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Beating the filters of failure: Engaging with the disengaged in Higher Education

Dr Stuart Middleton

Director External Relations
Manukau Institute of Technology

Introduction

Over the past fifty or so years, increased emphasis has been placed on the importance of postsecondary education and interest in access and equity in higher education has driven many developments aimed at increasing participation in tertiary education. This might seem something of a logical next step. Universal primary education had been achieved and in theory universal secondary education had been achieved and “compulsory education” stretched out typically to age-15 or -16. This emphasis on increasing participation has something of a look of a drive to achieve mass if not universal participation in postsecondary education.

While successive waves of policy implementation aimed at increasing participation have resulted in increased numbers of students undertaking courses that are labeled “higher education”, there has generally been no commensurate increase in the outcomes of higher education when measured by graduation rates in conventional and comparable higher education qualifications (Layer 2005; Newby 2005; Watson 2005). This phenomenon is also present in the education systems in Australia, the UK, the USA and Canada. It could be, therefore, that the issue is not one of merely increasing participation but rather one of questioning the capability of those education systems to respond to a set of new requirements created by a changing set of demographics and changing economies.

This set of education systems has their origins in the elitist English education system. The term “elitist” is bound to provoke a range of responses. Here it is used simply to mean that the education system which became the template for the development of the five large English-speaking education systems (UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) was designed for and served only a select group of people. The initial thrust was on increasing the primary / elementary level of education after which students would take diverse pathways into employment, further training or higher education.

The development of the K-12 systems occurred between these two educational book-ends – primary education and higher education. Secondary education developed as the bit in between. As populations grew so too did this secondary part of the system, originally as “post-primary education” and later as secondary education. As a result of this incremental and in some ways accidental growth, the purpose of secondary education has never been clearly understood in terms of the total population. That everyone needed a grasp of the basics as provided by the primary education systems was well supported. That there needed to be high levels of highly qualified people to enter the professions was understood. But what was the purpose of secondary

education and why over time did it become important that increasing numbers of teenagers were required to undertake increasingly longer periods of it?

It is clear that the traditional track for academic students had as a key purpose in post-primary education, preparation for higher education. But this seamless track through education had relevance for those students undertaking academic studies at a secondary level which in turn led to academic studies at the level of higher education. In terms of mass participation in education, this has suited, and continues to suit, perhaps thirty percent of the school population. Some of the remaining seventy percent were also provided for when explicit vocational tracks existed at the secondary level.

At one time, industrial arts tracks, office and commercial tracks, home economic tracks and suchlike were available to students to provide a smooth transition from primary education into employment-based education and on to appropriate employment. The destruction of these pathways in the interests of a general, academic focus may have been motivated by well-meaning notions of egalitarianism but the education facts spoke for themselves – this suited only the thirty percent that were already being well-provided for in the existing academic programmes. The rest were being asked to engage in an exercise of education for no obvious reason. And, it appears to have happened by stealth.

This happened between the 1960's and the 1980's as the following graph illustrates.

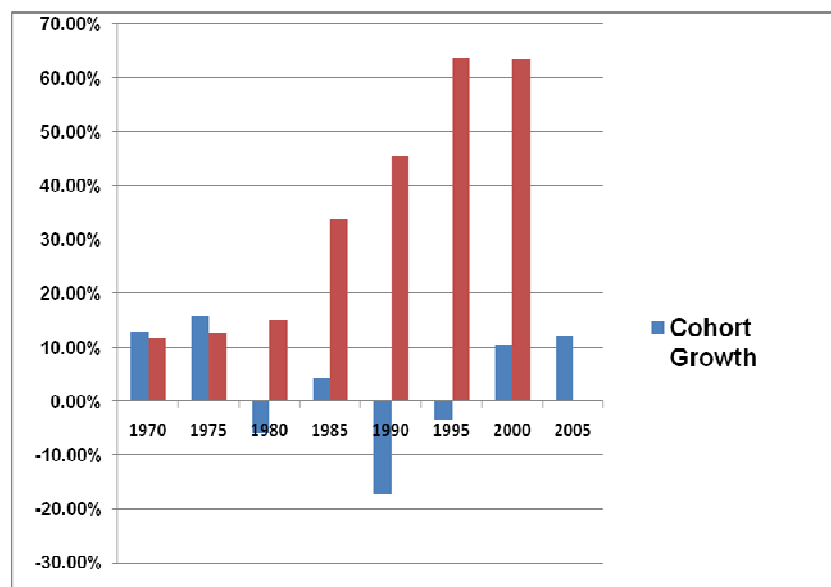


Figure 1: Cohort growth

The growth of the numbers who stayed five years at school grew exponentially from about 10% in the 1960's to over 60% in the 1990's. A set of possible explanations could include changes in the economy (such as the rise of structural unemployment), changes in the education curriculum (such as the move to a comprehensive general academic programme and the demise of vocational education), the decline of the apprenticeship approach to vocational training and a general belief that staying at school longer would result in higher levels of attainment.

