policy making undertaken by central government. Figure 3 below, taken from the policy framework used by the Education Commission of the States, provides one view of how data fits into the wider pattern of an effective education system, from the perspective of funders and providers.

FIGURE 3: FRAMEWORK FOR HIGH QUALITY EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE



(Taken from Remedial Education Policy Framework, in Vandal, 2010, p12).

Good quality information is critical for learners

As important as information is for Government and tertiary organisations, good quality information is also critical for learners themselves. Learners obviously benefit from the improvements to provision that come from improved information – from providers using data to understand learners, monitor progress, and adapt or change processes and delivery models where required, and from policy makers putting in place frameworks and requirements that facilitate, rather than inhibit, good outcomes. But learners also directly need access to good quality information about the programmes they are pursuing; they need to be able to make informed educational choices that fit with their ultimate career and life goals.

Neither the TEC nor NZQA collect data on the intent of programmes

Despite the importance of good information, we do not have a strong grasp on the specific nature of provision in this area. For example, we do know that there are a diverse range of these programmes serving a range of goals, from those intended to lead to employment, to those that build generic life and academic skills. However, while we do collect data on the subject areas of courses and qualifications, neither the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) nor the TEC collects data on the *intent* of programmes – such as, how many programmes are intended to be directly vocational, and how many are intended to provide more general skills or capabilities. This makes any rigorous analysis of the outcomes of different types of programmes very difficult.

We need to improve our ongoing approach to collecting and reporting information about priority learners and their experiences during and after they take part in these programmes

This lack of good quality data on programme intention is accompanied by weak data on learner intention – the reasons why priority learners enter their programmes, and whether they end up achieving these goals. And to return to outcomes, we have relatively little robust, systematically collected and regularly reported data on the long-term outcomes from these programmes, such as future educational performance (not just participation) or labour market outcomes. We have valuable examples of one-off or semi-regular analysis (such as the work on outcomes by Scott and Earle), but we need to improve our ongoing approach to collecting and reporting information about priority learners and their experiences during and after they take part in these programmes, and commit to utilising this information to improve the quality of provision and outcomes for learners.

An additional challenge: Those who have been left behind

The work of the EAWG has focused largely on making sure our system suits the needs of those who enter it. The issues identified above point to problems with how our system is meeting those needs, and the remainder of this report examines how we can address them.

In looking at issues for those who engage with the foundational levels of our tertiary education system, however, it is impossible to ignore the question of those who do not engage with these levels because our education system (and often society) has already failed them earlier in their life.

Some of the recommendations in this report will benefit these learners. Being more specific about the purpose of programmes, for example, may provide enough of a ‘Type Two’ incentive to encourage some of these learners to re-engage with education and training.

However, addressing issues for people that have become disengaged from education requires more fundamental action than that described here. One example of this is considering the relationship between the secondary and tertiary sectors, and whether different models of this relationship and the transition between stages of education may be more successful at serving the needs of those who are at risk of disengaging or have already done so.

4. What do we need to do?

Policy needs to be holistic; its focus needs to be on achieving sustainable positive outcomes for learners

While there are clear issues with the overall performance of our system for priority learners, the EAWG does not believe that we need drastic systemic change to address these issues.

We do need to ensure policy and funding systems do not hamper providers from addressing the points outlined in this report. For example, funding settings may discourage providers from recognising existing skills or qualifications, forcing learners to study what they already know. Similarly, as mentioned earlier, many of those who attended the discussion forums expressed concern that policies around targeted training programmes may treat a learner moving to a low-paid, insecure job with few long-term prospects as a better outcome than that learner enrolling in a trade-based diploma. In trying to promote positive employment outcomes in the short term, such a situation would actually lead to negative outcomes for that learner in the long term.

It is important that central government agencies take responsibility for this. We have a significant problem if providers are being told by one agency that they need to be developing positive educational outcomes for learners, but policy settings or funding rules from another encourage (or require) the achievement of outputs that lead to negative outcomes over time.

Making sure our system works well at these levels is not about wholesale change. In general, we have available the tools and necessary structures to ensure our system delivers good outcomes for priority learners

Making sure our system works well at these levels is not about wholesale change. In general, we have available the tools and necessary structures to ensure our system delivers good outcomes for priority learners. Performance is diverse across the sector, and some tertiary education organisations (TEOs) are doing very good work for these learners. These different TEOs might use different approaches, and there is no single model that will suit every group of learners or type of provider, but there are key lessons and principles that all TEOs can use to improve their performance. We need to embed and support good practice where it currently exists, and ensure it develops in areas where it currently does not.

By focusing on how resources are used, and directing them (at the organisation and system level) towards proven, effective approaches, improvements are possible with minimal additional resources

This also means that creating change should not require a significant amount of extra funding – the track record of some high-performing providers shows that it is possible to achieve high-quality outcomes in the current funding climate. Fundamentally, lifting outcomes for priority learners does not require more money, but rather both providers and the Government being ‘smarter’ about how they approach these parts of the system. By focusing on how resources are used, and directing them (at the level of both organisation and system) towards proven, effective approaches, the EAWG believes that improvements are possible with minimal additional resources. Where additional funding is provided, it should be tailored to build capability by supporting the specific recommendations in this report – such as training staff in conducting effective pre-enrolment conversations with students – rather than simply funding additional places.

If this part of our system does not work effectively, we are condemning many Māori to poor social outcomes and jobs with low pay, poor conditions, and few career prospects, making them highly vulnerable to short-term shifts in the economy

Conversely, there is also an onus on providers to ensure that they use their own resources to support priority learners most effectively. Some organisations might have to make additional investments in processes or staff training to put in place the recommendations in this report, but if they are serious about good-quality outcomes for priority learners, then they need to be prepared to make those investments. Concentrating resources in a somewhat smaller group of providers than currently exists, but who are better at achieving positive outcomes for learners, is not a bad thing.

It is worth re-emphasising here the particular importance of addressing these themes for Māori learners. As noted earlier, Māori participate in these programmes at far higher rates than other ethnicities and so their quality is particularly relevant to the overall experience of Māori learners in tertiary education. Beyond this, however, until we have addressed those structural factors influencing outcomes for Māori in compulsory education, the foundational levels of our tertiary system will continue to be vital for addressing deprivation amongst Māori communities. If this part of our system does not work effectively, we are condemning many Māori to poor social outcomes and jobs with low pay, poor conditions, and few career prospects, making them highly vulnerable to short-term shifts in the economy.

From its deliberations and input from external experts, papers and discussion forums, the EAWG has identified six broad areas for action. They are:

- An increased emphasis on ‘purposeful’ provision. By ensuring greater clarity about the direct and specific purpose of programmes, not only is it more likely that learners will succeed and progress to further study and/or employment, but the easier it will become to understand what performance means in the context of priority learners
- Increased pre-enrolment assessment, tied to better personalisation of programmes to the specific needs and goals of the learners
- Greater active ‘real-time’ monitoring of learner progress, accompanied by appropriate early-stage interventions
- ‘Joining up the system’: improving engagement around and in these programmes between providers, schools, employers, community institutions and government agencies
- The need for a strong accountability framework that reflects the nature of these programmes, can account for longer-term outcomes, and has strong incentives for performance
- Improved information about the nature and long-term outcomes of those taking part in these programmes.

Taken together, these can be grouped along the following themes:

- Better, individualised advice and support for learners.
- ‘Real’, purposeful and personalised courses.
- Improved data collection and use.
- Genuine transparency and accountability within a ‘joined-up’ system.

The remaining sections of this report describe specific aspects of these themes. It is worth noting, however, that many of the points covered in these sections do not only apply to programmes at lower levels of the framework. Improving pre-enrolment diagnosis and assessment of learners, for example, can be of significant value in all parts of the tertiary education system. The EAWG believes, however, that these actions are particularly critical for addressing the needs of priority learners.

Over its existence, the Working Group has been encouraged by policy developments that align with its thinking and recommendations. For example, it is clear that both providers and Government agencies are now more focused on identifying not just success within programmes, but on also identifying the actual outcomes for learners from those programmes. This in turn has led to a recognition of the need for greater linkages between areas (as in the recent establishment of the Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment portfolio), and improved sharing of official information.

