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THE NEW ZEALAND TEACHERS COUNCIL: MATTERS OF COMPLIANCE

After two full years of operation it is timely to reflect on what has been achieved in the initial phase of the New Zealand Teachers Council (NZTC) and to consider some options for the future. Media comment on the NZTC has been less than complimentary and most recently criticism has focused on the emphasis the NZTC is placing on its regulatory role, without due regard for its professional responsibility. In an international review of teacher registration authorities,¹ New Zealand was identified as the most regulatory body and the Victorian Institute of Teachers (VIT), Australia, as the most professionally focused. A visit mid-year to VIT and a similar visit in July 2003 to the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTC) highlighted some ways in which the New Zealand Teachers' Council could develop a much stronger professional base.

The NZTC was created by act of parliament as a Crown entity.² This means that all the regulations around such bodies apply to the NZTC. A small grant was provided by the Crown with the majority of income coming from individual teachers through teacher registration fees. Significant regulatory powers and functions were vested in the NZTC. These included maintaining a register of teachers, determining standards for teacher registration and practicing certificates, establishing and maintaining standards for qualifications leading to teacher registration, approval of teacher education programmes, developing a code of ethics, and exercising disciplinary functions. It was also to provide professional leadership in teaching, enhance the status of teachers in schools and early childhood education, and contribute to a safe and high quality teaching and learning environment for children and other learners. It is not difficult to see that giving effect to this range of functions creates a challenge in balancing priorities within the organisation. Without a clear vision for how professional leadership might be exercised, the organisation risks languishing as a compliance body.

The decision to roll over responsibility from the Teacher Registration Board to the new Crown entity without a proper scoping exercise, with no robust change management process, no business costing for legislated outputs, and with only a meagre government grant towards costs, was ill-advised. Assumptions were made about the capacity and preparedness of the new organisation to fulfil its widely expanded functions without additional support. In part this was an expectation that previous systems could adapt easily to meet the new requirements.

By comparison VIT was established as a new body, with proper business costings, a similar sized government grant, and a strategic plan which focused initially on sector consultation around the development of registration standards. VIT realised the vital role of communication with the sector and so a flagship professional publication was established early on, and this was sent directly to teachers. A website also supported access to information. Professional confidence was built in VIT and the professional face of the organisation was secured prior to its engaging in any disciplinary functions. With a stated belief that the goals of government and the profession are essentially well aligned, VIT has managed to create a positive tension between its state entity status and its professional responsibility to teachers. Why then has NZTC had difficulty in achieving the same?

Establishment work to complete the first Teachers Council elections in New Zealand was undertaken at the same time as the triennial peak of teacher registrations. The workload of elections and registration proved unmanageable, creating chaos in the renewals for registrations and provoking anger amongst the teachers who were paying for the service. This was teachers' first experience of their new body and it was a disaster. Anger was turned against staff members and

communication systems were log-jammed. A support project led by the Ministry of Education provided additional staff to work through the backlog and develop efficient in-house systems for handling and processing applications. This included a redesign of the registration forms following a 60% failure rate by teachers to complete the forms accurately. An ongoing management plan tripled the staff in the registration and call centre areas. Significant improvements were needed to the telephone and ICT data management systems. It should not have been surprising that NZTC ended its first year of operation with well-publicised failings in its compliance and operational areas.

With adequate staffing in place, the registration response time has been maintained consistently since that time at less than four weeks. Staffing is now weighted towards this legislated core function as a priority. The effect of standards-based registration has been to introduce more checks and balances into the system. These require a greater level of staff checking which, in turn, has slowed the system. It will be difficult to move to a more efficient electronic registration system without considerable standardisation of information. By comparison, GTC can complete its annual re-registration run electronically in a morning, at a much reduced cost, leaving staff free for more professionally-directed work. VIT has also developed a registration system with only one sign off required. Both these registration authorities have annual registration as opposed to triennial, so their databases retain currency. Both jurisdictions access registers of practicing teachers directly from payroll information. NZTC has neither of these options currently available. There is a strong imperative to reconsider how teacher registration functions in New Zealand.

NZTC handles more than double the number of daily phone calls reported by other Crown entities. The new phone system provides the NZTC with information it requires to give assurances around the timeliness of service provision. The need for a new computer system specifically configured for the purpose is urgent and no provision was made for this in the establishment costs of the NZTC. A NZTC website designed to inform the sector of the current work of the NZTC and to advise on policy and registration matters has been useful but it in no way meets the professional expectations of teachers. Unlike VIT, an effective communication strategy for NZTC has yet to be realised.

In its second year of operation, NZTC has delivered well on all areas in its statement of intent, including a clean test audit. Significant policy development has been completed, with a process inclusive of stakeholder consultation through national organisations. Policy around gaining and maintaining registration, including suitable settings, character and fitness to teach, convictions against teachers, English language requirements, provisions for Limited Authority to Teach and for non-teacher police vetting, have all been agreed and are published on the website.

In the area of initial teacher education, a memorandum of understanding has been signed by the four agencies with responsibility for approving qualifications leading to registration as a teacher. The NZTC database for re-approvals has been maintained and the work schedule is up to date. There are 151 approved teacher education courses from 29 providers to be monitored. With a growing number of providers and diversification of programme types, locations, and delivery methods, managing a quality assurance process challenges the NZTC. Both GTC and VIT with similar or larger population bases have only a handful of approved teacher education programmes.