But at the same time as secondary schooling lengthened, disengagement increased. The result was a pattern of disengagement with secondary education that has in the first decade of the twenty-first century reached worrying proportions. This trend has been accelerated by two factors – a rapidly changing demographic in the communities served by the English-speaking education systems and a set of changing emphases in the economies of those countries. Despite significant increases in the numbers involved in education and training in these countries, there remains an escalating shortage of suitably educated people and there are growing groups disaffected by and disengaged from education.

But still governments and those who shape policy pursue the view that more of the same education provision will one day produce different results. It is the simple argument of this paper that an education system that once met the higher education needs of learners and of the communities it served in an acceptable manner, might not be able to continue to do so without changing to reflect the changes that are happening around it.

Closing off the exit points

For a greater part of the history of our education systems, there were viable exit points from education that led to sustaining lives. For many, the completion of primary education – attaining the highest “standards” as they were called in New Zealand – marked the point at which attention turned to real employment in low skilled or unskilled positions or to occupations in which continued learning, both informal and formal occurred “on the job”. The value of manual labour and respect for it was higher than it is now and had yet to be challenged by factors such as technological developments, changes in the structure of economies and social attitudes that supported a view that manual labour was unworthy. There had also not yet occurred the uncritical call for everyone to pursue high level qualifications in the name of the “knowledge society” and the “information age”.

Increasingly, involvement in secondary schooling was seen as important in developing a promise of a future with reward and quality. Initially this was made possible by providing for different tracks – academic, general, technical, commercial and home economics in New Zealand. To enter one of these tracks was to declare that one was headed towards a certain range of futures with regard to employment and qualifications. An important point often overlooked is that this structure was unashamedly vocational in its orientation. Even the academic track was vocational with a clear understanding that such a track would lead to higher education and qualifications that supported entry into the professions.

However, when views of egalitarianism challenged both the usefulness of a school organisation based on a tracking system and indeed the morality of such an approach, interest increasingly turned to the one-size-fits all approach. The development of the comprehensive secondary school system in New Zealand however did not proceed in an even handed manner. A strength of the New Zealand education system had always been the smooth pathway that existed into tertiary education from secondary schooling. There was curriculum alignment (long before the term became fashionable) between the academic programmes of the school and those of the universities. A single set of qualifications served for both exit from school and entry into the

university and in fact there was no curriculum for the senior secondary school other than the prescriptions for those examinations. There was a greater degree of contact between those working in the university system and those teaching in the academic secondary programmes than is typical of other education systems. (This relationship was made manifest through the work of the New Zealand Universities Entrance Board, an organization working under the aegis of the University Grants Committee.)

It was inevitable therefore that successive reviews of the curriculum and the qualification structure left this strong feature intact and that comprehensive secondary schools in New Zealand would develop a general but academic orientation. The relegation of vocational tracks to optional streams, the general dilution of the industrial arts (eventually to be shouldered aside by the development of the Technology curriculum) and disappearance of business services subjects, led an acceptance that a five year general academic programme to be in the interests of all students. [A further factor might have been the blurring of distinctions between the traditional views of what was academic and what was vocation for it is true that the terms are now less of a distinction and more of a spectrum and, at times (e.g. in education for medicine and the law) one and the same thing (Newby 2005).]

There might also have been a diminishing value placed on manual labour. As one commentator said: “I do not know if education so refines the senses or makes people allergic to sweat, but educated people will not collect garbage, unclog sewers, scour urinals, make up beds, clear tables, etc.” Our group of five education systems addresses this by immigration.

This shift in emphasis of secondary education developed momentum and ignored the fact that it just wasn't working, was not in the interests of some students and was clearly not meeting the needs of a student population that was becoming increasingly diverse. The outcome has been increased disengagement with secondary education and the rapid increase in provision of foundation education programmes that repeat of secondary level education.

The changing demographic

New Zealand, like the other four major English-speaking education systems, has seen a student body present itself to the school gates that is increasingly diverse, speaking many languages other than English and having life-values that are different from and in some cases not understood by the majority group. In fact even the term “majority” will fast become irrelevant in its mathematical sense as the number of students from indigenous, migrant and other non-English speaking communities exceeds the conventional traditional communities. For instance, it is now asserted with confidence that this century will be the one when white English-speaking citizens in the United States will become a minority.

