A strong public education system that gives all New Zealanders the skills and knowledge they need to lead fulfilling and prosperous lives is the bedrock of a just society. We believe in an education system that brings out the very best in everyone and that means our educational offerings need to be as diverse as the learners we cater for.

New Zealand has an education system to be proud of. Our best and brightest are among the best and brightest in the world. Our curriculum is the envy of many other countries, and our devolved and empowered model of schooling provides enormous autonomy and flexibility to educators.

However, there are still some major constraints holding us back. Our focus on qualification attainment often rubs against a greater focus on providing each individual with a viable educational pathway that leads to meaningful work or further study. Schools are still encouraged to focus on ‘subjects’ rather than broadly based learning approaches, and vocational learning is often seen as a fall back option rather than a primary goal.

The changing nature of work is seeing people change jobs more frequently and entire classes of jobs are disappearing as they are replaced by automation. At the same time new higher tech industries are emerging in search of workers. This means we need our workforce to be more resilient and adaptable to change. Our education system is crucial not just in ensuring people learn what they need but also ensuring they ‘learn to learn’ so they can have a secure future.

Through our Future of Work Commission, we will be looking at ways in which our education system needs to change to meet the needs of the 21st Century. The focus of this paper is principally how to make lifelong learning a reality, beginning with the links between senior secondary schooling, further study and training, and the world of work. Other challenges and opportunities in the education system will be covered through our regular education policy development process.

This is one of six papers being produced as part of Labour’s Future of Work Commission. The others cover Technology, Economic Development and Sustainability, the Māori and Pasifika workforces, and Security of Income and Work.

These papers are designed to stimulate discussion and generate ideas for policies to achieve the objectives of the Future of Work Commission:

- Decent Work
- Lower Unemployment
- Higher Wages
- Greater Economic Security
- High-Skilled, Resilient Workers

The Future of Work Commission seeks to ensure New Zealanders can confidently face the changing nature of work and have sustainable, fulfilling and well-paid employment in the coming decades.
1. A FOCUS ON PERSONALISED LEARNING

Too many Government policies – particularly those focused on accountability and compliance – are rooted in a 20th Century educational mindset. In the past, our school system has acted as a labour supply mechanism by effectively “filtering out” an appropriate number of school-leavers at the skill levels required by employers.

Those who didn’t complete foundation qualifications such as school certificate could rely on unskilled labour jobs on the factory floor or with other large employers. Those with basic skills could find work in clerical roles, while others would find career opportunities in the trades. Those who survived the filtering process and made it through to the senior secondary system could go on to complete degree-level tertiary study.

Those days are now long gone. Today our senior secondary school system caters for a wide range of learners, not just those who are destined for degree-level study. Yet much of the offering at that level of schooling, and the structure of learning and assessment that accompanies it, remains rooted in the assumption that degree-level study is an inevitable outcome for senior school leavers.

Currently only 3 out of 10 school leavers are going onto degree level study.¹ Less than two-thirds of those who complete NCEA level 3 actually go on to university.²

An overemphasis on assessment, testing and qualification attainment at the senior secondary level is hampering efforts to focus on cross-cutting competencies that will be essential in the future such as creativity, innovation, teamwork, collaboration, problem solving and communication.

Lack of personalised learning can make it hard for some people to participate in the education system. We have engagement issues with several groups including the disabled, women, Māori and Pasifika. By tailoring education to individual needs it can help boost their engagement and improve educational outcomes.

Schools and teachers can often be heard asking how they can prepare students today for a world we can’t yet even imagine. The answer lies at least in part in equipping them with the attributes of resilience and adaptability. They will need to grow and change, be self-starting, innovative and creative. While the specific skills they may require to perform particular employment tasks may change, those basic attributes will not.

A focus on teaching students to learn from early childhood education through to university is crucial for ensuring that they are resilient and adaptable to changes in the future workforce.

- Are our formal education structures working to prepare students for life beyond work? How can they be improved?
- How can we better provide personalised learning for students?

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¹ Universities New Zealand, October 2014, Briefing for the Incoming Minister, http://www.universitiesnz.ac.nz/files/Universities%20NZ%20Briefing%20for%20the%20Incoming%20Minister%20October%202014.pdf
2. SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE NOT SUBJECTS AND EXAMS

The ‘cram and exam’ model of summative assessment is not a reliable way of assessing skills such as creativity, innovation, teamwork, collaboration, problem solving and communication. Each and every learner needs to understand the relationship between their learning, their working future and the educational options that will get them there. Senior high school needs a ‘destinations focus’ for students by creating clear and effective pathways to post-school destinations to study and employment.

We also need to reconsider whether there are practical life skills that aren’t currently being taught within schools but should be. For example, many jobs require a driving license but driver training is not widely delivered in schools. We should consider if skills like driver licensing can be an integrated part of senior secondary education, even as part of NCEA. Every school leaver should be confident they have core life skills to be successful post-school.

