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From Egalitarian Goals to Neo-Liberal Outcomes. VET in Aotearoa New Zealand From Currie to Hawke (1962 To 1988)

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Abstract

Context: This paper provides a brief overview of some key changes to technical and vocational education in Aotearoa New Zealand from the 1960s to the 1990s focussing particularly on two key education commission reports.
Approach: This paper is based on desk research and makes links to key historical reports and scholarly research.
Findings: Vocational education is subject to a range of social, cultural and economic pressures and is often shaped by historical contingency rather than a result of deliberate design.
Conclusions: Educational change is not always a result of a grand plan but can be a result of small changes, slight economic shifts and social changes that occur even over generations. These small moves however can result in significant change over time resembling a mighty shift resulting in unforeseen futures. What might have seemed necessary in one era is viewed as irresponsible in another. Technical education once occupied a significant place in New Zealand's education system. In the first half of the twentieth century, technical high schools, technical colleges, evening classes, apprenticeships, and trade instruction formed an important bridge between schooling and work. These institutions were deliberately created in response to the reluctance of academic secondary schools to respond to the needs of industry, working-class communities, and students whose futures were not expected to lie in university study (Guscott, 2000). Over time, however, technical high schools disappeared as a distinct part of the secondary school system. Their disappearance was not the result of a single deliberate act of abolition (Body, 2010) rather, it came about through a combination of social aspiration, political reform, curriculum change, institutional reclassification, and economic restructuring. A move to tertiary based polytechnics prior to neo-liberal reform and a de-emphasis in vocational and sub-degree educational programmes saw the retreat of TVET. Arguably, the demise in technical high schools removed a focus on technical education in general, resulting in an overall decline in vocational and technical education and leading to a much discussed «skills crisis» in the 2000s.

Keywords

technical and vocational education, technical high schools, history of TVET

1 Introduction

The dismantling of technical education at high-school level in Aotearoa New Zealand was an unintended consequence of progressive educational reform and a reflection of enduring social attitudes that placed academic education above practical and vocational learning (Harris & Clayton, 2020). Technical high schools were weakened by the post-war movement towards comprehensive secondary schooling, a common core curriculum, and equal educational



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opportunity (O'Neill, 2004). These reforms were designed to avoid premature social sorting and to give all students access to a broad education. However, they also removed the institutional distinctiveness of technical high schools.

At the same time, technical education was increasingly shifted into post-school institutions through technical institutes, polytechnics, apprenticeships, and later industry training organisations. This left secondary schools less clearly connected to vocational preparation (Maurice-Takerei, 2014). By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Aotearoa New Zealand faced repeated concerns about skill shortages, especially in trades and technical occupations. While such skill shortages cannot be explained solely by the decline of technical high schools, that decline formed an important part of a longer historical pattern: the weakening of coherent school-to-work technical pathways which marked the beginning of a series of ongoing reforms to rebuild vocational pathways.

2 Egalitarian Origins

The origins of technical education in Aotearoa New Zealand emerged from a perceived gap in the nineteenth-century education system. Traditional secondary schools were modelled largely on English grammar schools and were oriented towards academic subjects, university entrance, and the professions (Butchers, 1932). They served a relatively small proportion of the population. Existing secondary schools were reluctant to include manual or technical subjects, despite calls from the 1880s for schooling to include subjects with direct relevance to the «technical arts of modern life» (Maurice-Takerei, 2016).

Abbott (2000) argues that technical education before the turn of the twentieth century was limited, sporadic, and often provided through mechanics' institutes, schools of mines, evening classes, or a few secondary schools offering semi-vocational subjects.

Indeed, the lack of organised early technical education reflected the economic structure of colonial New Zealand. As Abbott (2000) points out, Aotearoa New Zealand at that time lacked the large-scale manufacturing or mining sectors that drove the earlier development of technical education in some other countries, including Australia and the colony could also draw on skilled immigrants from Britain, reducing pressure on employers to invest heavily in local training. Employers tended to undervalue formal training or to rely on workers trained elsewhere. Private and local initiatives were unable to create a stable technical education system and as Abbott (2000) argues, it was only when the state intervened around the turn of the century that vocational and technical education began to take firmer institutional form.

Government intervention came through the Manual and Technical Instruction Acts of 1900 and 1902. These laws enabled local authorities to spend money on technical education, provided grants for buildings and equipment, and allowed technical school inspectors to be appointed. The original intention was not necessarily to build a separate technical school sector, rather, the Department of Education hoped to encourage existing secondary and district schools to teach technical subjects (Maurice-Takerei, 2016). However, many secondary schools failed to respond. Consequently, existing evening schools expanded into day classes, and new technical schools were established. Technical high schools emerged not because policymakers initially planned a fully separate track, but because academic secondary schools resisted vocational reform.

3 The Rise of Technical High Schools

The establishment of «day» technical high schools began in the early twentieth century. These schools formed part of a tripartite post-primary landscape that included academic secondary schools, technical high schools, and mainly rural district high schools. Their original purpose was to provide a practical form of education for pupils who had not passed the

Proficiency Examination at the end of primary school and who were thought unlikely to attend university or remain long in post-primary schooling (Body, 2010). Such students were expected to enter roles as artisans, farm labourers, domestic workers, or similar occupations.