In many ways, our system is already on a path to increased across-the-board educational success for priority learners. We now need to not just ensure we maintain that path, but also make an effort to widen, support, and extend it further.

Literacy, language and numeracy

The issue of literacy, language and numeracy (LLN) is inextricably linked with the provision of programmes for priority learners. Many of those who enter these programmes will have low LLN skills, and while recent moves to embed LLN within level 1 to 3 qualifications recognise this, feedback to the Group suggests that literacy in particular remains a key barrier to success for priority learners.

It is widely accepted that New Zealand needs to actively address literacy and numeracy capability. Sutton and Vester (2010) point out that, according to official data, over 400,000 people in Auckland alone have literacy and numeracy skills below that required for everyday life, and they estimate that – even including embedded programmes – only 15 percent of this need could be met through existing provision.

How we can best raise these skills is a complex area beyond the scope of the EAWG’s work. However, it is clear that doing so must begin from a strong evidence base. To that end, both Government

and the public need to clearly understand the full extent of public investment in raising LLN, and how effectively this is supporting literacy and numeracy gains for those who need them.

Practical examples

As already mentioned, the EAWG believes that high-quality performance for priority learners can and is currently being achieved within our education system. This report therefore includes several examples of the principles, actions and aspects it describes being put into practice.

The Group presents these as examples of current good practice that is having a positive impact for learners: we do not include them as prescriptive examples of best practice or suggest that the specific actions and approaches described will suit every provider. Rather, they highlight the point that the recommendations put forward by the EAWG are realistic and achievable within our current environment, and showcase how providers can take action to ensure that priority learners enjoy the possible outcomes from their participation in tertiary education.

Recommendations

The Educational Attainment Working Group recommends that:

- Relevant agencies complete a stocktake of the Government's investment in lifting adult literacy, language and numeracy, and the effectiveness and outcomes of this investment in terms of both direct gain and wider educational, employment and social outcomes
- There continues to be a strong focus on lifting the achievement of level 1 to 3 learners in the Tertiary Education Strategy and by government agencies.

4.1 Better, individualised advice and support for learners

As noted earlier in this report, priority learners often have less experience of the education system than those at other levels, and lower levels of readiness for study – particularly in the less tangible dimensions around *how* to operate in a tertiary education setting. This makes the provision of appropriate advice and support, effectively integrated into programme delivery, particularly critical for ensuring that priority learners obtain good outcomes from their study. Because of this, learners need to be served by:

- effective communication from providers
- appropriate diagnostics and pre-assessment
- active learner support within programmes.

The starting point is clear communication to learners of the purpose of the programme, what is expected of them and how providers will support their learning

Effective communication by providers

Better advice and support begins with effective communication by providers about programmes of study at this level. This starts with clear communication of the purpose of these programmes, including the specific outcomes a learner can expect to achieve (see section 4.2 of this report).

Beyond this, however, the likely lack of ‘college knowledge’ (to use Conley’s terminology) means that ensuring learners clearly understand what is involved in the programme is key. Learners need to be made as aware as possible of what will be involved in the programme before they begin studying. They need to understand what will be required of them – even elements as basic as timely and regular attendance – and what will happen if they do not follow those requirements.

Conversely, priority learners also need to be aware of how the provider will support their learning. If there will be scope for resubmitting assessments, or if some social supports are available specifically for people in that course or faculty, learners need to be told about it. Providers/tutors cannot simply assume that learners will discover these on their own (as they may for learners who enter higher-level programmes).

It is important to recognise, however, that simply talking to learners is not enough in itself to ensure learners receive appropriate support. Support for priority learners needs to be based on active engagement, with providers making a conscious effort to recognise when a learner will need additional support, and actively moving to provide that support.

Pre-enrolment diagnostics to enable providers to identify and work off learner capabilities and provide the basis for constructive engagement is a key to learner success

Learner diagnostics and pre-assessment

The second key dimension of advice and support is ensuring effective assessment of learners prior to entering the course through some form of pre-enrolment ‘diagnostic’ phase. Transitioning to tertiary education is a complex area that, as Middleton (2011) points out, is best thought of as a ‘zone’ or phase rather than a sharp shift

between two states.¹⁰ Learners' experiences and needs during this process will differ on a number of levels; a learner in their 40s who has had little educational success and without family or peers who have been through tertiary education will be likely to have a fundamentally different transition experience than someone with university-educated parents who enrolls directly after successfully completing NCEA level 2.

While this may make it more difficult to generalise about what is required for a successful transition, it also means that early engagement between learners and providers is a key element of a system that supports learner success. The first element of this is both the learner and provider being clear about the purpose of studying – if someone has decided to study because they want to go on to achieve a good job in a particular area, then they should be enrolling in a vocationally-focused programme that will lead to this outcome. At times a learner may not themselves be entirely clear about what they want to achieve, and this diagnostic or pre-assessment period should be able to help a learner develop a clearer idea of their aims.

The second key element of this phase is developing a full picture of learners' capabilities. *The Getting Past Go* initiative in the United States uses – in the context of remediation programmes – a basketball metaphor for tertiary readiness. Some learners are almost under the hoop when they 'take their shot' at tertiary education – in the New Zealand context, this might represent a capable learner from a supportive background with NCEA level 2 or 3. Conversely, others may be trying to take a shot from far down the end of the court, or may be 'on the bench' without the skills to realistically even attempt the shot.

As a result, it is particularly important that this diagnostic phase involves the use of formalised assessment tools. Most providers are now making use of the TEC's *Literacy and Numeracy for Adults Assessment Tool*, but there are additional diagnostics available that examine more personal characteristics, such as self-esteem, that are also an important part of learner success.

It is particularly important that this diagnostic phase involves the use of formalised assessment tools

At the same time, this phase should not focus solely on the 'issues' facing a learner. This is also a point at which the particular strengths of a learner can be identified, and strategies developed to leverage off those within a learner's programme of study (see the discussion of personalised learning plans in section 4.2 of this report).

Effective diagnosis or pre-assessment is a process of the learner and organisation collaborating to identify what a learner wants to achieve, choosing and/or developing a course of study that will meet those goals, recognising the learner's strengths, and identifying the support systems the learner is likely to need

Effective diagnosis or pre-assessment is not a screening process, nor is it something that is done 'to' a learner by a provider. Instead, it is a process of the learner and organisation collaborating to identify what a learner wants to achieve, choosing and/or developing a course of study that will meet those goals, recognising the learner's strengths, and identifying the support systems the learner is likely to need later in the programme. This phase is also valuable for building rapport and trust between learners and providers.

¹⁰ For a discussion of issues around transition, see Middleton (2011).

Practical Example: Learner diagnostics and pre-enrolment

Pre-enrolment Conversations (UCOL)

In 2011 UCOL instituted a whole-of-organisation approach called Project Transform, which focuses on ways to improve students' learning outcomes, especially in programmes of study in levels 1 to 3. One aspect of this approach involved a change in process around enrolment. A two-stage process was introduced: the first, new part was called *Admission to UCOL* and took place prior to the student's actual enrolment in a programme. Through desk review, potential students who might be at risk for a number of reasons were identified. Programmes with low successful completions in the previous year were also targeted. These students were invited to have a conversation to discuss their preparation, readiness and awareness of the requirements of the programme to which they sought entry. Those who appeared to have learning difficulties also participated in a short diagnostic assessment, based on the TEC literacy/numeracy tool.

The purpose of the conversation was to make sure students had some of the important skills required for tertiary study, were entering at the right level, established a relationship with UCOL through the conversation process, and had enough understanding of the requirements of the programme so that they had confidence in what they were undertaking.

The conversation process was not an interview, nor was it a selection process. It was focused on guidance and support and information. The UCOL staff member leading the conversation gained an understanding of the person, which could be shared with lecturers if required. The potential students felt UCOL was taking a positive interest in them, and often came back to the staff member as a reliable source. A number of students did decide, often at their own instigation, that another programme might be a better fit. Sometimes that meant undertaking a foundation programme that would help with vital skills such as literacy and numeracy. Sometimes the student was encouraged by the conversation to consider a more challenging entry level programme.

