

ROVE - a journey without a specific destination for the ITP sector?

By Professor Kay Morris Matthews and Dr Pii-Tuulia Nikula

The Labour-led government recently announced the details of the Review of Vocational Education (RoVE), aimed at creating a more unified vocational education system. However, the proposal up for consultation seems to raise more questions than answers.

The RoVE reform recommends that the existing 16 independent institutions of technology and polytechnic (ITPs) be merged into a single entity. At the same time the 11 industry training organisations (ITOs) will cease to exist, and their courses delivered by the New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology. This new entity will be responsible for managing budgets and staffing as well as student and learning management systems.

There is no doubt that the sector has had some significant issues that need addressing, in particular, the serious financial difficulty that some institutes of technology and polytechnic have found themselves in. Why they are in this predicament can be put down to the government's funding approach, challenges in attracting students in a time of high employment and management issues.

At a broader level there are some positive aspects of the reform. It certainly could help eliminate the duplication of certain activities across ITPs as well as build a coherent set of national programmes. It would also create a more seamless and coordinated approach to vocational learning.

However, one immediate issue of concern is that the scope of the ROVE reform is narrowed down to sub-degree/trades training, with little consideration of the degree and postgraduate degree provision that forms about 30 % of all ITP programmes. It is unclear what the future will hold for this portfolio and how the changes affecting the vocational level align with the degree level provision.

Also, the big question that needs addressing is whether regional responsiveness, flexibility and innovation will be stifled. Under the current model, many of the 16 ITPs play a key role in their communities and proudly embody their regional identity. It is hard to see how one large monolithic ITP would fulfil this role and be good for the regions. In a bid to create a lean machine with centralised control, the key reason for the creation of these former regional institutes and community colleges seems to have been lost.

A meaningful regional influence, decision-making and a sense of ownership from employers, industry and communities should be at the core of the system. Unfortunately, there is little detail in the documents to indicate how that regional focus can be realised.

Regional learners, including in smaller satellite campus communities must not be disenfranchised. Local people know their regions best and it is difficult to see how an advisory regional group or bureaucrats in Wellington could possibly have their finger on the pulse of the needs of community tertiary education like those at the grassroots level.

It seems inevitable that jobs will be lost from all 16 institutions, but at a deeper level the loss could also be the history and reputations that those well performing

institutions have built up over decades. The risk is that all that intellectual capital and institutional knowledge will be lost as the regional bodies are subsumed into a central control model.

The 'Institute of Skills and Technology' is a failed working title with little thought given to one third of the ITP student body graduating with degrees.

The final name should be inclusive of all qualifications awarded by ITPs, and attractive to the wide range of domestic and international learners.

It is also unclear whether the campuses can continue using their existing names - in some instances carrying valuable brand equity - as part of their marketing activities at least in the short-medium term. Many of the regional institutions have worked hard to build that brand and it would be a shame to see that simply consigned to the dustbin of history.

So many questions have been raised by this reform and it is important that details about the political process and motives are addressed. There are no budgetary calculations available, which makes it difficult for taxpayers and the sector to know the true cost of this reform. How are they expected to evaluate the justifications behind it? Change costs money and there is an expectation that in the short and medium term, the reform is going to require considerable additional investment. Where will this money come from?

While the proposal is light on specifics, the timeline of the reform is extremely tight with a comparatively short six- week consultation period. The government has also indicated that legislation will be introduced and passed by the end of the year. In this reform, the devil is in the detail, and much of the detail is not part of the plan, making the consultation process even more ad hoc.

The short time-frame given to establish this new national ITP arguably indicates that there is a political driver behind it rather than any other urgent need. The fact that the 2020 general election is fast approaching should not be forgotten. A significant overhaul of this importance should be carefully considered and planned. Instead, we have a politically driven process without enough consideration of stakeholder views.

- **Professor Kay Morris Matthews is Research Professor at the Eastern Institute of Technology (EIT) in Hawke's Bay and Dr Pii-Tuulia Nikula is a senior lecturer at EIT's School of Business.**