



Victoria University of Wellington Students' Association
Te Ropu Taura a te Kura Wananga o te Upoko o te Ika a Maui Inc.

Submission on the Draft Tertiary Education Strategy 2010 – 2015

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On behalf of the

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Victoria University of Wellington Students' Association (VUWSA) is a student controlled association representing over 20 thousand students at Victoria University of Wellington. VUWSA promotes the interests and participation of its members and represents their views.
- 1.2 VUWSA would like to thank the Ministry of Education for the opportunity to present a submission and commends the Ministry for consulting with the community.
- 1.3 This submission is based on the following public document:

Ministry of Education, on behalf of the Government of New Zealand. October 2009. *Draft Tertiary Education Strategy 2010 – 2015*. Wellington, New Zealand. ISBN 978-0-478-34189-8.

2.0 Overview

VUWSA recognises that a Tertiary Education Strategy is necessary and that there are some very positive aspects and objectives contained within the draft document. However, VUWSA is concerned that 'additional flexibility' for tertiary providers will result in fee increases for students; requests that the document be made much clearer in terms of how objectives will be achieved and will support students; and recommends a more balanced approach between economics and diversity of study. The document needs a wider focus to ensure adequate support systems are in place for *all* students undertaking tertiary study.

3.0 Comments and Recommendations

3.1 Concern surrounding further potential fee rises

The statement "Government is committed to maintaining reasonable fees for students, but will explore ways of giving providers some additional flexibility to raise revenue" (p. 5) is an area of concern. Government should provide specific guidelines and parameters for tertiary providers in regards to this "additional flexibility" to maintain fairness and equality for all tertiary students.

In the 1990s 'flexibility' for tertiary providers saw annual increases in student fees of up to thirty percent, which considerably increased the level of student debt contributing to the current ten billion dollar debt that students and graduates now collectively owe. Potential further increases to debt for students will discourage those from low-socio economic backgrounds entering tertiary education, who largely fall into Government's proposed target groups (such as Maori, Pasifika, and some adult learners), thus potentially undermining Government's aims. Any Government plans to link the student loan scheme to academic performance would also be of concern to VUWSA; we also note that such changes would have a disproportionate impact on students comprising the proposed target groups.

VUWSA strongly oppose potential fee rises, particularly those akin to the 1990s. Specifically, we are concerned that "additional flexibility" may allude to a removal or increase of the current fee maxima scheme. The draft strategy states that "[t]argeting more support towards young people may require Government to re-examine the level of assistance for

those people who have already been supported to undertake tertiary education” (p. 7). While VUWSA support assisting young people into and during tertiary education (as detailed below), VUWSA highlight that tertiary education is an ongoing cost to students and graduates and that appropriate support should be available to all students. VUWSA recognise the importance of a high-skill economy, and highlight the expectation that in order to enter the workforce and remain employable it is desirable and in many cases essential that graduates undertake further study to up-skill and keep their earlier qualifications marketable.

3.2 Provision for all students

The document is strongly focussed on encouraging outcomes for young people (aged under twenty-five) in tertiary education, specifically with qualifications at level four and above. We note that young people comprise two of the three groups listed as priority targets (p. 5). While VUWSA encourages the participation of young people in tertiary education, we query how Government plans to ensure increased participation amongst this group, particularly when the current student allowance system is age-related and based on parental income until a student is twenty-four.

Further, we note that twenty-four percent of current Victoria University students are aged twenty-five and over; a significant proportion of Victoria students, including within this older age bracket, are also enrolled for part-time study. VUWSA urge careful consideration of the current demographic of tertiary students and how outcomes for these students can be incorporated into the strategy.

3.3 Clarification surrounding support for target groups

VUWSA commends Government’s focus on assisting Maori and Pasifika students to achieve at higher levels; Maori and Pasifika students (along with students with disabilities) are also listed as priority groups in the Victoria University of Wellington’s Equity and Diversity Strategy, recently presented to a meeting of Victoria’s Academic Board.

We note that approximately forty-five percent of students enrolled on Victoria University’s Certificate of University Preparation course identify as Maori and/or Pasifika. We also note the findings of the Victoria University Single Data Return (December 2008), which found that over forty percent of all Pasifika students at Victoria do not complete the degree or post-graduate diploma they have enrolled in.

VUWSA supports increased emphasis on such preparatory courses and highlights their role in facilitating Maori and Pasifika students into higher education. VUWSA advocates greater emphasis on pastoral and academic support for Maori and Pasifika students in order to assist their achievement of higher completion rates.

VUWSA recommends that the strategy contain a stronger focus on the support systems that will enable these goals to be achieved. For instance, how will an increase in numbers of priority group students be funded? Are there support systems in place for these students when they arrive? What sort of facilities are or will be in place to assist more students to

complete higher level research? And, how will the current move towards managed enrolment in universities work in with the strategy?

3.4 The focus on economic growth and return

The draft strategy is heavily focussed on economic growth and return from tertiary providers. While VUWSA acknowledges that tertiary providers are required to generate a small surplus, VUWSA strongly oppose a return to market practices and increased competitiveness within the sector. We urge that due consideration be paid to the important role that the delivery of diverse academic programme offerings play in contributing to not only the knowledge and skills of individual graduates, but to society in general.

3.5 Document lacks specifics and action points

Potentially the proposed approach to targeting, improving system performance, and supporting high quality research *could* help realise Government's three – five year priorities. However, VUWSA believes that currently many of the approaches are too vague for this to be determined.

VUWSA agrees that incentives for participation in and completion of higher level study (p. 6) would encourage and motivate students and VUWSA welcomes any increases to funding or student support, but we would seek clarification around the types of incentives Government aims to offer. VUWSA does not support incentives to some students which would limit opportunities to others.

One of the aims of the document is to target young people (p. 6). The document mentions the effect of funding on the engagement of young people in tertiary education and VUWSA is interested in how Government will change or adapt funding in order to meet their goals.

VUWSA recognise that high quality research is needed (p. 10) but are concerned about how the quality of this research will be measured or determined. Similarly, we would ask that tangible measures for determining qualifications with "poor educational or labour market outcomes" (p. 5) be provided.

VUWSA strongly supports informed student choices and the provision of data on provider performance to students (p. 9). However, we seek clarification on how this will be packaged and available, and we would also highlight that not all students have the same flexibility of choice, due to family and other commitments.

3.6 Indicators of Progress

VUWSA commends Government's commitment to monitoring progress on these aims. However, VUWSA believes that as learning and teaching goals are an important part of assisting these target groups to complete tertiary qualifications, a combination of both statistical and quality-based surveying should be utilised; VUWSA also request the inclusion of the monitoring of student experience in this section of the document.

3.7 *Cost of the changes*

VUWSA suggest that further consideration is needed on the cost of the proposed changes. The draft strategy states that Government expects to see “stronger financial performance in tertiary education organisations” (p. 13), but at what cost? VUWSA supports Victoria’s recently approved Learning and Teaching Strategy; we believe that learning, teaching and research, should comprise the core business of universities, and should not fall to the wayside in favour of profit or competition. Any drawbacks or detriments to students should be clearly communicated within this document to students.

4.0 **Closing Remarks**

VUWSA commends Government’s aims for increasing academic achievement within the priority groups, and for addressing the need for a more holistic approach within tertiary education. However, VUWSA has major concerns surrounding potential fee increases, support for incoming and current students, the strong focus on economic growth and return, and how these goals will be achieved along with the cost of such changes. VUWSA requires clarification on these areas and requests that Government consider these aspects more fully.

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5 November 2009