Because a significant proportion of Māori students at UCOL are enrolled in levels 1 to 3, the *Project Transform* initiative included a particular focus on the needs of these students via the *Raukura* approach. *Raukura* involves the use of five Kaitiaki Akonga, who provide active and holistic support to Māori learners at level 1 to 3 (and some level 4 programmes), drawing on whānau ora principles, throughout their study. This has included involvement in pre-enrolment conversations with Māori (and some Pacific) students and their whānau.

Overall, the suite of *Project Transform* initiatives has led to a significant improvement in achievement amongst priority learners. Overall course completions in level 1 to 3 programmes have increased by more than a third, from 45 percent in 2010 to 62 percent in 2011, and from 35 percent to 50 percent for Māori at these levels.

Once priority learners have begun a programme they need to receive significant learner support. This does not only mean access to specific support services but the ability to learn in an environment designed specifically to support their learning

For diagnostics and pre-assessment to be truly effective, however, they need to be tied into the development of a purposeful programme of study (see section 4.2).

Active learner support

Finally, once priority learners have begun a programme they need to receive significant learner support. This does not only mean access to specific support services (which may be enough for those studying at higher levels), but the ability to learn in an environment designed specifically to support their learning. A recurrent theme from participants in the expert forums held by the Group was that success for these learners depends on a holistic model of support, which focuses not only on purely academic elements, but also on support for the learner as a person. This often involves providers committing to a more active model of support than is offered to learners studying at higher levels – for

Ensuring that support systems meet the needs of part-time learners and extramural learners must be considered a key avenue for ensuring success for priority learners

example, tutors following up personally on non-attendance and being more flexible with access to classes.

A particularly important element of this is the level of support provided for part-time learners. As Turner (2011) notes, while the ability to study part-time may be something that attracts priority learners back into tertiary education (as it allows study to be more easily combined with employment or existing family and community commitments), At the same time, however, the less structured and more self-directed nature of part-time study – particularly studying extramurally – is also likely to be challenging for people who have lower levels of Conley's (2008) dimensions of readiness. Therefore ensuring that support systems meet the needs of part-time learners and extramural learners must be considered a key avenue for ensuring success for priority learners.

Another key element of this (as illustrated in both good practice examples in this section) is recognising that learner support can have, or be enhanced by, a cultural dimension. For example, if a given programme has large numbers of learners from a particular ethnic or geographic community, then one way of providing implicit learner support is to make an effort to recruit tutors from that same community and encourage approaches to teaching that build on the cultural norms of that community.

Recommendations

The Educational Attainment Working Group recommends that:

- Providers of level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging programmes establish relevant pre-enrolment diagnostic and pre-assessment processes for potential learners, leading to the development of dynamic and interactive personalised learning plans.
- Providers ensure that support for learners in level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging programmes is explicitly integrated into approaches to teaching practice and course design, as well as through external support services.
- Providers ensure that modes of delivery, teaching practice and learner support services are designed to suit part-time and extramural learners in level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging programmes.
- The New Zealand Qualification Authority's quality assurance processes for providers – including External Evaluation and Review and accreditation – include evidence that the distinctive needs of learners in level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging programmes are understood and addressed effectively.

Practical example: Active learner support

'Welcoming' and 'engaging' Māori priority learners (The Solomon Group)

Re-engaging in education is a crucial turning point for many Māori learners who enrol with The Solomon Group. Most have had negative experiences in traditional education and see themselves as failures, and bring a raft of other barriers with them. These learners appreciate an environment that reflects their culture (for example, mihi, wall displays, karakia, available kai and Māori staff).

A friendly discussion at point of entry about the student and his/her whānau elicits at least as much information around how The Solomon Group can best help them as do the formal interview questions. It is also important that learners are made aware of the programme structure and the outcomes they are required to achieve – a 'no surprises' approach. This involves reassurance that, while staff have high expectations of learners, there are processes and support people in place to help them succeed.

The first contact with a given cohort of learners includes welcoming each person and acknowledging their background – elders, parents, whānau, hapu, iwi (te tuakiri o te tangata). Assuring them that each has huge untapped potential gives hope to the student that "Maybe I'm not dumb – I always thought I might have potential." Identity is an important foundation for empowerment of all Māori learners. The Solomon Group provides the platform for all students to understand who they are and where they have come from so that they can celebrate their own culture/s. They are told that each person has worth, dignity and is unique – this builds self-belief.

Time is taken to establish the kawa of The Solomon Group, which centres around four rules:

1. Respect – of self, others and property
2. Commitment – treat this course as employment, on time, good attendance etc
3. No put-downs – no-one will laugh at you, but you must try
4. Be positive – adopt an 'I can' attitude.

The Solomon Group's programmes focus heavily on conversations around changing attitudes, as well as improving skills and knowledge. All are critical across many different environments, be they in further training or employment. Further, knowledge and understanding for all students around how they learn best, why they are there, goal setting, positivity and commitment develops independence in learners. Hope transforms into belief that it is not too late for them, or their whānau.

Staff forge individual relationships with students, and also encourage the students to support each other. The Ako philosophy (kaiako/akonga) strengthens the cohort (whānau) to support each other (tuakana/teina). Support is genuine, holistic and ongoing throughout their course; learning won't happen if they are under stress. Celebrating success together builds confidence and provides a strong platform for those students who will go on to further study.

This approach resonates well with students. As well as regular feedback from learners themselves, analysis conducted as part of a 2009 multi-site research project into student engagement indicated a strong match between student perceptions of key contributors to their performance, and higher-quality performance by the Group in those dimensions than other providers (see Zepke, Leach and Butler, 2010; and Solomon, Solomon and Solomon, 2010).

He aha te mea nui o te ao? He Tangata he Tangata he Tangata

What is the most important thing in the world? It is people, it is people, it is people

4.2 'Real', purposeful and personalised programmes

It almost goes without saying that programmes for priority learners – like those at any other level – need to be well-designed. Providers that offer these courses need to invest in the staff and learners on these programmes, and have the same expectations of performance as they would of those who teach or study in other programmes.

Providers must understand the situation(s) of learners within their courses, and develop delivery models that are designed first and foremost to suit the needs and capabilities of these learners

On a more practical level, the models used for programme delivery must also suit the needs of the learner above all else. For example, as noted earlier, learners at these levels are likely to be less comfortable with the more self-directed models of tertiary learning common at higher levels. However, Twigg (2005) has emphasised the potential value for these learners from increased use of ICT, on the basis that having a greater web-based component can give learners greater ability to manage their learning around family and community commitments. In practice, the suitability of these different modes is likely to vary depending on particular learners and the programmes in which they're engaged. What is essential is that providers understand the situation(s) of learners within their courses, and develop delivery models that are designed first and foremost to suit the needs and capabilities of these learners rather than those of the organisation.

The EAWG recognises that there may be issues with our funding model in this regard. Our current approach is driven by a unitised input approach, treating all learners as fundamentally the same, with entitlement to, for example, X weeks of provision, or Y weeks of literacy support. However, just as we need a flexible approach to provision that suits individualised learner need (and the achievement of clearly defined outcomes), we also need to ensure that our funding system is capable of supporting that flexibility. While analysing funding policy was beyond the Group's remit for this work, at some point policy makers will need to consider whether the way we fund tertiary education impairs the ability of providers to achieve the best possible outcomes for priority learners.

There are two specific dimensions of this theme that the Working Group has focused on. These are:

- Purposeful provision
- Personalisation of learning.