Herein is the largest challenge for higher education. The traditional supply of students with whom higher education institutions could achieve success is being replaced by increased numbers of students from groups that are traditionally underserved by higher education. Only an education system that can succeed with this wave of new students will be able to both respond to the challenge of increasing diversity in the community and the needs of a new economy.

An exception to this pattern is the success enjoyed by a new Asian migrant group in our systems that is predominantly from China. The issue is not language ability – new Asian communities succeed to high levels in the education system and in higher education. The success of this group, backed substantially by economic substance if not clear wealth, in higher education throughout the English-speaking world, leads to a tentative conclusion that social class and its attendant socioeconomic status might remain as a significant factor alongside ethnic diversity. It is in all likelihood, a combination of the two that defeats conventional education systems. Such an analysis is not new (see for example (Macpherson 1977)).

With Maori and Pasifika students the issues are more fundamentally related to cultural capital, histories of educational underachievement and a slowly growing appreciation of the crucial role played in a student's development by teachers able to adapt their approaches to meet the needs of these groups (Bishop and Berryman 2006). This increasingly diverse demographic landscape in New Zealand has posed real challenges to the tertiary education system (Anae, Anderson et al. 2002; Scott 2003; Scott 2005) and despite significant policy attention, the performance of the New Zealand system with regard to traditionally underserved groups sees only slow advances. Despite the sincere developments and some successes in indigenous education, levels of success with Maori students that continue to be well below those of the traditional mainstream. Similarly, Pacific Islands students also do not succeed in higher education at a rate comparable to other groups.

The changing demands of the economy

The goals of universal education and now its sequel of mass postsecondary education, is being pursued in a less benign environment than was once the case. Previously the government was a major employer and, in fact, the major source of apprenticeship training. Technological developments had yet to replace the unskilled and semi-skilled work that could be undertaken by those with less education success. Migrant groups were sought to undertake the work that the traditional workforce found unpalatable or for which there was simply too few people. This underbelly of low skilled or unskilled work perhaps masked the fact that students left the education system with little to show for their efforts or to be fair, in some cases, lack of effort. In some ways it was the blotting paper for educational failure

In today's environment adults undertake the work once done by young girls and boys such as delivering the daily papers, mowing the neighbour's lawns, helping out in the local dairy and the menial tasks that once maintained an after-school workforce. Low skilled jobs are exported to low-wage economies along with the industries that rely on them. Experience is valued above potential in an equation that favours the already successful.

The entry level into the economy is now a postsecondary qualification usually gained in a course that bears the "tertiary education" label. A relatively recent development has been the introduction of tertiary courses such as those called "employment skills" suggesting that students are leaving many years of primary and secondary schooling without such skills. Others are called "Introduction to Tertiary Study" suggesting that being through the school system is not sufficient. In the early 21st century, education

systems can no longer rely on mixed economies that will soak up their failures whose lack of success, once hidden and masked, is now explicit.

Redefining postsecondary education downwards

California got the game going in the 1960's when it invented the community colleges – open-access institutions situated at the bottom of the higher education sector – as a device to soak up all those who failed to meet the entry requirements for college (i.e. university). The Californian Dream of everyone going to college remained intact despite the increasing numbers who dropped out of high school and those who failed to graduate with a High School Diploma. The redefining downwards of what was called “college” set a pattern that was followed in each of the other countries. Increases in participation in higher education were largely achieved through the smoke and mirrors of introducing programmes at increasingly lower levels, taught in institutions that were admitted to what had once been a rather closed society, higher education. This was made easier in California by the lack of status attached to words such as “university” – everyone is happy to announce that they are going to “school” or “college”. In New Zealand the catch-all category called “tertiary” allowed for the easy introduction of lower level programmes into the post-secondary suite of options for students.

The New Zealand tertiary education system has undergone significant periods of reform over the past 15 years (Middleton 2002). Increases in participation rates in tertiary education have been achieved largely through policies that have achieved this redefinition of tertiary education downwards. That is to say, courses which would not once have been in the tertiary education canon were created to allow access to “tertiary education” for those groups of potential students who did not possess the requisite levels of academic preparation to enter into higher education programmes by way of meeting conventional entry standards (Ministry of Education 2007; Ussher 2007).

