

## **Second Learner Advisory Panel Discussion:**

We had 130 panellists in the second discussion, divided into six regional panels, and generated 90 individual comments. The discussion took place over five days in late January 2014.

The Learner Advisory Panels are a project of the New Zealand Union of Students' Associations to give effect to the student voice and are supported through a grant and oversight to ensure the procedures are robust by Ako Aotearoa, the National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence.

Following the lead of work initiated by the Ministry of Business Enterprise and Innovation and in discussion with Ako Aotearoa, we prompted discussion on the question of the adequacy of preparation for tertiary study and how well the study was preparing people for work (post-study).

The process consisted of NZUSA providing some prompts to get the discussion going and some ongoing facilitation through the discussion to help provide focus. Learners were encouraged however to initiate new conversations, or to comment or express approval of others' thoughts.

The results have been shared by sending them to participants, posting on the NZUSA website [www.students.org.nz](http://www.students.org.nz) and sending to our partners who contributed to determining the focus for the discussion.

## **Students' Consensus**

**There's a lot of discussion these days about connecting between "education" and "work". What do you think about this? Is it appropriate?**

In general the learners either believed that tertiary education was about enabling graduates to better participate (more usefully or for better financial returns) or were resigned to the fact that "it is now the way of the world". Accordingly, learners need to know that the things that they learn will be applicable in the workforce. Most believed that good connections between educational institutions and employers are good for students. However, there was also a counter-narrative, that education was about furthering knowledge, especially in the university setting, and although this might benefit students moving on into the workforce, or businesses receiving them, this was a side-effect and shouldn't be the main priority.

Consistent with across both of these perspectives was the idea that education encourages learners to change the way that they think about things, and that by encouraging creativity, problem solving, and communication skills graduates from all programmes will be more useful contributors to society – as workers and otherwise.

## **Do you think your institution does a good job of preparing you for life after education?**

Students expressed a range of views regarding their institution and their particular course. Some problems are focused on preparation for post-study employment, and involved final years which are meant to be completed in the workforce, or through a research assignment that involves working with a particular employer. This can be an issue in areas where there is a shortage of work, or where a lot of travel is involved. Others noted that while they were aware of such programmes it was not on offer in their course and that some teachers were more focused on preparation for work than others.

Students noted that “preparation for work” needed to be considered broadly and that the range of courses that they were required to complete provided this, others felt that what was really needed was the broad range of skills that university degree provided: research, writing, the capacity to think creatively and to apply knowledge. Some endorsed that these were the skills they wanted, and that they were listed as graduate attributes, but were not sufficiently addressed. IT skills were felt to be insufficiently covered, especially from those who were not (as mature students) not “digital natives”.

In general students felt that they felt in order to be prepared for post-study work they needed to show self-initiative but that both the careers services and the wide range of opportunities associated with campus-based study (clubs, the students’ association, etc) were useful to demonstrate attributes such as leadership and organisational ability if these chances were taken up.

## **What’s the role (existence, appropriateness) of workplace placements in the type of course that you are doing?**

Most students said that they did not have placements available within their programme but that this would be welcomed. The students felt that only some staff considered this to be amongst their (the staff member’s) responsibilities. Students note that there were careers fairs, and if they knew about them then they were useful, but placements or practicums would have been preferred. Institutions should at least employ a facilitator so that students can have a single point of contact if they wanted something to be arranged.

Where there were placements the feedback was mixed. While some students said that their practicums was where they learnt the most of all, and that having more of this – and less theory – would have enhanced their learning. Others challenged this, noting that students may not realise how important what they had learnt in class was useful when on their practicum. Of concern was that some students felt that what the placement taught them was that the theory and understanding of practice that they had learnt in their course was found wanting on their placement. That, in fact, how things worked in the “real world” was different from what they had been taught.

Panellists commented that qualifications based on research and applied research were different and that they shouldn't be merged into ones simply based on applied research, and that placements would only suit some qualifications. One suggested that what students felt about the practical nature of a course should be collected as part of the end-of-course feedback.

Consistent with the feedback that suggested that some students felt that educational institutions should stick to their core business of expanding knowledge was the suggestion that this was not the role of educational institutions at all. If the labour market was working, and there were jobs, then employers will come looking for graduates – and provide the transition needed to the specificity of skills that they needed in that particular placement.

**Making the move into tertiary education can be quite difficult – it's a new environment with different demands from school and work. What do you think does and doesn't help people get used to this environment, and how could schools and institutions make this easier?**

Panellists were all but unanimous in acknowledging that the changeover when they enter tertiary study is complicated. It is a big jump to tertiary and into a different style of learning. They saw that what should be foreseeable issues may not have been foreseen and schools and the tertiary institutions blur the responsibility, meaning that most students do not get the support that they needed. In general the information that they got at school was poor.

Students believed that secondary schools should teach referencing and the academic writing skills that were required in tertiary study. Some said that they had received this, but the fact that it was not universal across school reinforced inequality in the secondary system. It was acknowledged that if this was the responsibility of schools then those coming from work, or who did not complete year 13, would be further disadvantaged.

Some panellists had attended a one-day course at their university on research and referencing and had found this incredibly helpful. Others said that they were aware that another university had a compulsory academic writing paper in the first year and that this was also regarded as a good idea – though some said that they had felt well-prepared in this respect.

There was an interesting discussion about what was needed to prepare students. Some felt everyone should have a gap to “grow up”, others that it was life stresses that caused transition issues, such as living away from home, and that there needed more pastoral care to assist with this. There was support for the proposition that the academic preparation was not based on learning technical elements but rather making sure that students were aware that tertiary study was based on learning concepts of self-learning and being able to focus.

**If you had any difficulties, who do you think had the responsibility to make it easier: you, your school, or your tertiary institution?**

Learners acknowledged that there is not really a pattern to “readiness” and that different students are coming from different places in terms of their academic and social preparation so this question was complicated by those, as well as the different routes students had taken.

In general the support and information is available, but students need to have initiative to obtain it, and have sufficient avenues for information so that they can determine which the advice to accept and which to ignore.

Students expressed frustration at what they had been told at school: some said that they were not made aware of the expectations on them at tertiary, others that there were discussions but only for the students who were pre-ordained to be “academic”. These students felt that there should be the opportunity for regular visits to tertiary institutions so that the students can get acclimatised, and that bridging – within the tertiary institution – should be available. Targeting can be complicated; one student felt that tertiary study was much more suited for their style of learning than secondary, where they had not been identified as a high achieving, yet they were now thriving.

At tertiary institutions students acknowledged that the services, where they had accessed them, were excellent. Open days, preparation days and student learning services were all mentioned in this regard.

Suggestions reflected the broad range of experiences: (1) institutions should offer computer skills courses for mature students, (2) the problem with fitting in at the tertiary institution was making friends so this should be part of the focus of early first-year tutorials, (3) studies show international student difficulties are about adapting to different study situations rather than socialisation and there should be more help with this. For all of these some have access, or know how to obtain access, to such support, but some do not.