

## Walking towards the risk

*A conversation with Tim Fowler*



Tim Fowler

*Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) Chief Executive Tim Fowler talks with ROSE NORTHCOTT about bold projects, why he thinks our public sector could take a leaf out of Australia's book, and how representing his country in sport has influenced his work. TEC was a joint winner of the Prime Minister's Award in the Deloitte IPANZ Public Sector Awards 2018 for successfully implementing the fees-free tertiary education policy.*

### What is TEC's role?

As the government tertiary education and careers investor, we invest around \$3 billion annually into the tertiary education sector to some 700 tertiary organisations (TEOs). This includes foundation level education, vocational education, and apprenticeships, all the way through to higher education degrees and research.

The government has set high-level priorities, encapsulated within the tertiary education strategy. Based on our guidance, TEOs submit investment plans and try to meet regional or national priorities, which include such things as skills for industry, improving literacy and numeracy, and improving outcomes for Māori and Pasifika.

### How are you aiming to transform the tertiary education system?

We are seeking to make the system far more user friendly and learner centric. If you think of the demand side of the tertiary education system as students and business, we want to give them a far greater voice in order to drive outcomes, rather than have a provider-led system, which says you will consume this product, at this time, for this many years.

The key thing we are working on with the new government is the system's funding architecture. Currently it is massively complicated, totally inflexible, and volume based – the more students, the more we pay. There needs to be a variety of changes to better incentivise providers to be able to do the sort of work and get the high-value outcomes we want. You can't change it overnight. The Productivity Commission inquiry into the tertiary education sector compared it with a Gordian knot – you pull one thing and it makes it worse somewhere else. These things need careful unravelling in order to ensure we don't eliminate the good things.

This is an extremely interesting and exciting time to be working

in tertiary education with the amount of change that is going on, driven by the changing world of work, regional economic needs, the government, and the market.

### What is TEC doing to address the entrenched under-achievement of Māori and Pasifika students at the tertiary level?

The gap between Māori and Pasifika cohorts and the rest of the system has not been improving. It's flatlined in terms of participation and especially achievement. We need to be real about this. What's been done in the past hasn't effected enough change. We've been researching what's been done by others and found some international examples, especially one at Georgia State University (GSU) where they have managed to turn around 25 percent to 30 percent achievement gaps between black and Hispanic Americans and white Americans to zero within seven years.

We say closing the gap here is also doable, and we are picking the eyes out of the methodology GSU has used. In a snapshot, they are using big data and predictive analytics to generate information about individuals that can be actioned through intrusive advising. It's all about how you prepare and work with students. In the main, it's the non-academic part of their learning that can make a massive difference. We are going to "Georgiify" our goals, and within five years, we want to see patterns of parity emerge. It's a big task, and some of our critics would say five years is ridiculous and it's a 10–20 year job. In our view, we are not here to set the bar low, but to be aspirational and provide tools and investment to help others do the work.

***The gap between Māori and Pasifika cohorts and the rest of the system has not been improving. It's flatlined in terms of participation and especially achievement. We need to be real about this. What's been done in the past hasn't effected enough change.***

### Our polytechnic sector is under strain. What does that mean for our tertiary sector?

The institutes of technology and polytechnics (ITPs) are such an important part of our system, and equally, a really important part of our cities and regional communities.

They don't just provide learning but also employment. And they focus on community activity in a variety of places. The problem is that they are going through an extremely difficult period that is testing their financial viability. The challenge for us is to look at structural change and underpinning policies and finding changes that will make that part of the sector work. At the same time, we are having to intervene and support institutions.

***You don't die wondering with the Australians. If there were 10 opportunities sitting on the table, they'd take five or six and go away and try them off the bat. They might not be successful in all of them, but they would massively celebrate the ones they got right.***

### **Where did you complete your tertiary education and how has this helped your career?**

I did a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) at Victoria University of Wellington and then a master's in politics and international relations in the United States. They were diverse environments and gave me the ability to question and develop analytical skills that I use every day. It was a fantastic foundation. I was also privileged to do executive level courses at both The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and at INSEAD – and they honed my leadership skills.

When I came back from the States, I started at the External Assessment Bureau at the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Again, that honed my analytical skills and my ability to write in plain English. The importance of those basic-level skills is massive.

### **How did your career progress?**

After three years at the Bureau, I realised I wanted to be making deals rather than writing about people making deals, so I went into the private sector and then the university sector. Another highlight was three years working in Australia, where I had my first general manager role at the University of Southern Queensland. That got me out of doing functional leadership and into general leadership and management. It was an amazing experience working in Australia. They've got a different style of doing things, which I enjoyed.

I moved back to New Zealand in 2009 and back into the public sector for the first time in 15 years, firstly into a role with NZQA and then this job in 2013.

I got into the tertiary education sector by accident. I wanted to do things that were commercial, which is what attracted me to the international side of the university sector because I liked the idea of building a market and relationships and trying to turn a dollar. At Victoria, we built international education from a \$3 million per annum business to a \$35 million business in five years.

### **What was it you liked about the Australian style?**

You don't die wondering with the Australians. If there were 10 opportunities sitting on the table, they'd take five or six and go away and try them off the bat. They might not be successful in all of them, but they would massively celebrate the ones they got right. We [New Zealanders] are generally far more circumspect. We might talk, plan, and do two or three

opportunities, and if one fails, we chastise ourselves for getting it wrong. The Australians are hugely optimistic and energetic when it comes to opportunities.

### **Did you adopt some of that attitude when implementing the fees-free policy?**

It was a high priority for the new government and had to be done at breakneck speed. It was high octane stuff – a little over 30 days from the cabinet decision to launch. We didn't say "It can't be done". We didn't let it get the better of us. We walked towards the risk; we embraced it and figured out how we could manage it. We could do more of that in the public sector generally.

I was extremely proud of the way our team and my colleagues in other agencies pulled something together and got it going. And it has worked really well in terms of the process we put in place. Winning the IPANZ award was a thrill.

### **What have been your key influences?**

The obvious ones are my family, upbringing, and values. They really influence how I work and where I work. It's important that I do something that matters. Another thing that influences my work is studying and working internationally. It taught me a lot about looking for different perspectives. Sport has also had a positive influence on my career. I've played hockey for New Zealand and represented New Zealand in ironman. I learnt a lot through sport, especially safely learning about failure and the need for self-reflection. Applying that in my work has been hugely valuable. Leadership roles are personally quite taxing, and reflecting on how I'm operating and feeling is an important way of managing that challenge.

### **What advice do you have for ambitious young professionals?**

I think three things need to work in tandem if you want to enjoy your work and get ahead. First, when you are asked to do something, over deliver, do it far better than specification. That is going to be highly valued. Second, don't walk past a problem. Be seen as somebody who fixes things. Third, and most important, is that you need to be able to build relationships. If you do only those first two things, you can still be the type of person nobody wants to work with. If you build relationships and do the first two things in such a way people love working with you, then you will go a long way. Finally, don't be fixated on the next step. If you can focus on those first three things, good things will happen.