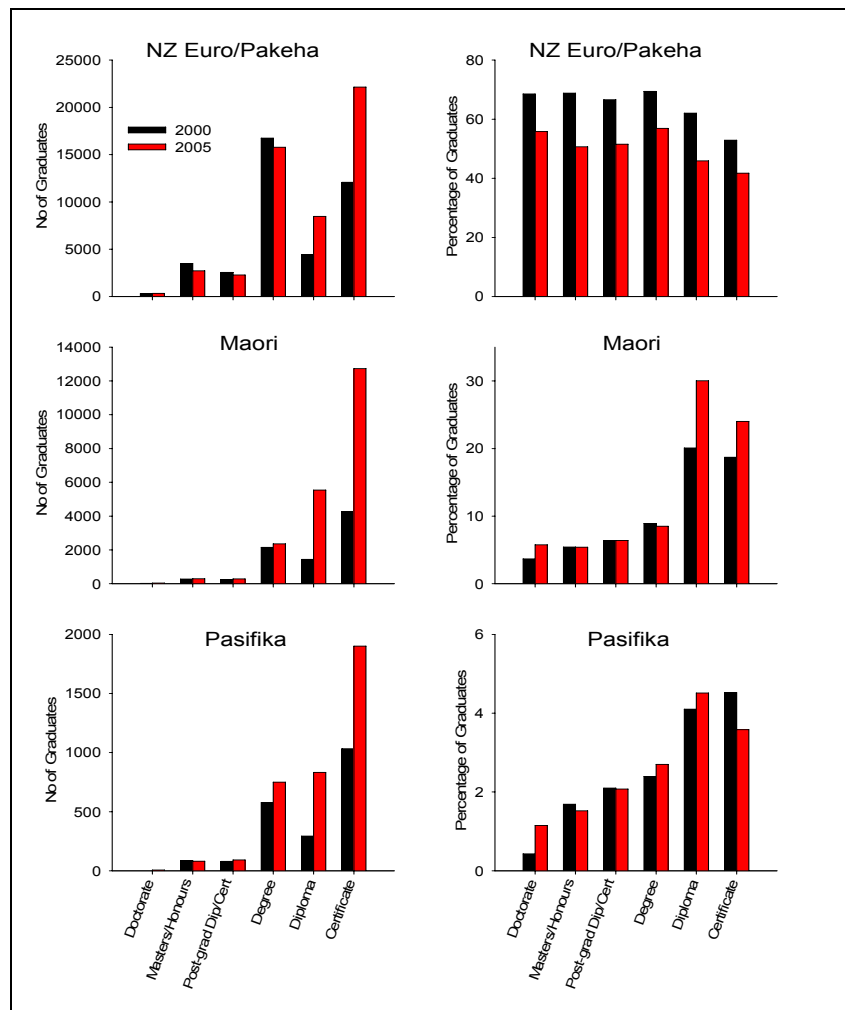
This approach largely manifested itself in three key areas. First, there was an increase in foundation, bridging and other programmes at sub-degree levels (Anderson 2007). Tertiary institutions in New Zealand developed sets of programmes that prepared students who otherwise would not be eligible for entry into a tertiary programme and developed the skills and prerequisite knowledge that would enable this to happen. Some of these programmes are of a general nature such as literacy, numeracy and technology skills while others are specifically targeted at certain disciplines – preparation for nursing, for business and so on.

Secondly, in 2000 – 2004 there was an explosion in the number and scale of Adult and Community Education programmes. The Minister of Education at the time reported that while student numbers at certificate and diploma levels grew by 116 per cent from 2000 to 2004, degree level education grew by only 6%. Adult and Community Education in polytechnics, wananga and other institutions grew by 546% over the same period (Mallard 2005). Typically these programmes are informal, open-entry programmes that might lead to qualifications and which can vary in length from a few hours through to two semesters. These programme attracted considerable political interest from politicians that argued that while they urged an increase in participation, this was not what they meant!

Thirdly, in New Zealand there is a class of tertiary institution that is aimed at providing programmes of special interest to Maori and, more importantly, delivered in a manner appropriate to Maori, respecting both language and customs. One of these, Te Wananga o Aotearoa, had campuses throughout New Zealand and developed a life skills programme (*Mahi Ora*) and a Maori language programme (*Te Reo Maori*) which attracted very large numbers of enrolments. At the height of this expansion of participation, these two programmes in this one institution contributed a significant share of the growth in participation in tertiary education in New Zealand (Middleton, 2003).

For instance in the year ending July 2002, the New Zealand Ministry of Education reported growth of 11% in participation in tertiary education. On the face of it, this is an excellent result. But if the figures for international students are removed, the growth in domestic students reduces to 8.6% which might still seem excellent. But in that year, 70% of the growth in domestic students occurred in only three institutions. There was in conventional terms approximately 2.5% growth in participation in tertiary education in the rest of the tertiary education sector outside of those three institutions (Gerritson 2003). Subsequent to this, the national education newspaper, *Education Review*, reported that in the face of an apparent growth in Maori participation, enrolment of Maori students in New Zealand universities was continuing to fall. This underlines the caution required in arguing that there has been increased participation of Maori and Pasifika students in tertiary study / higher education beyond the historically low levels.