Purposeful provision

The most fundamental point here is that programmes need to be purposeful – there must be a clear indication of the purpose of a given programme of study, and what the programme will eventually lead to. This requires specificity beyond the set of competencies, graduate outcomes, or the Strategic Purpose Statement required by NZQA – it relates to *why* someone

Programmes need to be purposeful

would undertake this specific programme. If a programme is intended to provide skills that will lead to employment, what are the specific jobs that a learner can do with these skills? If a programme is intended to staircase into higher levels of education, what programmes can a learner enter with this qualification? And, importantly, where is the evidence – what have previous graduates from this programme gone on to do? In essence, purposeful provision is about moving away from a generic model and toward a more contextualised and focused approach that relates programme design to specific, clearly stated goals and expected outcomes.

Purposive provision can increase Type 2 incentives and thus a learner's predisposition to engage with a course

Being clear about the purpose of provision has three distinct advantages. First, it assists with learner decision making. Understanding exactly what those with a given qualification will go on to do provides clarity for learners and helps them make accurate choices about which educational paths they should pursue. Second, it provides a stronger basis for understanding the performance of a programme. If a programme is specifically designed to staircase learners into higher-level education but few graduates go on to such study within a reasonable timeframe, then even if completion rates are very high that course cannot be said to be successful.

Third, and most importantly, purposive provision can increase a learner's predisposition to engage with a course. Returning to Keep and James' two types of incentives, one of the strongest forms of external incentive is the returns that learners get from a course – what they can do once they have completed. It follows that that the clearer and more specific these potential pathways are, the stronger these incentives will be.

The defining element of purposeful provision is being specific about expected outcomes, pathways and results. For example, a bridging programme that states that it will provide the skills necessary to enter level 5 or degree-level study is not an example of purposeful provision. In this case, purposeful provision is that same programme being able to show, through articulation agreements or similar, that it will be accepted as meeting the minimum entry requirements for – and providing the appropriate skills to successfully transition to – a particular set of institutions and/or a specific set of programmes.

Personalisation of learning

As mentioned in section 4.1, improved pre-enrolment diagnosis and assessment is a key method for making our system suit the needs of priority learners better. However, for this to be truly effective, the same principle – understanding learners, their strengths, needs and predispositions – must flow through into programmes themselves. Priority learners need to be able to engage in flexible programmes that are designed to fit their goals and pre-existing abilities, rather than being constrained by strict provider input requirements.

This may mean organisations adapting policies and processes for these learners, ensuring that ‘special cases’ for priority learners can be easily addressed, and making significant use of assessment and recognition of prior learning or current competence. For example, if a learner enrolling in an academic preparation programme already possesses good numeracy skills, it is difficult to see what benefit they would gain from being required to complete a basic numeracy course that would usually be included in that programme. Programmes need to be responsive, both fitting the needs of learners and building on their strengths, rather than learners being required to fit the needs of programmes or providers.

At the level of the individual learner, an effective and straightforward way of personalising learning, already used by some providers, is through the increased use of personalised learning plans. Learning plans tie a learner’s study to the goals they want to achieve from their programmes, providing clarity as to *why* they are doing what they are doing.

Learning plans need to be learner-focused – they should be seen as a method for priority learners to begin to take ownership of their own learning

As with pre-enrolment and diagnosis, learning plans need to be learner-focused rather than provider compliance or accountability documents – they should be seen as a method for priority learners to begin to take ownership of their own learning. At the same time, these plans are another avenue for addressing the personal and cultural dimensions of tertiary readiness. Learning plans provide another opportunity to explicitly detail the organisation’s expectations of learners, and what the organisation will provide in return.

Recommendations

The Educational Attainment Working Group recommends that:

- Providers ensure that delivery models for level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging programmes appropriately build on the strengths and respond to the needs of learners in these programmes.
- All level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging programmes are required to include clear and specific purposes, represented by explicitly intended academic and/or employment outcomes.
- Providers ensure that level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging programmes incorporate the use of dynamic personalised learning plans.

Practical example: Personalisation of learning

Individual learner plans (Corporate Academy Group)

Corporate Academy Group (CAG) now makes extensive use of learner plans to guide the delivery of its programmes. In this process, each learner is assessed and then has their identified needs responded to in such a way that all stakeholders are assisting this learner to achieve in a positive, mentored manner, allowing for a curriculum customised to students' prior knowledge, skills and identified needs. The learner plan includes:

- initial diagnostic assessment of the learner, including prior learning
- learner goals(educational, employment, social, personal)
- learner needs
- targets with dates allocated
- curriculum alignment/relationship
- progress reviews
- achievement records
- self-esteem questionnaire.

Although this leads to the development of an initial plan, these are not static documents. Plans are regularly reviewed, with the learner and facilitator jointly re-examining each of the above points, as well as attendance, credits earned, quality of work and community service. This is key, as a learner plan must be both a living document and based on honesty and interaction between facilitator and learner that is founded on trust.

Since the implementation of learner plans, learners at CAG have shown a 10 percent positive improvement in career placement and 15 percent improvement in credit achievement. While there have been difficulties experienced around time management, staff allocation and lesson flexibility – whilst still adhering to contractual requirements for certain subject coverage – these are not insurmountable. The use of this tool not only gives CAG a structure with which to clearly guide learners, it also provides an effective means to clearly measure key performance indicators, creating a strong foundation for continuous improvement.

4.3 Improved data collection and use

As discussed earlier in this report, effectively gathering and using information are crucial components of a well-functioning system; figure 3 in section 3 highlights the relationship between data and high-quality provision. This includes not only collecting the right sorts of data – both qualitative and quantitative – but also ensuring that we actually make use of it to support good outcomes and improved performance. Information needs to be used to develop and reinforce good provider-level practice and system-level policy, and it also must be easily available to learners, to inform their decision making and give them control over their own learning pathway.

There are three core dimensions to better collection and use of data:

- in-course monitoring
- tracking outcomes
- system-level information.

Practical example: Using data and information to improve quality

Performance monitoring and intervention processes (Otago Polytechnic)

For the last five years, Otago Polytechnic has been managing an active, evidence-based process for monitoring and intervening in courses and programmes where performance seems to be a concern. The September Single Data Return (SDR) provides an early flag to the Director: Quality of courses/programmes with student retention and success issues. January SDR data is then used to confirm whether or not these issues exist, by providing an overview of the previous year's delivery.

When this process indicates that there are issues with a programme, the Director: Quality formally contacts the relevant Head of School. This communication includes providing the Head with a copy of the relevant SDR data that explicitly highlights where issues have been identified.

At this point, the Head of School talks to the teaching team directly involved with managing and delivering the programme, to identify what might be causing the issues. The Head of School and team develop an action plan, with support available from the Educational Development Centre and the Internal Academic Evaluator, to review and address the factors hindering student success.

Where issues continue to exist, an experienced educator (external to the school) is commissioned to facilitate a comprehensive review of the programme. This review process involves the teaching staff and is taken as an opportunity to further develop their self-assessment capability. The review also often includes focus groups with current and past students (including those who did not complete) and relevant employers. This process leads not only to increased student satisfaction and completion, but also more reflective and action-orientated staff.

Putting this system in place has had clear benefits for Otago Polytechnic. The institution's overall successful course completion rate has moved from 66 percent in 2008 to 80.5 percent in 2011. By 2011, 31 programmes had improved course completion rates. One that had significant ongoing performance issues underwent a range of interventions to develop the action plan and bring about change, and improved its rate from 48 percent to 74 percent.

It is critical that the provider commits to actively monitoring learners' progress against their learning plans, and takes remedial supportive action when learners fall behind

Systematic monitoring also provides an evidence base for providers to consider quality issues and programme revision

Providers need to track programme outcomes over a significant period of time, e.g. to success in higher-level study or sustainable employment

In-course monitoring

Once a learner has developed a learning plan and is enrolled in a programme of study, it is critical that the organisation commits to actively monitoring their progress against that plan. Putting such systems in place allows for early signalling of when a learner is starting to face difficulties and, in turn, the provision of targeted assistance as soon as possible.

This monitoring should primarily be used in a learner-focused way: to identify learners who may be struggling in a programme and provide support for them as soon as possible. Learners themselves also need to be involved in this process and have access to this data – enabling them to track their own progress and identify when they are starting to fall behind.