Modern high schools can’t continue to just ask students to “pick six subjects” - we need schools to plan programmes that support learners towards their next steps, whatever they happen to be.

- How can the education system better provide students with useful skills rather than just subjects?
- What core skills should be in a school leavers “toolkit”? (such as drivers’ licenses, financial literacy, civics and citizenship)

3. NEW OPPORTUNITIES AND ACCESS

Changes to technology have created many more opportunities to improve our education system. Making use of emerging technologies can help not just to reduce costs and promote access but also improve learning experiences so our workforce is more prepared for work.

Already schools are increasingly equipping students with digital devices and making better use of technology in the classroom but more progress could be made. There are other ways technology could be brought into the curriculum which we are not taking advantage of, for example teaching coding within schools. However many students who do not have access to technology at home or a personal digital device for school are missing out on learning opportunities.

Technology is also making high-quality vocational learning increasingly available online. This provides a massive opportunity for tertiary level study and retraining because people can obtain entire qualifications online with the same quality of direct learning and engagement as if they were on-site. If this is fully harnessed it can provide opportunities for workers to retrain without having to leave the workforce and for courses at a tertiary level to be delivered at a substantially lower cost, possibly even without charge. Removal of barriers like this can help ensure all New Zealanders have access to a quality life-long education.

There are also new opportunities from changing technology for our teaching workforce. The ageing population and workforce brings new opportunities to shift some of those with extensive real life experience into teaching to share their experiences with the younger generation. New technology also allows experts to teach in their field while remaining in the workforce.
It has to be acknowledged however that education and training providers face large costs in adopting new technology. Many struggle to provide the latest technology. A better integration between employers and providers is essential to dealing with this challenge.

- How can we better incorporate technology into our schools and tertiary providers to improve learning?
- How can the Government support greater use of online learning for tertiary study and retraining to improve access and reduce costs?

4. CLOSER CONNECTIONS TO THE LABOUR MARKET

Education is far from just preparation for the labour market, it’s preparation for life. But that doesn’t mean schools and training institutions can be blind to the needs of business and employers. Through good education and training we can ensure our workforce is able to deal with all of the challenges the changing nature of work throws at them. By the time they leave school, every young person should be on a pathway to meaningful employment or further study or training.

The current focus on qualification attainment, particularly the Government’s target to have at least 85% of school leavers achieving NCEA Level 2, creates an incentive for schools to focus on credit accumulation, rather than developing meaningful learning pathways for their students that will lead to longer-term outcomes. Despite an increase in qualification attainment at the senior secondary school level in recent years, New Zealand still has high levels of NEETs (Not in Education Employment or Training).³ We need to focus on the quality of that learning and whether it provides knowledge and skills, not just credits.

New Zealand is not alone. International researchers McKinsey and Company surveyed 8000 employers, providers, and young people and examined over 100 programs. Among their findings were:

- A minority of young people felt they were well-informed when making decisions about courses of study.
- Once in the job market, only 45% of young people said they had made the right choices about their education.
- Only 42% of employers surveyed felt the education system adequately prepared young people for the workforce, while 72% of education providers felt it did.
- Employers consistently rated young people lower than education providers on competencies such as teamwork, spoken communications, written communications and problem solving.
- About a quarter of young people were still looking for work six months after finishing their studies, while a further quarter were in ‘interim’ employment that had no relationship to their field of study.⁴

New Zealand can and should be at the forefront of addressing these issues. Our qualifications framework is one of the most progressive and flexible in the OECD, yet we aren’t yet making the most of it. While NCEA has opened up far greater scope for personalised learning, more work needs to be done to ensure the results of the education system are understandable to end-users (parents, employers), so that learners are able to transact better in the labour market and have their skills recognised and valued.

There are problems on both sides: employers say they want to engage, but more often sit as ‘recipients’ of the education system, rather than necessary participants, actively involved in defining and delivering skills.

Employers also expect ‘work-ready’ employees, but the skills they refer to are often best developed through experiential opportunities, outside traditional classrooms. Genuinely blended learning has the potential to better engage many of those who currently disengage from education, but it will require much greater partnering between the world of work and the education system.

There is a real question of whether school and university is the right place for all of our students. Some students will learn better in industry training or directly on the job. Getting businesses to sign up to this – particularly in emerging industries where there are skill shortages like ICT – is crucial to ensuring we have a workforce which meets New Zealand’s needs and ensures our young people do not end up unemployed.

For its part, the education system can be insular, and see its role as educating the public about the education profession. E.g. “how do we make parents understand NCEA?” rather than “how to we make NCEA understandable to parents?”

At very least the results of the education system need to be digestible, and employers need to grapple with their responsibilities to help define and deliver employable skills.