The table below above indicates that generally the number and percentages of Maori and Pasifika graduates has increased since 2000. (That the reverse is true for Pakeha is more a function of compensation in the percentages for this increased numbers of Maori and Pasifika participating rather than any dramatic decrease in actual numbers of Pakeha in tertiary education.) The representation of Maori and Pasifika in tertiary education has therefore been largely achieved through increased presence in programmes at the lower levels and therefore in programmes leading to qualifications at lower levels. There has been a substantial increase in diploma and certificate numbers across all ethnicities. This increase has yet to be reflected in increased graduation rates of Maori and Pasifika.



(Landon 2007)

Figure 2: Number and percentage of graduates by ethnicity

In summary, the picture of New Zealand tertiary education in terms of reflecting the diversity of the community is that up to 2005, growth in participation of Maori and Pasifika was recent and had been substantially achieved in lower level programmes although some growth had occurred at all levels. This has made explicit the fact that Maori and Pasifika as groups did not and continue not to have the entry qualifications for programmes at other than these lower levels.

What is happening behind the statistics of participation?

It has been asserted (Watson, 2005) that the most important and growing issue is the gap between a successful majority and a disengaged minority. Over time the focus of attention has shifted from a concern simply with participation onto the degree to which the outcomes of K-12 education have been equipping post-secondary students to undertake higher education at higher levels. Increasingly it is understood that the levels of academic preparation being achieved in New Zealand secondary are, for many students, not matching the standards required for entry into higher education institutions. The range of mechanisms by which students in the New Zealand school system are inhibited in their preparation for post-secondary education and training is a reflection of the inhibitors that are reported in the education systems of the UK,

Australia, Canada and the United States. Access to higher education for disadvantaged families in the USA has declined since the enactments of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Mumper 2005) . The degree of inequity in Australia has remained relatively stable for over a decade (Yorke and Longden 2004). The issue is an international issue which suggests that the issue is systemic, it is something to do with the way these education systems work – or don't work.

As is common to all the five education systems identified earlier, in New Zealand a further factor is the serious extent to which numbers of students disengage with secondary education. This results in poor performance of the education system which puts New Zealand in the second to bottom place in the OECD for participation in education and training of 15 – 19 year olds (Mallard 2005; UNICEF 2007). A substantial part of the growth in numbers in tertiary education in New Zealand has been with returning and adult students (and this is particularly the case with Maori and Pasifika) while the supply of school-leavers qualified to enter tertiary programmes is static. The high quality – low equity nature of the New Zealand education system is reflected in the contrasting and relatively high results New Zealand students score in international achievement measures such as PISA.

Three key concerns are the serious disengagement of Maori students from senior secondary school, the low level of school leaver qualifications for Maori and Pasifika and the high numbers of school age students generally who do not participate for one reason or another. Figure 3 below shows that this pattern, which occurs for all students at around age 16 (the compulsory leaving age), starts earlier for Maori students at age 14. Not only is this a current trend but, as Figure 4 below shows, has been so for the past forty years. The rise in ages 16-18 is the result of the overall increasing disengagement with secondary school that has been a trend in the past 40 years among non-Maori with the resultant increase in percentage terms for Maori. (See the following graphs.)