However, systematic monitoring also provides an evidence base for providers to consider quality issues and programme revision – for example, if it is common for a significant group of learners to begin having problems at a particular point in a programme. This should become a core element of an organisation's formal Self-Assessment processes.

Tracking outcomes

One of the defining features of programmes for priority learners is that they are focused on attaining specific educational or labour market outcomes. It therefore follows that providers of these programmes need to be tracking the ongoing outcomes for these programmes – not only over short timeframes, but also over significant periods of time (such as one to two years following completion).

Furthermore, this tracking needs to be sophisticated. Bridging programmes and other education-pathway programmes need to track not only whether those who complete begin studying for further qualification, they also need to develop methods for identifying how successful learners are once they enter that study. Vocationally-focused programmes need to not only identify whether graduates are entering employment, but the types of jobs they are entering (and how successful they are within those jobs).

As with provision itself, these outcomes should be personalised to what learners want to achieve. The goals identified in the personalised learning plans discussed in section 4.2 should include not only intentions related to the programme itself, but to the eventual goals of learners once they have completed their programme of study. Following up and tracking the success of learners against these goals is a key method of capturing some of the wider outcomes from programmes – such as improved quality of life or better relationships with family – that are often pointed to as key benefits for priority learners from engaging in their courses.

Tracking outcomes gives a provider an indication that the intended outcomes of the programme are being met; understanding what

happens to learners once they complete a programme should be a key element of ensuring that a programme is achieving what it has set out to do. This allows for effective quality assurance and consequent improvement, as it provides a basis for identifying what is missing from programmes and how they can be enhanced. As with in-course monitoring, the information about these outcomes should also become an input into providers' formal self-assessment processes.

System-level information

Much of our current funding attempts to assure value for money primarily in terms of inputs purchased, and monitoring and information focuses on immediate outputs or short-term outcomes. What we need is better data on the long-term outcomes of engaging in these programmes

As noted earlier in this report, the EAWG believes that there is a noticeable system-level information gap around priority learners. We do have sources of high-level data, and the work of Scott (2009), Earle (2010) and Mahoney (2009, 2010a, 2010b) shows that useful information can be gleaned from it – particularly when linked to census or other official datasets. However, there are gaps in these works – for example, Scott and Earle both focus on younger age groups, when many of those in these programmes are older learners. Similarly, targeted training reporting focuses on very short-term outcomes occurring after a matter of months. Furthermore, much of the analysis of these data is opportunistic or 'one-off', rather than regular and systematic.

To ensure that government policies around priority learners are not hampering the delivery of effective education, we firstly need deeper information about the nature of the programmes that are being funded. For example, tying back into the point of 'purposeful' education, some of these programmes have a strong 'vocational' focus – their primary aim is to support learners to progress directly to employment. Conversely, other programmes have a stronger 'generic' focus, providing skills that are applicable across many different environments, or are intended as vehicles back into education for those who have been less successful previously. To have a strong understanding of the performance of the system, we need to be able to distinguish between these types of programmes and develop success measures that reflect these intended purposes¹¹.

At the same time, we need an improved understanding of the learners taking part in these programmes. Developing high-quality policy requires an understanding of the people who the policies are intended to benefit – that is, the learner. Policy makers need to have an accurate understanding of what motivates learners at these levels, why they are choosing to learn, and the sorts of obstacles they face.

¹¹ From an overview of official 'field of study' codes, it appears that just under a half of level 1 to 3 learners are involved in strongly vocational programmes tied to specific employment outcomes, with the remainder being evenly divided between generic programmes (such as languages or life skills) and programmes that provide general employment skills usable in a variety of settings. However, making this distinction purely on the basis of these codes is problematic, and we need more programme-specific data on programme focus. More discussion on this topic can be found in Ako Aotearoa (2011a).

Finally, just as providers need to start focusing on tracking longer-term outcomes from their programmes, so too do central government agencies. Much of our current funding attempts to assure value for money primarily in terms of inputs purchased, and monitoring and information focuses on immediate outputs or short-term outcomes. What we need is comprehensive data on the long-term outcomes of engaging in these programmes.

Recommendations

The Educational Attainment Working Group recommends that:

- Providers of level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging programmes implement systems for systematic, 'real-time' monitoring of learner performance during their programmes that allows remedial actions to be taken in a timely way.
- Providers of level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging programmes develop systems to track purpose-specific learner outcomes from these programmes for at least one year following programme completion.
- The Tertiary Education Commission and NZQA assist providers to track student outcomes through improved access to official datasets, including data collected by the Inland Revenue Department and the Ministry of Social Development.
- The Tertiary Education Commission and NZQA develop systems to collect data on programme purpose as part of regular reporting.
- The Ministry of Education commissions and/or undertakes additional research to map the 'Type Two' incentives (Keep and James, 2010) that affect learner completion within level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging programmes, and this work feeds into subsequent policy development.

4.4 Genuine transparency and accountability within a 'joined-up' system

We need genuine accountability for the things that matter

Providers whose programmes are not meeting the needs of priority learners need to be challenged to improve their performance, and if they cannot, then they should not be offering those programmes. To accept otherwise is to devalue the commitment that we ask priority learners to make when they enrol in a programme

A central thread running through the EAWG's deliberations has been that success needs to be defined in terms of expected sustainable outcomes for learners

A high-quality system that serves learners' needs must be founded on principles of transparency and accountability. While these terms are often treated as accountability to funding bodies or the Government, we also need to be thinking of these as accountability to and transparency for *learners*.

Accountability is not simply an issue of 'value for money'; it is ensuring that learners' investments – not just financial but also in terms of the time, effort and emotional investment they put into their learning – will give them the outcomes they are seeking. To be blunt, providers whose programmes are not meeting the needs of priority learners need to be challenged to improve their performance, and if they cannot, then they should not be offering those programmes. To accept otherwise is to devalue the commitment that we ask priority learners to make when they enrol in a programme.

This aspect of improving how well our system serves priority learners obviously must sit within the wider framework of our tertiary education system's approach to accountability and transparency. Significant steps forward are being made in this regard, such as the educational performance indicators now being published by the Tertiary Education Commission and NZQA's emphasis on self-assessment by providers accompanied by external evaluation and review. In this context, the EAWG encourages more extensive use of intra- and inter-institutional benchmarking by organisations to gain a more accurate idea of their own performance. However, there are two particular dimensions that the Working Group wishes to highlight:

- sophisticated accountability and defining success
- 'joining up' the system.

Sophisticated accountability and defining success

Discussing accountability immediately raises the question of what 'successful' performance looks like. A central thread running through the EAWG's deliberations has been that success needs to be defined in terms of expected sustainable outcomes for learners. If a learner completes an automotive mechanic programme but ends up stacking shelves, while they may have gained a qualification and found a job, their study cannot be said to have had a wholly successful outcome.

Conversely, several of the providers who took part in the discussion forums for this work argued that some of the vitally important outcomes from these programmes – the (arguably misnamed) 'soft' outcomes of personal and social development – are often not captured well by current approaches to measuring performance. Without capturing this information, we may be missing an important and valuable contribution of these programmes to building the cultural capital of priority learners.

A key measure of this – given that many participants in these programmes have previously had low success in the education system – should be understanding the ‘distance travelled’ or value-add component of these programmes

Just as providers must ensure that their delivery models and internal processes are designed holistically to serve the needs of the learner, so too must NZQA, the Ministry of Education, the TEC, the Ministry of Social Development, and the Department of Labour¹² ensure that their actions in this space are fully coordinated to support providers. The current Ministerial portfolio of Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment provides a strong opportunity for linking these policies and processes

¹² Or the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment.

As noted above, the EAWG firmly believes that we must maintain a robust and effective system of accountability. However, it is also important that we drive this system off the right measures. The EAWG, therefore, believes that the most important question to ask here is:

How do we develop an accountability regime that accounts for the distinctive features of this part of the tertiary system?

A key element of this – given that many participants in these programmes have previously had low success in the education system – should be understanding the ‘distance travelled’ or value-add component of these programmes. In other words, we need to understand the specific contribution that these programmes make for their participants. Similarly, we need to ensure our system reflects the purpose of engaging in learning – if not at the level of an individual learner’s goals, then certainly at the level of intended outcomes from programmes.

