



The neo-liberal experiment at Unitec.

BURNING DOWN THE HOUSE!

WHAT HAPPENED – WHAT WE LEARNT - AND IDEAS ON
GUARDING OUR FUTURE TERTIARY SECTOR

'I told-you-so' is a miserable business. And we at the TEU did tell them!

Don't play with matches! don't play with matches! don't play with matches!.

Now - look what you did! The house is on fire!



Sadly, Unitec was my house. Happily it hasn't completely burnt down – albeit we are all somewhat singed.

They haven't gone away

- ▶ “To win the battle of ideas, conservatives must fight on philosophical grounds, explaining why these policies are immoral. They must make the case based on ethics rather than economics because the latter is downstream from the former. It is only a matter of time before a purely economic or logical argument loses to a moral or emotional one. **In practice this means explaining why the fundamental principle of collectivism underlying these socialist proposals is immoral**: It violates the individual rights upon which societal progress and happiness are based (Alison, 2019. p.1)”

Former CATO institute CE – widely regarded as one of the most influential think-tanks in the world.

Thoughts on the Neo-Liberal paradigm

Polanyi (1965). Kuttner (1997). (and Poppa Karl).

Coming from remarkably different theoretical approaches all three authors make the very good point that:

The unregulated application of the market model devastates the very fields it claims to serve.

Kuttner makes the additional claim that education in particular is what he would call a second-best market. That is, a market better served by metrics measuring social good rather than fiscal gain.

We also know that the intention to create education as primarily market commodity rather than primarily serving a public good is not a new one. Nor is the idea likely to evaporate in a burst of socialist sunshine Post-Corona (Lyotard, 1984; Marshall, 1995).

Long histories -

Before turning more to the Unitec experience - I'd like to make the point that what happened to us at Unitec cannot really be separated from the three or more decades old neo-liberal project. This project was not in essence simply economic . The project aim was also to redefine human nature as essentially individualistic, choice able, tightly boundary and inherently self-interested operating within a world construed as a competitive field. (Apple, 1991; Fitzsimons, 2002; Kenkel, 2005; Phoenix, 2003; Marshall, 1995; Mulderrig, 2003; Rose 1999).

Within that schemata and despite all evidence to the contrary, the competitive market becomes the perfect device for maximising human well-being. Solidarity and collectivism (Think unions) become the enemy of the market and hence the enemy of human well-being (Mayer 2016).

A trio of problems.

The difficulties that Unitec faced over that time might be characterised as falling under **three broad and often overlapping categories.**

First problem:

inherent structural problems in the new approaches of what was called the transformation. Many of these followed a **failure to follow principles of subsidiarity** with a tendency for efficiency drives involving centralisation of decision-making with a corresponding loss of expert input into decisions affecting the coalface.

Second problem:

Whole of institution incompetent and ill planned implementation without piloting or testing

Many of these seemed driven by the '**shiny-new-toy-syndrome**' rather than research – or; driven as vanity projects by senior executive leadership team members.

The sunk cost fallacy (Money and Ego) became a real problem.

Third problem:

A failure to listen to advice or take account of evidence-based feedback on the part of the previous executive leadership team and Council. There was consistent feedback from staff and TEU that the ELT - (executive leadership team) -under Dr Rick Ede - (and by extension the Unitec Council) - refused and ignored offers of advice and feedback from staff and continued to proceed with initiatives that clear evidence-based information showed to be pathways to disaster.

Solutions seemed reasonably simple and will take time. Given the disaster and a change of government, new management were effectively in crisis management mode for two years. 'Transformation' became a dirty word.

Use 'close-to-the-coalface' quality assurance mechanisms such as program management committees with sufficient discipline-based admin support that they can function well. Ensure that these follow a consistent format / mandate. **Follow the principle of subsidiarity at all levels**

Decentralise admin and make it possible / easy for potential applicants and students to speak to discipline knowledgeable admin staff and lecturers. This would mean removing the assumption that generic student services staff can know everything about everything sufficiently as to address the complexities of discipline specific studies.