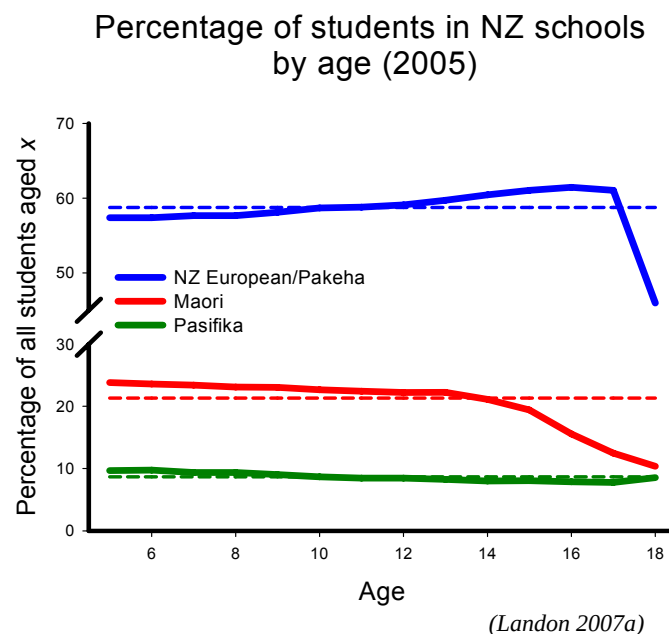


Figure 3: Percentage of students in NZ schools in 2005 by age and ethnicity

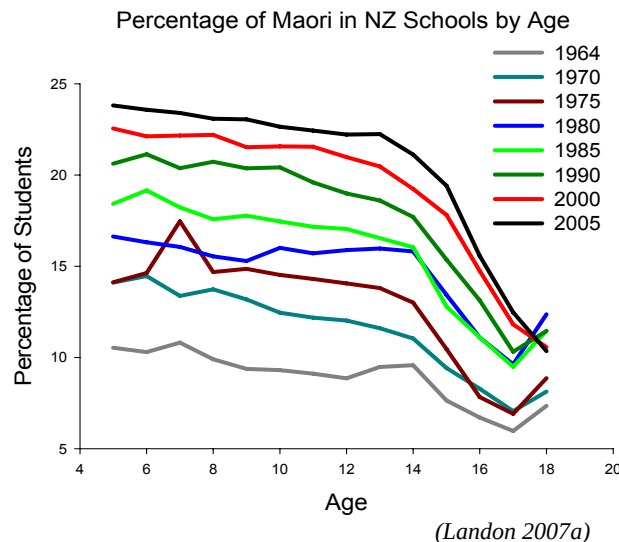


Figure 4: Percentage of Maori students in NZ schools by age: 1964-2005

Catering for new customers

If tertiary education institutions are to respond to the changing demographics, the supply of students who have conventionally proceeded into higher education which is diminishing will have to be replaced by increased numbers of non-traditional (the under-represented, the underserved, the minority) students. The education system has yet to adapt its approaches to produce a stream of adequately and academically prepared students from these groups or to a lesser extent any other group. Attention must therefore swing towards the interface between secondary and tertiary education. It could be argued that the severe disconnection that has characterised this interface in the past can no longer be excused in light of the diverse communities of New Zealand. As a consequence of so many school-leavers failing to have qualifications that will take them into tertiary education at a traditional level, the growth of foundation and bridging programmes has shown substantial growth in New Zealand. The conventional, horizontal boundary drawn over many years between the secondary and the higher education sectors is no longer relevant.

It has been argued (Middleton 2007) that this interface between K-12 education and higher education needs to become much more porous, diffuse and ill-defined as a boundary if increased pathways are to be developed for students entering tertiary education. This will require that students will need pathways into tertiary studies that are greatly more flexible. One such example of a flexible pathways is the development of Early College High Schools in the United States (School 2007) and its attendant opportunity for secondary level curriculum to be taught in a tertiary setting. Ironically, huge amounts of secondary level curriculum are already being taught in higher education systems through remedial, bridging and foundation programmes.

In short, students will be required to make a transition between K-12 education and higher education that is seamless, overlapping and providing for continuous development of knowledge and skills at levels appropriate to the student. Rather than the metaphor of higher education as a the supermarket, chain-store or bazaar that has

seemed appropriate in the past, the new metaphor for tertiary education and its interface with secondary education might well be that of the professional consultation.

Qualifications of school-leavers among Maori and Pasifika students show distributions that are quite different to each other and to the overall pattern for New Zealand students. The mode for Maori male (27%) and female (24%) is '*no formal attainment*' (overall the mode is National Certificate of Educational Achievement [NCEA] Level 3 or higher). For Pasifika the mode is at NCEA Level 2 (male 25%, female 28%) – however the second highest percentage is NCEA Level 3 for females and '*no formal attainment*' for males. For both Maori and Pasifika males, achieving NCEA Level 3 is very rare. In short, Maori and Pasifika in the secondary school system achieve only to low levels and few achieve the required standards for entry into conventional tertiary programmes.

The leaking education system

New Zealanders should be worried about the pattern of disengagement that runs across all groups of students in New Zealand. Recent data (Education 2006) shows that these sets of excluded students (albeit that the drop-out phenomenon is self-excluded) are at significant levels:

