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## **Civil Contractors New Zealand submission on the draft Tertiary Education Strategy**

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### **1. About Civil Contractors New Zealand**

Founded in 1944, Civil Contractors New Zealand is an industry association representing the interests and aspirations of more than 800 member organisations, including more than 500 large, medium-sized, and small businesses in civil engineering, construction, and general contracting. Over 300 associate members provide valuable products, support, and services to contractor members. We live and work in all communities across New Zealand.

Our members play a vital role in the development of our country, our economy and our way of life. They are responsible for the construction and maintenance of the roads connecting our cities and towns; they install and care for the water networks that bring fresh water to houses and wastewater to treatment plants; they install the cables that bring the internet to homes and businesses. These are services a modern and developed economy must have to compete efficiently in world markets and to deliver high living standards for all New Zealanders.

The broad civil construction industry employs more than 60,000 people and undertakes projects worth around \$10b to \$12b annually. More specifically, our organisation represents the contractors who carry out the physical construction works on New Zealand's roading, rail, port, public transport and utilities networks.

The civil construction sector is responsible for infrastructure construction and maintenance, which is vital to keep New Zealand moving and quality of life high. Our productivity and workforce entry points depend on an effective education sector which links primary, secondary and tertiary education.

CCNZ welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposed Tertiary Education Strategy.

## 2. Executive summary

In summary:

- Overall, we support the strategic direction.
- We support work-based learning models as this is where the majority of formal qualifications are achieved in the civil construction industry.
- We support the concept of improving educational performance outcomes by such measures as “distance travelled, or value added”.
- We suggest that increased funding and access to pastoral care could improve achievement rates significantly.
- Broadly we support the priorities of achievement, economic impact and innovation, access and participation, integration and collaboration and international education.
- We agree that graduates of tertiary programmes do need to have job-ready skills.
- We support the system having stronger feedback loops with employers and industry.
- We support strengthening industry leadership through the new structures of the Industry Skills Boards.

## 3. Background

Our industry research tells us that we have too few people coming into the industry as new graduates from school. A massive 66 per cent of workers entering the civil construction industry are career changers, as illustrated in the Construction and Infrastructure Centre of Vocational Excellence report '[Where's the front door? – An investigation of the workforce entry points into the construction and infrastructure sectors](#)' (2023, p3).

The implication is that the education system is not meeting the needs of the civil construction industry, or the needs of learners entering roles in this sector. Yet, tertiary education has an important part to play in the education ecosystem preparing people for the world of work.

Early exposure to career ideas, early skills development, foundational literacy and numeracy can be developed and clear career pathways to careers that lead through the education system into the world of work can be developed. Industry has a large part to play to lead this work. We know what skills we need to get the job done and industry needs to be at the forefront of strategy development for education to ensure a pipeline of talent can be met for future workforce needs.

Civil construction offers meaningful employment opportunities and as we seek to grow our country with an emphasis on infrastructure development, access to education opportunities for the people to carry out this work becomes increasingly important.

## 4. A flawed process

We have significant concerns about the reforms taking place in the vocational sector currently. The reform process is well advanced with a new structure in place by 1 January 2026, and yet this has all taken place without any clear and visible strategy (until now). Any business expert knows that structure should follow strategy, and yet the strategy is only

being consulted on now. This is poor policy making that leads to poor legislation – employers and learners deserve far better than this.

The scale of reform is massive and with these many moving parts we have grave concerns about the speed and direction with which these reforms are taking place. With Industry late to the table, and needs often not heard, we have concerns that this reform will fail.

## **5. Strategic Direction**

Overall, we support the strategic direction. CCNZ believes that a skilled and adaptable workforce is essential for growth. The workplace is the primary place of learning for civil construction, and the role of workplace supervisors, trainers and mentors is a critical part of the system. We need to ensure we preserve this, grow it and make it more visible to ensure that workplace learning remains fit for purpose and continues to contribute to the sector.

## **6. Why change is needed**

We do not need change for change's sake. It is important to consider the parts of the system that work well and retain these factors. There is a focus on completion rates and enrolment rates for those in work-based delivery. These statements on their own are meaningless without context.

