


In 2000, under the rubric of ‘Nation-Building: Life-long Learning in a Knowledge Society’, New Zealand’s Labour Government launched an inquiry into the future of tertiary education in this small South Pacific nation. This review was conducted by the Tertiary Education Advisory Commission (TEAC) – a Commission established by the Government independently of New Zealand’s Ministry of Education. The TEAC produced four major reports, which recommended, *inter alia*, the establishment of a Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) to manage the tertiary system.¹ The Government subsequently implemented this recommendation and,

¹ The Tertiary Education Commission’s web address is http://www.tec.govt.nz. The TEAC reports can be found on the TEAC website: http://www.teac.govt.nz
in mid-2002, produced its first five-year strategy paper. What can so far be said about this flurry of activity?

First, it is clear that the need for a TEAC inquiry was widely recognized. However, whether the model it adopted – including the requirement that higher education be more responsive to economic priorities – is appropriate for New Zealand, is yet to be seen. The resolution of this issue turns on a larger question: how can New Zealand best develop higher education in a manner suitable to a small nation with an open economy and a distinctive cultural history.

From the beginning, the TEAC’s terms of reference illustrate the complexities of the situation. In effect, these reflected New Zealand’s unique blend of neo-liberal and social democratic policies, but they made globalization and information technologies prominent themes. Overall, while TEAC adopted an inclusive definition of higher education (that is, including arts and humanities as well as science and commerce, lifelong education as well as international research, indigenous as well as Western models and traditions), its frequent references to the needs of the economy foreshadowed the ways in which its priorities were to be presented. Its reports were presented on the web. Most public interest was attached to the TEAC’s fourth report, which dealt with the financial implications of the preceding three. Taken together, they convey assumptions that we are well advised to consider carefully.

AN INNOVATIVE NEW ZEALAND

Perhaps the single most conspicuous theme underlying the TEAC’s reports is the Government’s thorough-going commitment to what has been called the ‘knowledge society’. The definitive expression of this is set out in a Government White Paper – Growing an Innovative New Zealand – which was released by the Prime Minister on 12 February 2002.4 In developing strategy, it was the Ministry of Research, Science and Technology – rather than the Ministry of

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2 The Terms of Reference can be found in Appendix 1 of TEAC, Shaping a Shared Vision, 33–34.

3 The first TEAC report proposed that ‘A broad definition of the knowledge society should be adopted in the development of policy for tertiary education. This includes a recognition of the potentially valuable contribution of all forms of knowledge’. TEAC, Shaping a Shared Vision, 4.

4 Growing an Innovative New Zealand (Wellington: Office of the Prime Minister, 2002).