Such a system needs to be developed in concert with the sector, which in turn means that providers must accept in good faith the need for such a system. This may lead to programmes for priority learners being treated in a different manner to other parts of the sector.

Joining up the system

A further element of accountability concerns who is actually responsible for ensuring successful outcomes for priority learners. The work of the EAWG has, in keeping with its mandate, focused on the tertiary teaching and learning context and what can be done to make that work effectively. However, there are many additional players with roles in achieving successful outcomes for priority learners, including:

- government agencies that establish and administer the strategic and operational policy settings (including funding) that provide the context for delivering programmes
- the compulsory education sector, and in particular upper secondary education, where the process of transitioning into education and/or employment begins
- the entire network of New Zealand tertiary education organisations (including industry training organisations), which recognises – or fails to recognise – learners’ qualifications and skills, and thereby creates or reduces future education pathways
- the enterprises that employ workers (and the unions that represent them) who use the skills that learners possess and often support education and training themselves
- the communities from which learners are drawn and to which they return

- the learners themselves, who must be served by a well-functioning system, but who also must take responsibility for their final achievement.

All these components affect the eventual outcomes that priority learners will experience from their learning – both positively and negatively – and for our system to work well, all parts need to recognise this. Schools need to adequately prepare learners for transition into tertiary education, employers need to support education and utilise the skills that learners possess, and TEOs must reduce barriers to moving into higher levels of education (including recognising existing skills and qualifications gained from other organisations and prior experience).

In addition, building links between programme and local communities can work well not only for improving ‘in-course’ results, but also for improving longer-term outcomes. For example, a good provider of vocationally-focused programmes will endeavour to make connections with relevant local businesses to provide opportunities for practical experience. This provides a valuable learning environment within a programme, and it can lay the groundwork for successful post-completion transitions into employment.

However, this dimension is not simply about organisations working together more effectively and more often. A genuinely joined-up system is one where different parts are working towards the same goal even when they are not actively engaging with each other. A particular point of concern here is the need to align policies articulated by government agencies.

The issue of ‘silos’ and the lack of communication between departments and portfolios is a common problem in policy development and implementation, leading not only to poor engagement with each other, but policies and settings that at best send mixed signals and, in the worse cases, actively harm the ability of providers to function effectively. In the case of priority learners, the potential for problems to develop from such silos is significant, given that at least five agencies have a role or interest in this provision – not just the three core education agencies, but the Ministry of Social Development and Department of Labour¹³ as well.

There is also an onus on the individual government agencies to take responsibility for unified action. Just as providers must ensure that their delivery models and internal processes are designed holistically to serve the needs of the learner rather than the desire of the organisation, so too must NZQA, the Ministry of Education, the Tertiary Education Commission, the Ministry of Social Development, and the Department of Labour¹³ ensure that their actions in this space are fully coordinated. This is particularly critical for ensuring successful transitions between different stages of education and between education and employment.

¹³ Or Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment.

The current Ministerial portfolio of Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment provides a strong opportunity for linking these policies and processes.

Recommendations

The Educational Attainment Working Group recommends that:

- The Tertiary Education Commission prioritises investing in level 1 to 3, targeted training and bridging-programme providers that identify specific intended academic and/or employment outcomes and can provide evidence of successful outcomes over time.
- The Tertiary Education Commission and Ministry of Education work with providers to develop system-level performance-monitoring systems that can account for both programme purpose-specific outcomes and the ‘value added’ for learners.
- Government agencies build strong policy development and implementation links between the Department of Labour¹⁴, the Tertiary Education Commission, NZQA and the Ministry of Education, particularly with regard to transitions from secondary to tertiary education, and from education to employment.



¹⁴ Or Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment.

5. Conclusion

Ultimately, the Working Group is confident that improving learner achievement and outcomes across the board is realistic and achievable. Given the political will, provider commitment to improving performance and sharing good practice, and effective government agency support for change, we are only a few small steps from fully realising the potential of these programmes to enhance living standards, economic performance and quality of life for individual learners and across New Zealand

Programmes for priority learners are an important and valuable part of our tertiary education system. They play a key role in supporting those with low previous educational success, and learners on these programmes constitute more than a third of our tertiary education system. Ensuring that these New Zealanders have access to good-quality post-compulsory systems for building skills and capabilities, which in turn lead to further education and good jobs with sustainable career pathways, must be a central component of any strategy for alleviating poverty and increasing New Zealand's social and economic performance. This is particularly critical for Māori, for whom our compulsory education system has historically not performed well.

It is clear, however, that this part of our tertiary system is not working as well as it might. Completion rates are low, particularly among the part-time students who make up the majority of priority learners. It is also unclear how well these programmes are benefitting learners – few progress to higher-level programmes, and the little robust data we have around social and economic outcomes show only weak benefits for those who do complete. Underlying all this is a lack of robust information about the nature of these programmes, the learners who take part in them, and the effect of the programmes for learners over the long term.

At the same time, there are examples of good practice in our system. Some providers are offering excellent programmes with clearly defined outcomes, supported by the effective collection and use of evidence, that are delivered by committed and professional staff, in supportive environments, leading to successful education and employment outcomes. The challenge we face lies in lifting performance across the system as a whole and ensuring that all priority learners have access to such programmes.

Throughout this report, the Educational Attainment Working Group has discussed four key themes that need to be addressed to improve achievement and outcomes for priority learners: effective support, purposeful programmes, good information and an aligned system that focuses on genuine accountability for the things that matter. For each of these of themes, the Working Group has put forward recommendations that provide a starting point for actions by providers and Government to improve our performance.

These discussions and recommendations – and the associated background papers and events held as part of this work – provide a strong basis for improving success for priority learners. As always, however, the true challenge will come in implementing the ideas proposed and the members of the EAWG are, therefore, committed to continue actively working to support these changes in practice.

Ultimately, the Working Group is confident that improving learner achievement and outcomes across the board is realistic and achievable. Given the political will, provider commitment to

improving performance and sharing good practice and effective government agency support for change, we are only a few small steps from fully realising the potential of these programmes to enhance living standards, economic performance and quality of life for individual learners and across New Zealand.



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Appendix One: Contributing international experts

Dr Bruce Vandal

Director, Postsecondary and Workforce Development Institute, Education Commission of the States, United States of America

Bruce Vandal coordinates research and policy work as director of the Postsecondary and Workforce Development Institute at the Education Commission of the States. He has directed projects on aligning education and workforce development policy, teacher preparation and college access.

At present, Bruce is the director of *Getting Past Go*, a three-year Lumina Foundation for Education project to effectively leverage investments in remedial and developmental education to increase college attainment. He is also the co-director of the *Tennessee Developmental Studies Redesign Initiative*, which is a partnership with the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) to reform developmental education courses at TBR institutions. This initiative is funded by the US Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education.



Professor Ewart Keep

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Ewart Keep is deputy director of SKOPE, based at the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences. He has a range of research interests, including lifelong-learning policy, learning organisations, training for low paid workers, the design and management of education and training systems, employers' attitudes towards skills, how governments formulate skills policy, higher education policy and the nature of the linkages between skills and performance.

He is currently working on the role of recruitment and selection as a source of skills, and the feedback signals that employers' patterns of recruitment send to the learner regarding future research priorities in the field of education and training, and how English policy makers conceive of skills policy and its linkages to other policy domains.

Ewart is a member of the Scottish Funding Council and Skills Development Scotland joint Skills Committee, the Higher Education Funding Council for England's Strategic Advisory Committee for Enterprise and Skills, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills Policy Expert Group, and the Scottish Government's Skill Utilisation Leadership Group. He has provided advice and consultancy for the National Skills Task Force, several UK government departments including the Department for Employment and Learning and the Treasury, the Cabinet Office, House of Commons and Scottish Parliament committees, the Welsh Employment and Skills Board, Skills Australia, and the governments of Queensland, New South Wales and New Zealand.