In Vocational Education, we need more tertiary education programmes that “include the prize”. Rather than stick education on to people and hope for the best (push strategy), we need end-to-end programmes that bridge learners into jobs or better jobs (pull strategy). This requires deliberate, practical, local, community-led effort and requires employers and community interests to be involved at the front end. It also needs more joined up design between providers and the industry training and apprenticeships system.

The Maori and Pacific Trades Training concept (‘consortia approach’) is good and could be built on, though the practice has yet to match the theory. Fundamentally the effectiveness of VET systems is about the integration between the world of education and the world of work – the more integrated the better the VET system.

• How can we improve the responsiveness of education and training so that it meets the needs of careers people will have in 5, 10 or 20 years’ time?

• What can be done to boost businesses involvement with the training of their future workforce?

• How do we better integrate our education and training system with our labour market?

• How can the transition between schools and work or industry training be improved?
5. BETTER ADVICE FOR LEARNERS

We need to develop a simple common transitions framework that works across schools, tertiary education providers and employment opportunities. Too often careers advice is seen as an “add-on” to a student’s learning experience, rather than an integral part of it. Too often it is also an add-on to the workload of a subject teacher.

Good careers advice and educational pathway planning needs to be interwoven with curriculum delivery if we are to ensure that every young New Zealander gets the best possible chance to achieve to their full potential.

The Vocational Pathways\(^5\) are a great start, but what will drive them is planned and deliberate programme design that genuinely bridges young people from education to employment, and cultural change to empower parents and employers to have a say about the courses their local schools and polytechs offer. Two things matter: young people seeing the purpose of their learning and someone caring about their learning.

We need to revisit the current model that ties careers advice to school staffing. Careers happen beyond the school gate, and we know from ERO reports that the current quality of careers advice is “variable”. Technology provides new answers to this but there has been an unwillingness to look fundamentally at the model. There is also an entrenched culture and behaviours that see careers as something separate from curriculum.

- What should the Government do to improve careers advice for learners?
- What role can business, tertiary institutions and other training providers play to support the provision of good quality careers advice?

6. LIFELONG LEARNING

Too many educational policies are also based on the notion that education, and working life, is a linear pathway, when in fact opportunities to change course, re-skill and re-focus are increasingly essential throughout life.

As the American writer Alvin Toffler stated: “The illiterate of the 21st century won’t be those who cannot read and write but those who cannot learn, unlearn and re-learn”.\(^6\)

Foundational education (NZQF L1 and 2, in both secondary and tertiary) needs to develop the broad core capabilities that make someone employable and adaptable in the workplace. Interestingly, employers cite the same skills requirements for employees no matter which level of the education system they are emerging from. Our training systems are also flawed by being based on the concept of training prior to work. With industry needing a highly skilled, adaptable workforce, we need to be looking at retraining right through a person’s life. This could include looking at level 5 and 6 apprenticeships and learning beyond level 6 to facilitate constant development. This is especially important in ensuring our ageing workforce is able to adapt to sometimes entirely different industries than they are used to.

Lifelong learning also needs to be about our teaching workforce. New technology means teaching staff in some areas face

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\(^5\) Vocational Pathways helps direct students through the appropriate NCEA standards and training for work in six industries: Primary Industries, Service Industries, Social & Community Services, Manufacturing & Technology, Construction & Infrastructure, and Creative Industries. http://youthguarantee.net.nz/vocational-pathways/

their knowledge being out of date within a few years of them entering the profession. There needs to be a consistent focus on professional development and upskilling our educators so their pupils receive the best possible education.

• How can we ensure people have access to opportunities to reskill and refocus throughout life?

7. INDUSTRY TRAINING AND APPRENTICESHIPS

There is growing evidence to support the provision of on-going training for all workers. While there is contested evidence about the number of career and job changes people can expect to have in their lifetimes, there is no doubt the rate of change is increasing. Rapid advancements in technology – and the nature and experience of work – mean workers need to be constantly updating their knowledge and skills.

The disruption caused by these changes mean many workers may also spend more time moving in and out of the workforce. During these periods continuing access to training will be important to ensure they are work ready for future job opportunities. Training is a critical part of an active labour market policy. Well trained workers are more productive and provide essential insight into innovation.

Improving access to training opportunities requires us to reconsider the models we have in place for the funding, provision and organisation of training. In a world where the acquisition of broad based knowledge is as important as core technical skills, is our current model of apprenticeship training adequate?

For example, Waterloo University in Canada has made huge progress in their region by partnering with local industry and promoting entrepreneurship to ensure its education aligns with future developments.

• Is the current industry training/apprenticeship system delivering the training needed?

• Should employers be obliged to provide training in partnership with Government? How could the Apprenticeship System be developed to provide the skills and qualifications relevant to the changing nature of work?