Consider civil construction for example. With little visible pipeline of work and businesses laying off staff, enrolment into tertiary study is understandably not a priority; business survival is. Trainees that are enrolled in work-based learning will have a focus on doing the job well and completion may not necessarily be a focus.

Additionally, we need to consider the way in which in-work training is pitched to trainees where multiple workbooks, poor instructional design and competing priorities may all impact on completion rates. We support the intent to see providers needing to evolve their practices to meet changing learner needs and suggest this needs to be widened to ensure meeting the needs of industry for functional assessment. Innovation in learning design and assessment practice will be needed for this to be a success.

## **7. Priorities**

Broadly we support the priorities of achievement, economic impact and innovation, access and participation, integration and collaboration and international education.

With regard to drivers for change, a key driver in the civil construction sector is work security. That is, a clear pipeline of work so that contractors can plan for all learning that needs to take place across the range of roles that support civil construction.

We suggest many of the qualifications are not mandatory in this sector, as in others, and this would lift performance and productivity. It will also support an attractive apprenticeship pathway that can lead into higher tertiary learning. Succession planning can be utilised as a

driver for training. We also support increased visibility over career pathways and opportunities to enter and move around in the sector.

## **7.1 Priority 1: Achievement**

Support.

We support the concept of improving educational performance outcomes by such measures as “distance travelled, or value added”. We suggest that increased funding and access to pastoral care could improve achievement rates significantly.

For example, access to learning styles, increasing access to literacy and numeracy support, multiple learning and assessment methodologies being accepted could also assist. The government has slashed funding for training at a time when we need to be building our capacity and capability to meet the expected significant uptick in work. This makes no sense and is a critical risk to delivering the government’s own infrastructure agenda.

## **7.2 Priority 2: Economic Impact and Innovation**

Partially support.

We agree that graduates of tertiary programmes do need to have job-ready skills. There are many practical examples of this where degree level learning incorporates practical assessment with short term employment/work experience as part of the overall qualification. Initiatives like this lead to better tertiary graduates with higher employability skills.

We support the system having stronger feedback loops with employers and industry. There are good examples of this now. A major hand brake is grappling with the bureaucracy of funding decisions through the TEC, and approval processes through agencies such as NZQA and others. This all needs to be streamlined to ensure there is a system that listens more and acts on the change requested.

We support work-based learning models as this is where the majority of formal qualifications are achieved in the civil construction industry. We also expect to see work-based learning expand as well as the opportunity for degree level apprenticeships. However, we cannot support the concept of a proliferation of regional programmes delivered through regional polytechs. That will lead to nationally consistent and industry agreed programmes being dropped in preference to a regional focus supporting “new providers”.

The statement that apprenticeships and traineeships should develop to ensure that people are prepared for today, as well as tomorrow really is a statement about flexibility in learning programmes and critical thinking. We need to see this not just at tertiary level, but also secondary education and concepts delivered in primary education.

We support strengthening industry leadership through the new structures of the Industry Skills Boards. In this regard, for ISB’s to be successful and meet the needs of their sectors they need to be adequately resourced. The current proposals require the ISBs to do everything that the WDCs did (and more i.e., with respect to NCEA changes), but with

insufficient funding and too few people. This is an unfolding disaster and risks the success of the reforms and the way in which the sector regards education.

### **7.3 Priority 3: Access and Participation**

Overall support.

The statement about underperformance of specific groups in the tertiary sector isn't confined to just this sector and cannot be fixed in just this sector. A whole of education approach needs to be taken to widely lift performance. Barriers to participation in education and training are not just about access, they are also about uptake. A system that can address that need should be considered alongside access. New Zealand has an issue with ambition and this needs to be addressed in earlier levels of learning before suggesting that access to tertiary education is where the problem needs to be fixed.

We have a low wage economy and people who may wish to complete tertiary study are highly likely to have competing demands at home, not be able to access the financial supports through family or via loans and this impacts both access and uptake. Education can be very expensive so breaking down barriers that make the system easier to manoeuvre to, and through, would be helpful.

It is our view that foundational learning, i.e. level 2 learning, should be delivered in schools alongside foundational literacy and numeracy.

We support the concept of clearer career pathways for vocational education. Civil Contractors New Zealand developed an industry first tool to show the range of roles, both in work, and higher-level learning opportunities to help students, schools, families and communities understand the role opportunities and tertiary education pathways available. This work can be seen here at the [Infrastructure Career Roadmap](#).

