

Universities and their councils serve their communities, not the Minister

Although government funding and grants represent less than half university income, the Minister of Tertiary Education, Steven Joyce, has signaled his intention to completely take over the university councils.

Universities are places of great challenge for staff and students. They are dedicated to the pursuit of truth, excellence, new knowledge, and to the transfer of that pursuit and knowledge to new generations. They attract staff of the highest caliber from around the world. These talented and highly committed folk dedicate their lives to their disciplines in order that our store of available knowledge and skill might become ever deeper and more pervasive.

Modern University councils are the governing bodies of their institutions. Governance means they are charged with planning for the universities future activities and needs, negotiating funding with the Tertiary Education Commission, setting student fees and providing for the physical and intellectual needs of staff and students. They appoint the Vice-Chancellor. These are weighty responsibilities in that a modern university has a wide range of fundamental and professional programmes of study which need to be fostered. They run the gamut from pure science, mathematics and philosophy to law, engineering and the training of teachers and social workers. It is hard to imagine a modern society functioning well without graduates in computer science and medicine.

So a modern university is multifaceted and its council should, and currently does, reflect that diverse range of activities and connections. Following wide ranging discussions within NZ communities during 1987-1989, a largely democratic structure was laid down for the councils describing their roles and constitution. For example there were to be up to three places for each of the academic staff, the support staff and the students. There were to be representatives from the Employers Federation and the Council of Trade Unions. At Waikato it was common to have three Maori representatives, the Mayor of the city, the Director of the then Ruakura Research Station and the Chief Executive Officer of the polytechnic. At different times there have been members of the legal profession, including justices of the high court. Four members appointed by the Minister of Tertiary Education were to be appointed last, to ensure that the geographic, ethnic and gender balance of the Council was reasonable. The wise legislators who enacted this legislation, wanted the universities to be in good contact with their communities and the professional bodies which accredit professional degrees.

At the heart of a university are academic programmes of teaching and research. These are the special responsibility of an academic board. It decides which programmes should go a central committee with representatives of all of the universities, for final approval. This part of the system is not common in other countries. It's a throw-back to the days when there was just one university, the University of New Zealand.

The 1989 legislation was carefully worded. Universities were to be autonomous and have protected status, called academic freedom. This status has been in the charters of universities throughout the world since medieval times. The meaning of autonomy and academic freedom was spelt out in some detail: university staff and students are free to put forward new ideas, test received wisdom, articulate unpopular opinions, engage in research, determine the content of courses and programmes of study and teach and examine students in the manner they consider best promotes learning. This freedom is

conditioned by the need to act responsibly and ethically and allows for public scrutiny. There is certainly plenty of this - NZ academic staff must be one of the most looked at and measured in today's world. Universities work very hard indeed to spend every dollar of student fee income, government income and research income wisely and well.

Now Minister Joyce wants to change the structure of the university councils. He wants to make them, apparently, "leaner and more entrepreneurial". If the polytechnics are a guide to what he wants, he himself will appoint the Chancellor and deputy, appoint four of the members who will have a business orientation, and then they will appoint four more members. In other words, change a governing body which is broadly democratic and representative of major stakeholders, able to understand both the university and the needs of its communities for teaching and research, into one appointed, directly and indirectly, by himself with a very narrow focus. Since taxpayer government funding is typically less than half of a university's income (at Waikato in 2011 it was less than 44%), there is even no basis in equity in this take-over of control.

And in any case, the universities are already very entrepreneurial. There are many links between companies and researchers and between crown research institutes and researchers. For example the University of Waikato was one of the prime movers in the development of the successful Waikato Innovation Park. There are many NZ examples of spin-off companies formed from ideas hatched within the universities. University staff make important contributions to their communities in a huge variety of ways, not just entrepreneurial. But their main contribution to the development of society and its peoples includes undergraduate teaching, which on no account should be downgraded.

Mr. Joyce may wish to tie funding to some measured institutional entrepreneurial-ship: that is the modern way. The performance based research funding system is being used to stimulate a concentration on a particular type of research. We have an analogous system for teaching with pass rates, retention and completions being measured as part of the funding structure. Not only are these funding structures flawed, but they are outlawed by the Education Amendment Act of 1989. In providing for autonomy and academic freedom in teaching, assessment and research, the Act requires councils, commissions and ministers to respect this autonomy.

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