Introduce mechanisms that operate to 'brake' ill thought through 'shiny-new-toy-projects' / vanity project approaches. Typically, this might involve experienced teaching staff having considerable input into decision-making rather than allowing authority capture by a small group

Respect the integrity of disciplines by promoting management who have experience in those disciplines into positions of authority.

Judicious and targeted use of e-learning across the arc of study rather than its wholesale blunt application.



Ensure there are well-resourced specific Maori and Pasifika support services

Reject language such as 'customer' and 'pathways' and move back to more commonly understood terms such as 'student' and faculty.

Cap the introduction of new management staff and consultants rather than capping teaching staff. Cap management salaries. CEO's should not be paid up to 8 times more than ordinary teaching and admin staff.

Adopt a staged 'bed-in' approach to change that does not court change fatigue and hostility from staff.

Value, listen to and support teaching staff.

Thoughts for post corona.

- ▶ Guard face-to-face teaching. It's a treasure of Aotearoa and one that we could all too easily lose.
- ▶ Beware the **marketisation** of pandemics - guard against a plethora of new shiny toys. Instead we need robust reliable well tested platforms.
- ▶ Insist on institutions providing appropriate technology so that education can be easily taught in class and also allow the full participation of those who will be unable to attend class for the foreseeable future.
- ▶ Do not let crisis workloads become the new expectation.
- ▶ Bed in and firmly cement the principle of subsidiarity at all levels. Bed in critical education as central. More at risk than ever.
- ▶ The new Polytech structure will be hard to reverse. That said; there is nothing to prevent the reintroduction of managerialism if we have a change of guard in government. This needs to be fiercely resisted.

Unitec's Transformation

- ▶ Unitec's traumatic experience is what can (and did) happen when a small group of politically well-supported acolytes of a neoliberal ideology were allowed unfettered access to the control levers of public education.
- ▶ The experience should operate as a -'how-not-to' - learning experience for broader education in New Zealand. We need to study it. Not ignore it!

What happened at Unitec reflects perhaps one of the more extreme examples of the saying:

That - Neoliberalism tends to operate as relating to the market metaphor as a - **revealed truth rather than a contestable logic** (Myers, 2004).

Or as Kuttner puts it:

“There is at the core of the celebration of markets relentless tautology. If we begin by assuming that nearly everything can be understood as a market and that markets optimize outcomes, then everything leads back to the same conclusion—marketize! If, in the event, a particular market doesn't optimize, there is only one possible conclusion—it must be insufficiently market-like. This is a no-fail system for guaranteeing that theory trumps evidence. Should some human activity not, in fact, behave like an efficient market, it must logically be the result of some interference that should be removed. It does not occur that the theory mis-specifies human behavior (1997. P, 1.)”

The new normal

In 2015 Paul Prestige and I examined the colonisation of the community sector by neo-liberal norms over a 30 period – (Kenkel and Prestige (2015)).

What we found extraordinary was the extent to which neoliberal norms of functioning and being have (over time) become the common norms of functioning and being to the extent that other possibilities become squeezed out of sight.

Collectivity and solidarity become faintly embarrassing concepts and the so-called efficiency gains of a neoliberally informed managerialism became hegemonic in their ascendancy. **The same seems to have become true for education** and I frankly don't trust that a change of guard equates to the end of the neo-liberal hegemony.

So what typically happens in education? – logics of action under neo-liberalism

Increasingly ruthless exclusion of information that doesn't support the success story of marketisation.

Replacement of existing management by new managers expressly picked because of their allegiance to a market model. (Tellingly - at Unitec few were from education).

Bizarre Nomenclature to support / buttress the neo-liberal 'vision' – (for example - benefits realisation managers!)

Persistence with ideologically inspired projects even when it becomes apparent they are failing massively. (truth should never get in the way of a good story)

Inefficient efficiency gains. The sorts of changes that look good when viewed from a distance via spreadsheet – but, produce disaster at the ground.

Clumping of authority and power into smaller groups, with success measured by loyalty to the ideological vision, and failure determined by expression of dissent. Classic 'Cuban-Missile-Crisis' effect, often accompanied by vicious games of musical chairs to exclude / silence dissenters. unchecked vanity projects by the in-group proliferate because dissent using real-world metrics becomes effectively impossible.