We also consider that there will be increased participation through appropriate Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) or Recognition of Current Competence (RCC) practices and suggest that this would impact not just on access and participation, but also duration, completions and it would add immense value to industry.

We recommend that standardisation will be required for some sectors, infrastructure being one of these, to ensure nationally consistent delivery of in work training programmes.

### **7.4 Priority 4: Integration and Collaboration**

Partial support.

The previous reform of education established the CoVE's. These were research entities, and the work carried out by these publicly funded agencies was a game changer for infrastructure. In the current tranche of reform they are being dis-established.

This priority suggests that industry and education will need to have stronger ties and greater engagement, and research will play a big part of this. We had this with the CoVE's. It worked

incredibly well. Rather than redesign though other Public Research Organisations, we should reinstate what we had.

## **7.5 Priority 5: International Education**

Partial support.

Where education can lead to an effective employment outcome, and there is no New Zealander to do the job, we could support this. This is why we support specific roles for immigration into New Zealand.

## **8. Delivering the strategy**

The statement that universities “act as the critic and conscience of society, meet international standards, and serve as repositories of knowledge” is not well grounded. A significant number of other agencies and individuals do this as well. Statements such as this continue to perpetuate the concept that tertiary study at universities is somehow “better” than other tertiary study.

Regarding providers being expected to respond to workforce needs and improving outcomes for under-served students and trainees and contributing to national and regional development, we largely support this statement. However, New Zealand will never achieve the gains in education if we do not equally focus on the higher performers and shifting the middle of the curve toward success. The ongoing focus on low achievers becomes self-perpetuating if this is the primary focus. We recommend that the strategy is wider as noted above.

## **9. Government Agency Roles**

We note the government agencies and the role each has to play in the tertiary education system. Our current experience is that these agencies, particularly TEC, are a hand brake to progress, are stifling innovation, and are forcing ideological changes on sectors without a clear understanding of how those sectors work, what they need to progress and grow, and what contribution they make to New Zealand’s growth and productivity.

We are being asked as industry to work within and contribute to a structure, but our contribution is often going unheard, and our requests remain un-met as they do not fit into the views held by the agency. There is too much control in these agencies and too little voice given to industry in terms of decision making and recommendations on a future state for education.

With the vocational education reforms, the Minister promised that “industry leadership” would be the cornerstone of the reforms. The truth is the exact opposite, with the agencies dictating what industry can and can’t do, and the draft vocational education legislation expressly preventing any prospect of industry leadership.

This is unacceptable and risks employers walking away from a nationally recognised framework. This would be disastrous for industry, learners and New Zealand generally, and

we are perplexed that the Select Committee and government are prepared to put our world class system at such significant risk.

With the wholesale reform of the sector taking place, we have concerns that the focus on the bigger picture will lose the detail of the system changes that need to be made for the education sector to become high performing.

It is past time that the agencies, particularly TEC and NZQA, are subject to substantial and meaningful review to determine if they remain fit for purpose – our sense is that they do not.

## **10. Monitoring Tertiary Education Strategy Outcomes and System Performance**

We support the broad structure in place for monitoring the strategy. We would be keen to see the strategy given time to bed in and not significantly modified during election cycles. The system has had enough change, and for industry to remain engaged at all levels the constant scale and level of changes needs to stop. System stability is required.

In regard to achievement, in a work-based learning model which is predominantly how the civil construction sector accesses tertiary study, completions are a function often of the nature of the work, access to additional work and the type of contract. Distance travelled concepts may help but this needs to align with in work activity and visibility of future works.

We reiterate our concerns regarding “access” to education by providers and argue that the concept of uptake and ambition are considered in the mix.

For international education, while there is substantial increase in student enrolments to double the value of education, we would be more interested to see at what level of study these students were learning and how their learning also contributed to ‘NZ Inc’, and our overall productivity.

And we reiterate again – these kinds of changes must be industry-led and government enabled – without that the fundamentally flawed process that we are experiencing with the vocational education reforms will continue to be repeated.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit on this draft proposal. We look forward to working with you. We would be happy to present in person if that opportunity arises.

Yours faithfully



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