- 20% of all students have left the school system *before* the legal leaving age of 16 years (Maori 37%, Pasifika 16%);
It is clear that the device of a legal school leaving age is not working. Those for whom the age is meant to act as a constraint to their leaving, simply ignore it. There are fewer 16 year olds in the school system now than when the legal leaving age was 15 years of age.
- there is an estimated *daily* truancy rate of 3-4% across all levels with 15% being absent daily in low socio-economic secondary schools, 10% in high socio-economic secondary schools;
Schools do not have the capability to stop truancy which in many instances appears to be condoned by a parent or care-giver. Special projects and programmes can nibble at the edges of this issue but the fact remains that there is a proportion of students who simply do not attend school.
- In the past, up to 4000 secondary students are excluded from secondary schools each year for misdemeanors;
Schools have a capacity to exclude students for a range of reasons usually to do with the maintenance of an orderly school and the safety of other students. While operating within a legal framework there is a view that schools see this provision as a convenience that allows them to “solve” the issues related to a group of students is beyond the capacity to manage.
- there is at any one time in New Zealand, between 17,000 (6.5%) and 25,000 (9.5%) young people aged between 15 and 19 years who are not in education or employment or further education and training (NEET);
This large group of non-productive young people costs the country something in the order of \$NZ1 billion a year.

- 68% of secondary students leave school not qualified to enter tertiary education (Maori 72%, Pasifika 74%)

Despite spending between 10 and 13 years in a school system, a remarkable proportion of students are not adequately prepared to continue their education and training beyond school.

New Zealand is not on its own in such a set of indicators. Australia, Britain, the United States of America and Canada all have similar issues. While the statistics differ a little – some higher, some lower – the picture is the same. English-speaking education systems struggle to provide the student population in its schools with appropriate pathways that offer success to student and, more importantly, a foundation on which to build higher education and training qualifications. This has led to the development of a huge remediation industry in the United States. Of those moving on to college, around 65% take remedial courses. After 13 years of schooling and the gaining of a college high school diploma, huge numbers of students are simply unprepared for work at a higher education level. New Zealand has applied a number of failure filters that keep groups of students from entering the higher education gateway to the extent that they are able to in the United States, but there are signs that the growth in foundation education is starting to track in the same direction as the United States.

So, what is the real issue?

Education systems that have their origins in the elitist English system and which are coping with rapid demographic change in the economic context of an employment environment which has a rapidly diminishing set of opportunities for unskilled and even low-skilled workers are struggling to provide an equitable range of opportunities to the students. Each of these education systems shares a set of characteristics:

- an increasing number of students leaving the school system before the point of progression to further and higher education;
- an increasing number of students in addition to that group who are underprepared for a continuation of further education and training;
- a policy focus on increasing participation in further and higher education that has resulted in the growth of programmes at a sub-tertiary level, many of which do not lead to conventional tertiary qualifications and their subsequent employment opportunities.

Put simply – if the current pattern of engagement continues there will be serious issues for the economy. As Newby (2005) reports, while overall participation in higher education has moved upwards over the past 15 or so years, the participation rates between the top and bottom socio-economic classes has moved only slightly. He calls this the “persistent, consistent and continuing tendency to recruit students from the middle classes” (Newby 2005).

A further key issue is that even when a group of students gets to the higher education gateway and is able to enter – fewer than half will leave with a higher education qualification. Despite a persistent focus on quality in the school system and on increasing participation in higher education, there has been no commensurate increase in the graduation numbers of those with traditional higher education qualifications.

The factors that impact negatively on the performance of the education systems differ in scale and weight from one system to another but the pieces of the different jigsaws repeat themselves across the different systems and form remarkably similar pictures.

New Zealand is no exception. It is therefore hard to escape the conclusion that it is as much an issue of the nature of education systems as it is the particular detail of the response of each system to the pressures that become concerns for students, the community and, especially, politicians. It is clear then that takes an entire education system to address issues of equity and access in higher education. If we are to be serious about access and equity in higher education, we had better be serious about those elements of the education system that come before that point in the education pathway. Given the filters of failure that currently operate within education up to the point of entry into further and higher education, the group that presents itself for postsecondary education has become such a distorted reflection of the community that even the most carefully attentive and sensitive selection procedures would simply not achieve equity nor provide access for a majority of students.

If this were to be translated into a road map it would look something like the set of connections outlined in the figure below.