The current Ministry of Education focus on improving quality in initial teacher education includes research into the sector, establishing entry, exit and graduating standards, and considering a common core curriculum for initial teacher education. All this will generate further work for the NZTC. The expectation that NZTC will be able to respond to all these initiatives within its resources is hopeless. In practice this means that professional work rightly belonging to NZTC continues to be driven from the Ministry of Education. Such a practice contributes to the perception that the NZTC is professionally weak and leads to claims that it operates as an arm of the Ministry. It would seem essential that new initiatives are resourced through the appropriate agency and that capacity building is focused onto NZTC.

High-calibre appointments have been made to the two advisory groups of the NZTC mandated within the legislation; early childhood and Māori, but the lack of resource to service the work of these advisory groups is a source of frustration. With changes to legislation requiring registration of both Māori medium and early

childhood teachers, there is a pressing need to develop a sector-wide strategy for both areas. Applying the frameworks around the "suitably trained and qualified to teach" criteria, which underpin teacher registration, is considerably more complex when being applied to those already in employment, and in particular to the diversity of the early childhood sector. The collective wisdom of the advisory groups, and the extended professional support available to them through their own organisations, cannot be harnessed unless they are adequately resourced through NZTC.

The ability to constitute advisory groups is an important professional function. It would seem preferable for the NZTC to determine its own advisory group needs from time to time, to support a current strategic focus, rather than being tied to ongoing structures. There is no less a need for an initial teacher education advisory group. The Act does not preclude this type of organisation, but the cost of servicing the work that it would entail does. VIT and GTC both have much larger councils with advisory group structures charged to carry out specific functions. This appears a more sensible way to spread the workload, build capacity, and ensure quality of advice. How realistic is it to expect the twelve NZTC council members to sustain all tasks and functions, and commit the time required, whilst holding down other fulltime positions?

Establishing a code of ethics for the profession is a major project currently being undertaken by NZTC. Without spare staff capacity to support the work, this has been achieved by contracting out. A successful consultation round generated nearly nine hundred responses, 94% positively supported the proposed code. Council members completed consultation by leading workshops with groups of teachers from across New Zealand. The consultation process was a positive start to engaging the sector in professional dialogue. The professional work of NZTC could be better supported by using seconded teachers, in a similar way to GTC, to work on professional projects and also to award research scholarships. VIT has appointed teachers onto staff to lead professional foci, deliver workshops, and undertake consultation around the development of its registration standards. For GTC, secondment of teachers into the organisation builds a sense of profession and professional belonging. VIT is building a distinct organisational culture by directly using teachers' skills and understanding. There, staff talk with confidence about "what our teachers say, what our teachers think and what our teachers want." It is

this culture which leaves no doubt that VIT is a voice for teachers and able to advocate for teacher quality with the support of the profession. Such opportunities have not been capitalised on to date by NZTC.

Over the first two years of its operation, NZTC has taken full responsibility for disciplinary functions prior to the new disciplinary powers coming into effect. In the last year, this has meant council members assessing and hearing 69 cases against teachers, leading to 13 de-registrations. It is huge additional workload. During this time the council has been engaged in establishing the rules for the Complaints Assessment Committee and the Disciplinary Tribunal. It has made appointments to panels, and engaged with stakeholders groups. The legislation requires council members to sit on one or other of the disciplinary bodies, and so there is unlikely to be a reduction in workload even though resolution of cases is focused at the lowest level, the school or centre. It is not common in other jurisdictions for council members to also be part of the disciplinary processes. This raises the question of whether sitting in hearings is the best use of council members' time. If disciplinary functions were separated, then council members could provide a stronger emphasis on professional leadership.

We all want a high quality teaching profession, though we may have different views about how to assure quality within such a system. I believe that what teachers in New Zealand are asking for, is that their "voice" be heard in the debate. What they are seeking are two things; real information and reassurance about what is happening and how it will affect them, and a sense of inclusion through consultation. They want an opportunity to shape the direction of the profession they are part of. Too often the feeling amongst teachers is that things are being delivered outside of their sphere of influence under the catch phrase "we are doing it for the good of the profession". Such a sense of being done to, rather than worked with, causes resentment and resistance. Time spent in communicating ideas and in consulting is time well spent. Through a continual focus on legislated compliances, the NZTC is at risk of seeming impotent to fulfil what teachers see as the core role of a professional organisation they fund. That is professional leadership, effective policy analysis, and advice on current educational issues.

NZTC needs to lead in professional areas rather than be subsumed within Ministry of Education initiatives. It needs to establish a strong, credible voice of its own within the dialogue of aligned education sector agencies. It needs to establish dialogue with teachers if it is to become the voice

for the profession. If it achieved these objectives it would serve as a conduit of information and ideas between the profession and policy makers. As a teacher, an educational leader, and a council member I look forward to NZTC truly coming of age as a leader of the profession.

NOTES

¹ Queensland Board of Teacher Registration (<http://www.brt.qld.edu.au/>)

² Education Standards Act 2001

Statements and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author as an individual.