Ewart is concerned with progressions into worthwhile employment and how the demand-side of this equation cannot be ignored. Employers need to be involved in pathways development and they have a significant role to play in incentivising improved utilisation and development of skills.



Professor David Conley

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David Conley is Professor of Educational Policy and Leadership at the College of Education, University of Oregon. He is the founder and director of the Center for Educational Policy Research at the University of Oregon, and founder and chief executive officer of the Center for Educational Policy Improvement, a not-for-profit educational research organisation. He also serves on numerous technical and advisory panels, consults with educational agencies nationally and internationally, and is a frequent speaker at national and regional meetings of education professionals and policy makers.



In 2003, David completed *Standards for Success*, a ground-breaking three-year research project to identify the knowledge and skills necessary for college readiness. The project, funded by the Association of American Universities and The Pew Charitable Trusts, analysed course content at various American research universities to develop the Knowledge and Skills for University Success standards. In 2005, Dr Conley published his research from this project in *College Knowledge: What it takes for students to succeed and what we can do to get them ready*.

Dr Conley's most recent book, *College and Career Ready: Helping all students succeed beyond high school*, features case studies from America's most college-ready high schools, and informs policy makers, administrators, teachers, parents and students how they can develop a culture rooted in postsecondary success.

Appendix Two: Summary of Profiling 'Priority' Learners: Who are they, where are they, and what are they doing?

The 'priority learners' group – primarily those learners at levels 1 to 3 of the New Zealand Qualifications Framework – is the largest single group of learners in New Zealand's tertiary education system. Although the number of enrolments in this group has declined since its 2005 high point, in 2009 these learners still made up 36 percent of all tertiary enrolments. However, many of these priority learners are enrolled in part-time programmes – from 2002–2009 an annual average of 61 percent of these learners was enrolled on a part-time basis, and the average learner was enrolled as 0.35 EFTS (the lowest of any level).

One of the most distinctive features of students at levels 1 to 3 is their age profile – specifically the comparatively high proportion of learners who are aged 40+. In 2009, 38 percent of level 1 to 3 learners fell into this age group, compared to approximately 30 percent for learners at other sub-degree and postgraduate levels, and 12 percent for those at degree level.

Level 1 to 3 learners are primarily (63 percent in 2009) located within the ITP sector, with smaller concentrations located in PTEs and wānanga (21 percent and 18 percent respectively) and only a very small presence in universities (2 percent).

Level 1 to 3 enrolments are currently concentrated in the *Studies in Human Society, Language and Literature*, and *Office Studies* fields of study. Historically, there were large concentrations in *Employment Skills* and *Social Skills* programmes, but they have shrunk since 2004 (being balanced by corresponding growth in the previous three fields). Approximately one quarter of EFTS are located in 'generic' programmes, while just under one half are located in 'specific vocational' fields – the remainder in programmes that provide vocational skills not tied to a specific occupation.

Targeted training programmes also share many aims with level 1 to 3 programmes. These programmes consist of the Training Opportunities and Youth Training schemes – of which, the Training Opportunities scheme has recently been divided into two slightly different programmes, one administered by the Ministry of Social Development and one by the Tertiary Education Commission. Placements in both programmes fell dramatically over the 2000s, driven primarily by falls in the number of New Zealand European and Māori participants. Participants in both schemes are noticeably younger than those at levels 1 to 3 and are overwhelmingly based in PTEs.

In addition to level 1 to 3 learners and those in targeted training programmes, the priority learners group includes those participating in level 4 bridging programmes designed to prepare students for further study. Although data specifically relating to these programmes are sparse, overall participation in these programmes has risen steadily over the 2000s, with participation by European learners outstripping other ethnic groups – particularly Māori. Wānanga and PTEs have essentially exited from offering this category of programmes, and while numbers at both ITPs and universities have risen relatively steadily, changing policy settings appear to make it likely that numbers at universities will decline further in the future.

Appendix Three: Summary of Profiling ‘Priority’ Learners: Pathways, what’s working well, and where are there issues?

Historically, learners at levels 1 to 3 of the New Zealand Qualifications Framework have had comparatively high five-year qualification completion rates. Rates for both full-time and part-time learners at this level have generally been higher than other sub-degree levels and comparable to degree-level students; full-time learners at levels 1 to 3 who began study in 2003, 2004 or 2005 have had the highest five-year completion rates of any level. Annual course-completion rates, however, have generally been amongst the lowest – although in recent years they have increased to be roughly equivalent to those at other sub-degree levels.

Completion rates have varied between sectors, although in all cases they have been substantially higher for full-time learners than those studying part-time. Wānanga and universities have both consistently had higher-than-average qualification-completion rates for full-time learners, and from 2002 onwards wānanga have also had very high rates for part-time learners. In contrast, the completion rates at ITPs, while generally increasing over time and now being similar to those of PTEs for full-time learners, have been very low for part-time learners. The five-year qualification-completion rates of women have traditionally been clearly higher than those of men, but the most recent cohort for which data are available shows this difference largely disappearing among both part-time and full-time learners.

In terms of ethnicity, domestic learners of Asian ethnicity consistently have the highest five-year qualification-completion rates, with those studying part-time having particularly high rates compared to learners of other ethnicities. Among full-time learners, completion rates for Pacific learners have consistently been lower than those for other ethnic groups, and while Māori and New Zealand European rates historically mirrored each other, later years have indicated a divergence between these two groups, with Māori completion rates decreasing while New Zealand European rates remained stable. Among part-time learners, all non-Asian ethnic groups have broadly similar qualification-completion rates, although in two cohorts (2002 and 2004) completion rates for Māori were noticeably higher than for Pacific and New Zealand European learners. There is generally little consistent difference in completion rates based on the age group of learners.

Level 1 to 3 learners generally have lower qualifications than those at other levels, with 57 percent having no qualification or NCEA Level One as their highest school qualification. Similarly, comparatively few have entered directly from secondary school or another form of tertiary education, and a noticeably higher proportion (18 percent) than at other levels were most recently non-employed or a beneficiary.

While a key aim of level 1 to 3 programmes is to encourage not only movement into employment but also into further education or training, rates of progression to higher-level study among level 1 to 3 learners are low and they appear to be falling over time – in 2004 less than 40 percent of graduates from such a programme went on to study at a higher level within five years. Analysis by Earle (2010) also indicates that while possessing a level 1 to 3 qualification is associated with more positive social and economic outcomes than possessing no qualifications at all, relevant indicators are often lower than for those who possess only school-level qualifications. Scott (2009), however, has identified the existence of a small but clear income ‘completion premium’ for level 1 to 3 programmes that is roughly equivalent to other sub-degree programmes.

Targeted training programmes (Training Opportunities and Youth Training) do appear to have high proportions of placements that result in ‘positive’ outcomes after two months. However, many of these positive outcomes consist of returning to participate in another placement under the scheme, and the average number of credits being attained by participants has fallen over the 2000s. It remains to be seen what impact recent changes to targeted training will have on these outcomes.

Appendix Four: Summary of Issues for Learners in Targeted Training Programmes

(Walbran, 2011)

Targeted training programmes provide courses for people, particularly school leavers with low or no qualifications, and those who are at risk of long-term unemployment. Statistics show high numbers of Māori and Pasifika learners in targeted training programmes with much smaller numbers of European and Asian ethnicities being enrolled.

The original purpose of the Training Opportunities programme, introduced in 1993, was to raise the achievement levels and increase the participation of groups under-represented in education and training. Programmes are currently undergoing considerable change. Training for Work, administered by the Ministry of Social Development, seeks employment outcomes after just thirteen weeks, whereas the Future-Focused Training Opportunities programme (administered by the Tertiary Education Commission) includes progression to further education and the achievement of qualifications as legitimate outcomes. The 2011 Budget included a significant increase in the number of placements in the Youth Guarantee programme, which will result in Youth Training being subsumed into this programme.