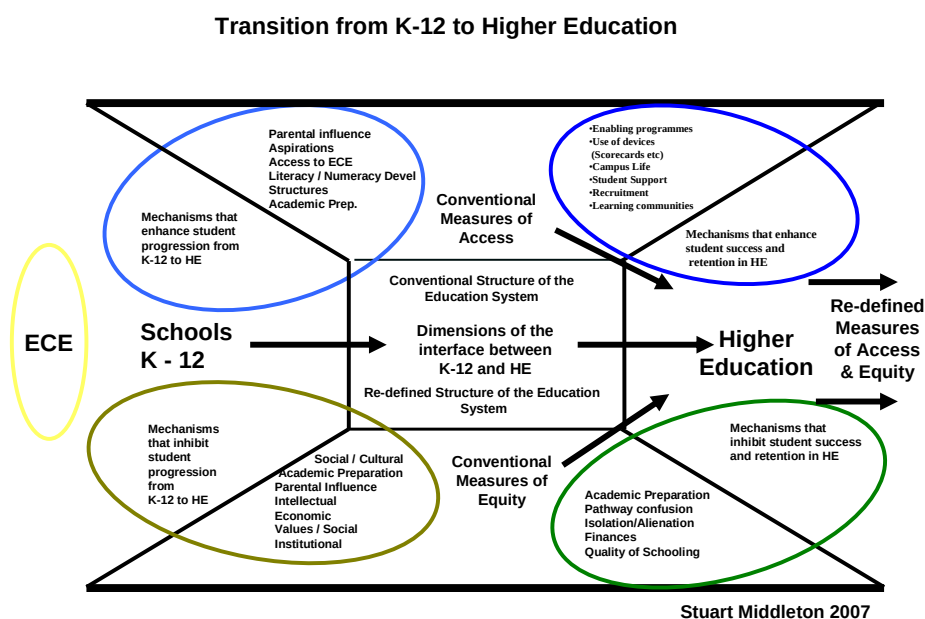


Figure 5: The road map to equity and access

This roadmap outlines a series of connections that are central to an uninterrupted pathway to, into and through further and higher education. The major component pieces are:

- access to quality early childhood education that allows each and every young person to be ready for school;
- mechanisms that enhance or inhibit progress through the K-12 / Year 1-13 sector;
- issues related to the interface between that system and further and higher education;

- questions about the structure of the education system;
- the meaningfulness of “equity” and “access” at the point of the interface between K-12 / Year 1-13 and postsecondary education and training;
- mechanisms that inhibit or enhance progress through further and higher education – issues of retention, success, attrition and completion;
- re-defining equity and access and access in higher education on the basis of the outcomes of a P-19 education system (i.e. an education system which is structured and acts to be a coherent and cohesive system from pre-school through to the end of a first degree-level postsecondary qualification).

These issues become the key focus for any meaningful attempt to improve equity and access in higher education.

And when they arrive?

There is a voluminous and international literature that grapples with issues of student persistence, retention and success once they have entered higher education programmes. A major review of this literature – *What matters to student success: a review of the literature* (Kuh, Kinzie et al. 2006) – identifies literally hundreds of techniques and approaches that have merit in increasing persistence, retention and success. A New Zealand review (Zepke, Leach et al. 2003) supports the view that while quality teaching is necessary, it is not in itself sufficient. Supporting students is critical to their success.

Add to this, the body of work of from academics such as Tinto, Swail, Kuh, Pascarella and so on. Add the work being done by foundations such as The Jobs for the Future Foundation in Boston, EdWest in San Francisco – there is an industry that has worked to increase understanding of why over the past 100 years, retention has persisted as a problem in higher education (Swail 2004). It has remained at about 50% over that time – half of those entering higher education do not leave with a qualification.

It is not that we do not know what to do and yet the National Survey of Student Engagement Annual Report 2007 in the USA reports that despite effort to address issues of retention, student engagement in higher education continues to be characterised by:

- no increase in actual hours of student work which are below what academic staff consider to be the level necessary to succeed (in other words they simply do not do enough work);
- first generation students and those transferring from community colleges are less likely to take part in the very activities offered to support success (those traditionally disadvantaged continue to be at a distance from the support designed to support them);
- 10% of students never met their academic advisor in the academic year (systems in place but not utilised);
- and so on.

But there are advances in our understanding that hold much promise. The work of Conley on what knowledge is required for success when entering higher education provides a sharper focus for the secondary curriculum (and for those working at

tertiary levels than has previously been the case (Conley 2005). The symposium style material that has a focus on how to increase numbers (Kazis, Vargas et al. 2004), or on bringing high schools closer to tertiary (Hoffman, Vargas et al. 2007) and or gathering descriptions of best practice (Kuh, Kinzie et al. 2005) are all evidence that if a tertiary institution sets its collective mind to improving rates of persistence, retention and success it need not lack support from the literature or practical guidance from those working to do just this.

But it has been the view of this paper that the issues are more fundamental than this and that to address them at the level of the tertiary institution is simply too late.

The group that presents itself at the gates of the academy has been so filtered by failure that higher education institutions, even if they were able to address issues of persistence, retention and success within their walls, would still not yet be able to engage with communities to levels that they seek. Issues of the engagement of higher education with their communities is as much about what happens on the journey towards it as what happens during it. While universal education systems have sought to build the broad path to the wide gate, students discover that indeed the path is narrow and gate strait.

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