

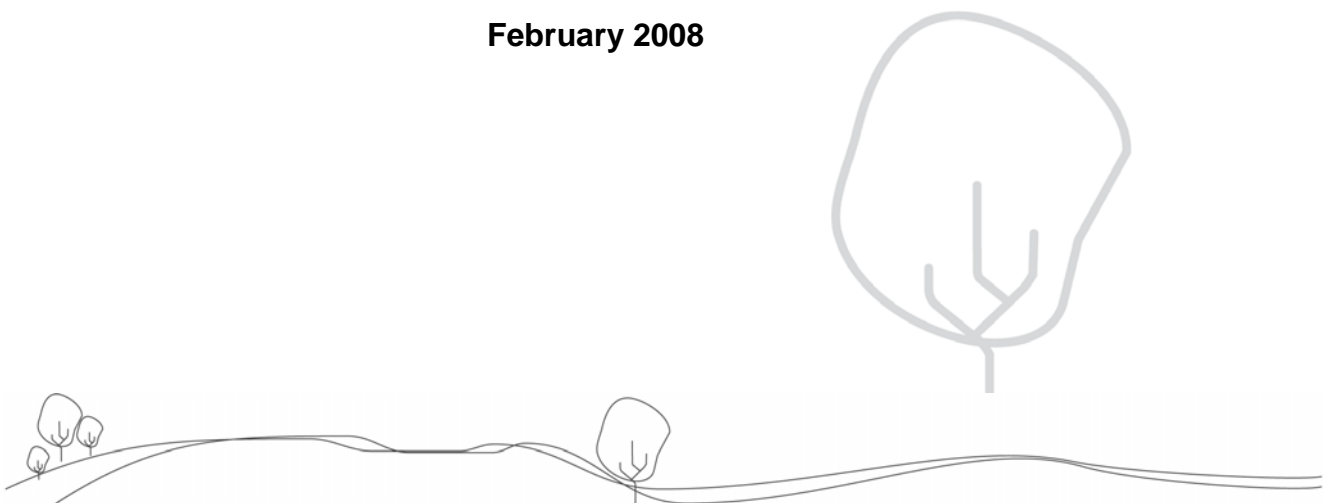


# Research priorities in the tertiary sector

**An interview with  
Dr Peter Coolbear**

**Director of Ako Aotearoa, the National Centre for Tertiary  
Teaching Excellence hosted by a consortium of tertiary education  
institutions led by Massey University**

February 2008



The body of research knowledge about teaching and learning in tertiary education in New Zealand strikes me as very fragmented. The research that is out there could be disseminated more effectively and, in my view, made more relevant to practitioners. So dissemination and consideration of how any research project fits into the existing body of knowledge and impacts on practice are important issues for researchers and for our centre.

It seems to me that the exception to this fragmentation is in the area of elearning, where you can see work being done to pull together the various projects and practices across the tertiary sector in New Zealand. There's a strong argument that what we need now is to assess what's already been done in elearning, so that new work can build on current understanding. People interested in research in that area should look at the eLearning Maturity Model work, the eLearning Guidelines project and Te Pane Takiao, the SPEEKS (Strategies and Practice for Embedding eCDF Knowledge and Systems) website. Ako Aotearoa's project on eLearning Knowledge Resources will, I hope, provide strategic planning guidelines for future developments of elearning in New Zealand's tertiary sector.

I think there are huge gaps in the body of knowledge on approaches to vocational education in New Zealand, not least around the nature and validity of vocational qualifications.

For me, there are basically two key debates in this area: how best to contextualise vocational training; and whether an exclusively unit standard-based approach to curriculum (and make no mistake, the way we use unit standard-based assessment drives curriculum) best supports effective teaching and learning or can act as a barrier to it. The model has always been challenged, and there's been the odd master's or PhD thesis in this area but not a great deal.

It's interesting to compare what New Zealand is trying to do in vocational training, with respect to national qualifications, and what's going on in the UK and elsewhere. We went down an extreme model of competency-based assessment. At the tertiary level it raises some of the same issues as the NCEA model does at the secondary level but less attention has been paid to it.

The high-level questions that need exploring include: is the main purpose of national qualifications to support the government's aspirations to transform the New Zealand economy or are they designed to fill immediate skill shortages? Do national qualifications meet the needs of individual industries and how do we know? I'd also be very interested in research that explored models of good practice for workplace learning in industries.

An urgent area in need of investigation is the number of people signing up for industry training agreements but not completing their qualification. Why? Is it a problem with teaching and learning or is it to do with the nature of the qualification? Or is it both? Perhaps getting the actual qualification is not relevant to that person's employability. Maybe they can compete sufficiently well in the present buoyant labour market without having a completed qualification.

These sorts of questions would no doubt have to be looked at in a discipline-specific way. I am very wary of looking for one size fits all solutions, but such questions could lead to a series of short, sharp projects—this is a very dynamic area.

In terms of teaching, I think we know a fair bit about the attributes of good and excellent teachers, and the Ministry of Education is supporting work drawing that evidence together.

One of the strands that has come out of that is the different learning experiences of people who are not from backgrounds that have traditionally gone to university or continued on to a profession. This is particularly relevant to Māori and Pasifika students. How do they become part of that tertiary-educated group? And at what expense? What might they give up in order to fit into a university/professional mould?

In my experience, some university departments still operate as if all their students are fully equipped to become easily familiar with the university environment and are autonomous learners as soon as they come through the gate. But many tertiary students have to be taught to be autonomous learners. They may not have had successful experiences at school.

So the high-level question is how the university (and also the polytechnic) sector copes with this increasing diversity. I don't just mean gender and ethnic diversity but also from the psychological perspective—the notion of *becoming* someone different through tertiary education. NZCER's Pathways and Prospects project [a longitudinal study of young people making the transition from school to further education and the workforce] engages with some of these issues. Many students entering tertiary are surprisingly fragile decision makers about undertaking further study. I think we are well past the paradigm of informed student choice in the current reforms and this is a huge step forward. The challenge is how to target support for learners to best effect.

I don't think we understand anywhere near enough about the motivations of part-time learners. The Ministry of Education has some great data about people who have been in the workforce and then gone on to tertiary study and the progress they make. This raises significant questions about how we measure success. There are a whole lot of questions about whether many students are even aiming for a qualification in the first place.

For example, in one cohort, 29 percent of students completed every course they enrolled for but five years down the track they haven't completed a qualification. We don't know if they are just getting skills and knowledge, without needing an actual qualification to help their career. This is important if the government gets into monitoring tertiary institutions on the basis of the numbers completing qualifications, with funding tagged to this success measure. Maybe it would make more sense to look at course completion, not qualifications.

In particular discipline areas, we know people are leaving full-time study before they end their course because the job market is so good for them—a current example is in the hospitality industry. This needs further exploration—maybe ITOs and polytechnics need to look at different length of courses to fit in with market.

When it comes to learning, there is a lot of evidence here and overseas about how people learn and what strategies work. But in some areas it has had very little impact on practice, where the drivers are more about funding and regulation than about effective teaching and learning. You still see some ITOs brokering training between on and off the job in ways that cut across some of what we know about successful learning. Trades that recruit learners who have not been successful in engaging with theoretical concepts out of context when they were at school are coming up with programmes that separate the theory from the practice. While I understand why this approach is being taken, I am not at all sure that this is good practice. Some projects that researched different industry training models would be very useful, especially if these were conducted in partnership with the employers and education practitioners involved.