There is considerable debate among providers as to whether the narrowly defined outcomes currently being used are the best way to measure the success of the programmes for learners, many of whom present with complex needs. These often take long periods of time to address fully and many factors are outside of the control of the training providers (although they may take steps to ameliorate their impact). Government agencies are under increasing pressure from providers to recognise short and intermediate outcomes such as improvements in the well-being of learners and their ability to contribute more fully to society, although the sustainability of these benefits also needs to be evidenced.

There is relatively little research available that provides a good understanding of the features of these programmes that contribute to learner success. Information that is available suggests that contributing factors include high levels of pastoral and learning support, small class sizes and teaching staff who are both skilled and passionate about working with youth. Programmes are also reported to be characterised by a high level of learner-centeredness and one-on-one approaches to teaching. However, questions remain about the effectiveness of these strategies in creating independent learners.

Many of the tensions associated with targeted training programmes relate to the wide range of learner needs that have to be met first in order to gain engagement with learning. This occurs in a policy context of a demand for results in gaining the outcomes being purchased via the funding mechanisms. There is a desire by Government to increase its return on investment by increasing the outcome measures for programmes, such as the current 60 percent measure for employment or further training. However, this needs to be carefully weighed against the real benefits to learners and the opportunities available, especially in changing economic times. The recognition of intermediate outcomes, such as greater self-esteem, better communication and social integration, as steps towards creating sustainable changes in people's lives are worthy of recognition.

NZQA has a set of outcome indicators as part of the Tertiary Evaluation Indicators used in the quality assurance of providers. They include the achievement of qualifications, entry to employment and engagement with further study, as well as other outcomes such as the improvement in the well-being of learners. The NZQA indicators could provide a good basis for ongoing discussion around outcomes.

A greater degree of flexibility could be considered in order to ensure that learners can pursue their areas of interest and create better pathways regardless of the funding stream. This may

require incentives for encouraging more system-wide collaboration between providers to ensure that learners are able to access the most relevant courses (or parts of courses), especially when there is a need for particular skills to be developed to enable entry to a programme at a higher level.

The focus on literacy and numeracy has gained considerable traction in recent times. There needs to be careful monitoring and evaluation of the progress being made to ensure that the best value is obtained from investments to date. As long as learners continue to leave school without basic literacy and numeracy skills work will need to continue in these areas.

Finally, targeted training programmes provide a group of learners a real opportunity to change their lives and become productive members of society. There are still many gaps in our understanding of what creates success for learners as well as a number of tensions associated with the administration of these programmes. Some issues will be difficult to resolve. However, the education community owes it to learners to keep the dialogue going and to understand better how these programmes can contribute to learner success.



Appendix Five: Summary of Transitions: A Discussion Paper

(Middleton, 2011)

Transitions, whether they are abrupt or modulated, require responses, not only with regard to preparing students for the exit from school but also for the introduction, induction and socialisation into postsecondary programmes. The notion of “college knowledge” (Conley 2005) – that is the knowledge and skills which students should know and be able to do in order to succeed postsecondary – is a particularly useful direction that brings purpose to the pathways as they head to differentiated outcomes. This requires greater focus in the senior secondary school on the demands of the particular pathways students are choosing to move down, rather than the conventional emphasis on the academic disciplines of the curriculum. It also requires postsecondary providers to be explicit about requirements in terms of academic preparation and to reach out to incoming students, and there must be integration of careers advice if successful transitions are to be effected.

As the education system has moved towards meeting the goal of five years of universal secondary education pursuing an increasingly general, academic curriculum, the goal of providing universal pathways to success has moved further away. Where once options existed, openings and pathways decreased and there developed a group of students disengaged from an education that was lacking focus for them – they could see no credible progression to higher qualifications from the narrow path that their schooling had become and this was happening at a time when the strait gate to youth employment was narrowing. One recent commentator concludes that “New Zealand still struggles to comprehend the full impact of mass post-primary schooling some 60 years after its inception” (Lee et al., 2007). Nowhere is this more apparent in than in the management of transitions.

Recent discussions and actions have focused on developing increased options and pathways that are flexible and that lead to postsecondary qualifications and a ticket to employment. The polytechnic system has developed an increasing focus on level 1 to 3 programmes, and achieving a seamless progression from these levels into programmes at higher levels remains a challenge.

New Zealand is joined by other English-speaking systems to develop a greater understanding of the need to provide multiple, seamless pathways for all young people to programmes at higher levels that in turn lead to qualifications that open up avenues to employment and all the benefits that go with that.

If the education of a young person were a musical composition, it would have many transitions in it that assist the flow, shape and beauty of the music, rather than one in which the piece is brought to an abrupt and sudden end.

Appendix Six: Summary of Priority Learners in Part-Time Study: A discussion paper

(Turner, 2011)

The first and most obvious conclusion from the available data is that part-time priority learners do not succeed as well as their full-time counterparts. This is not a marginal problem. In any year, the majority of learners studying at levels 1 to 3 with tertiary providers are part-time students, even though the proportion has fallen slightly in the last two years.

However, the availability of genuine comparative and detailed data about this group of learners makes more comprehensive analysis of the issue quite challenging. There are a number of factors behind this: much of the available data about learner participation and success can be analysed by different qualification levels, at different types of institution and by different ethnic groups. However, further disaggregation based on part-time and full-time modes of study is not easily available. Instead, data on full- and part-time learners are generally only available at a fairly broad level, and do not, for instance, easily enable a comparison between female part-time Māori and Pacific learners at level 1 and 2, studying at ITPs.

The definition of “part time” is inevitably very broad. The data doesn’t tell us why people choose or are obliged to study part time. Qualification completion rates can be hard to compare, given the time it can take to complete a full qualification, particularly for a part-time learner, although this is less of a factor for the generally low learning-volume qualifications typically delivered at level 1 to 3. Definitions of the measures of learner success have changed in the last two years, with qualification-completion rates in particular now being measured in a completely different way from previously.

Clearly, however, there is scope for significant improvements to be made in the provision of high-quality, relevant tertiary education options for individuals who are currently studying part-time at level 1 to 3. There may be some arguments about whether the data (particularly in terms of the way course completions are measured) paint an unduly pessimistic picture about the actual situation for these learners. Nevertheless, the failure rate is far too high for this to be in any way considered as offering a good return for the high public investment. And given the relatively high proportion of these learners who have not previously been successful in education, there is also likely to be a significant human cost in terms of exacerbating the sense of failure for many of these people.

However, a good number of these part-time learners do succeed, even if it takes many of them some years to complete a qualification. So, the first important issue to examine further is why some tertiary providers and, more particularly, specific programmes of study have a good track record of enabling their part-time students to complete their qualification successfully?

It is likely that a range of factors will impact on the likelihood of success of those students who choose or are obliged to study part time. Success factors will likely include items specific to the programmes of study themselves and also the support mechanisms, both academic and pastoral, available to respond to the very specific needs of this group of learners.

A number of system-level changes are under way, which may well have the impact of improving success rates for part-time learners at levels 1 to 3, but could also continue the trend of reducing the volume of opportunities available to the types of learner attracted to part-time provision at lower levels. In that situation, alternatives, such as an expansion of targeted Adult and Community Education provision, may be worth considering.

Existing good practice needs to be identified from those providers and programmes that perform well. But it is probable that the following will be among the types of factors that may have a positive influence on student success:

- greater focus at enrolment stage on student motivation, and setting clear expectations
- the availability of targeted academic support, including for extra-mural students, on a one-to-one basis, to help students manage their time, understand their workload requirements, be clear about their assignments, and 'push' them to continue progressing. This would encompass the existing implementation of greater focus on targeted support for literacy, language and numeracy
- the availability of and support (by the institution) for student study groups, including in particular for extra-mural students
- the possibility of childcare (and other carer) support for learners e.g. at drop-in learning centres
- additional pastoral support services, including joined-up links with health, social services and other central and local government services
- the possibility of incentives for promoting ongoing success, including step-by-step rewards for completion of assignments, courses etc.

Most significantly, it will be important to find out more about the circumstances, motivations and needs of a range of part-time learners. Such qualitative information, allied to more comprehensive, fine-grained data and possible case studies of successful approaches, should help to provide a clearer way forward to ensure these people are better served by our tertiary education system.







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