And – like Dubya Bush declaring victory before the results are in – creating a hardening of position and making backtracking almost impossible.



Things distorted take time to un-distort. Systems manage politicians not the other way around.

- ▶ I'd like to make two simple observations:
- ▶ 1. Many – if not most - of the current education systems, their bureaucracies, practices and senior leadership (within both tertiary institutions and funding / Quality assurance institutions) were designed and selected because of their allegiance to neo-liberal policies and practices. Hence change will be quietly resisted at many levels.
- ▶ 2. Using WINZ (as an example) – political will has been an abject failure at shifting an internal culture and set of practices designed to be cruel to beneficiaries. The neo-liberal machine has not been dismantled – rather it is in idle – and - will be race ready come the end of our current burst of crisis socialism and soft-left government

Unitec's 'transformation' 2013 to 2017: Background

- The philosophy that informed Unitec's transformation (i.e. restructure) can be summed up: ***Public vocational education should prioritize and focus wholly on the needs of business.***
- Education to be business focussed, *not* student focussed
- Unitec's 'transformation' began in earnest in late 2013, with the restructure of the design school, with staffing being reduced from 53 to 17 permanent positions.
- Half of the teaching hours were to be filled by industry 'experts'
- An emphasis on online learning, with intended dramatic reductions in face-to-face teaching, was promulgated throughout the institute

(Loo, W. 2018)

Unitec's 'transformation' 2013 to 2017: Background

- *"It's fair to say we are fundamentally repositioning the role of an academic in this space...We see the need for quite different jobs in this mix - they are academic jobs but a different balance of things we are asking them to do. That is quite confronting for the Tertiary Education Union."*

Rick Ede, former Unitec CE

- In 2014, traditional academic faculties and departments were disestablished and replaced with so called 'Networks' and 'Practice Pathways'
- 'Networks' and 'practice pathways' would supposedly facilitate vastly increased employer input into course and programme content, and thus streamline students into work.
- (Loo, W. 2018)

Privatisation and Centralisation of Enrollments

- In late 2015, Dr Rick Ede, former Unitec CE, announced 55 job losses in relation to the centralization and **outsourcing of student services and the application to enrolment process** - to the multinational business services company **Concentrix**.
- Unitec promised Concentrix *“would provide students with faster, personalised help using technology and a world-class customer care environment to identify their needs and guide them to the services they need.”*
- Dr Ede said: *“We also want to offer the best possible customer service to our students. Concentrix are specialists in customer-centric service provision, and this partnership will ensure we achieve this....”*
- Management seemed to have extraordinary confidence in Concentrix’s ability to do the job – in spite of Concentrix having **no previous experience** in providing tertiary services. (Loo, W. 2018)

List of problems in consequence of the transformation:

- ▶ The restructuring of the design and visual arts school such that at present EFTS are only 11 % of what they were five years ago, (in terms of new enrolments for semester 1 2018).
- ▶ The creation of year one common semester courses with a strong on-line component. These were of such poor quality that they drew significant negative attention from at least two professional registration bodies.
- ▶ The removal of required quality assurance processes such as program management committees that in large part drove the crash to category 3 status

- ▶ The large drop in EFTS, which in comparison to the EFTS status of other ITPs could not be explained by simple changes in the economy and labour market.
- ▶ Very poor student survey results over more than one year.
- ▶ The downsizing of specific support services for Maori and Pacific students and their amalgamation into mainstream services.
- ▶ Staff survey results that over four successive years offered a powerful and pointed criticism of the negative effects of the reforms.
- ▶ And oh yes – we lost a lot money and had to be rescued with a bailout and the council were dismissed and replaced by a commissioner.

- ▶ As described - The outsourcing of enrolments to the multinational company Concentrix (which had no previous experience in this area of work). There was a corresponding 20% drop in domestic students in just two years (from 2015 to 2017) and a plethora of complaints. The front door for prospective students was effectively closed. Enquiries met a bewildering array of variable quality 'scripted' responses. Options to speak with discipline specific staff were disallowed.
- ▶ The drop from NZQA category one to category two after the 2016 EER and then a further drop to category three.
- ▶ A major problem was profound alienation between management and staff. This is only slowly changing

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