Technical high schools offered a wide range of practical subjects, trade preparation, commercial courses, domestic science, workshop learning, and evening classes for apprentices and adult learners (Nicol, 1940). In the first half of the twentieth century, apprenticeships and on-the-job training were often combined with part-time tuition at local technical high schools or colleges (Abbott, 2000). By 1930, more than 10,000 people were enrolled in technical classes in New Zealand, a number that was more than twice the enrolment in the University of New Zealand colleges and agricultural colleges combined (Abbott, 2000).

Technical high schools also became distinctive institutions within New Zealand's education system. In 1939, the American scholar F. H. Spencer in a review of technical education in Australia and New Zealand described New Zealand technical high schools as a «noteworthy» and fitting type of school for New Zealand conditions. John Nicol's (1940) report also recognised the significance of technical high schools and their tradition of co-education with an emphasis on cultural activities including music and drama, stating they might be less vocational than the term «technical» might apply. Regardless, it was pointed out that these schools tended to serve those who most likely work in non-professional roles (Nicol, 1940). By the interwar period technical high schools had achieved a recognised role. They were particularly important because traditional secondary schools had been slow to broaden their curriculum. Indeed, it is argued that the conservatism of secondary schools had contributed to the rise of the «almost unique» New Zealand technical school (Body, 2010).

4 Egalitarian Challenges

Despite their practical value, technical high schools faced a problem of status. Their origins were tied to assumptions that some students were not suited for academic education and should instead be prepared for manual or domestic work. Many parents resisted the idea that their children should be placed in «lesser roles» through technical schooling (Body, 2010). As secondary education expanded, academic credentials became increasingly important for social mobility. The standard public examinations including the Public Service Entrance, University Entrance, and later School Certificate influenced parental and student choices. By the 1920s and 1930s, many schools and families were focusing on examinations, particularly University Entrance which according to Butchers (1932) writing at the time, suggested had by default come to function as a general secondary school-leaving examination.

Technical high schools responded by adding academic subjects, partly to meet parental demand and partly to improve their status. At the same time, several academic secondary schools introduced vocational subjects to attract more students and revenue (Body, 2010) and the distinction between technical and academic schools became blurred. Where technical schools sought to escape the stigma of being second-best by offering academic pathways, secondary schools added practical subjects as part of a common core curriculum introduced in the 1940. This process of curriculum convergence preceded the formal disappearance of technical high schools.

The social devaluation of vocational education was not unique to New Zealand, but it had strong local consequences. A society that valued egalitarianism nevertheless often associated academic schooling with aspiration and manual work with lower status. This produced a contradiction. Policymakers wanted to provide equal educational opportunity; however, equality was seen as equal access to academic pathways rather than equal esteem for technical and manual educational opportunities.

5 Post-War Reform and Universality

The major turning point came with the reforms of the 1930s and 1940s. The abolition of the Proficiency Examination in 1937, the raising of the school leaving age to fifteen, the accrediting of University Entrance in 1944, the development of a national common core curriculum in 1946, and the introduction of School Certificate in 1946 all contributed to universal secondary schooling (O'Neill, 2004). These reforms formed what O'Neill (2004) points to as the New Zealand post-primary education settlement: a broad consensus about mass secondary education and equality of educational opportunity.

The post-war settlement was shaped by democratic and egalitarian ideals. The aim was to ensure that all young people, regardless of background or destination, received a broad secondary education. This was a response to older forms of social sorting, where technical education could be seen as a pathway for those not considered academically able or socially destined for professional work. In that sense, comprehensive reform had a progressive purpose. It sought to avoid locking children into narrow futures too early.

However, the same reforms weakened technical high schools as distinct institutions. The common core curriculum reduced the curriculum differences between secondary, district, and technical high schools (O'Neill, 2004). If all schools were expected to provide broad general education, then the justification for separate technical high schools became less obvious. Body (2010) in his thesis on the demise of technical high schools, argues that philosophical, educational, social, and legislative changes from the 1930s onward affected technical high schools without necessarily intending to abolish them (Body, 2010). Comprehensive education was intended to guarantee equal opportunity through a common curriculum, not to eliminate technical high schools. Yet in practice it made them increasingly indistinct.

The reforms were not anti-technical in principle. But because technical schooling had been historically associated with lower-status pathways, the move towards common secondary schooling tended to absorb rather than elevate technical education. Technical high schools became secondary schools with some technical subjects, rather than a separate and coherent vocational-technical pathway.

6 Re-Classification

The formal end of technical high schools came through legislative and administrative change. In 1965, all post-primary schools were deemed to be secondary schools. The legislation stated that every school that had previously been a secondary school, technical high school, technical school, or combined school would be deemed to have been established as a secondary school (Body, 2010). This did not necessarily close school buildings or end all practical subjects, but it removed the legal and institutional identity of technical high schools.

This reclassification reflected a reality that had already developed. By the 1960s, the distinction between technical and academic secondary schooling had become increasingly difficult to sustain. Secondary schools had expanded rapidly after the Second World War. O'Neill (2004) notes that between 1945 and 1975 student numbers rose from 35,000 to 200,000, and many schools were built to accommodate a larger, more diverse student population. The comprehensive secondary school became the dominant model. It included a wider range of subjects and social functions but was not primarily organised around trade or technical formation.

At the same time, technical education itself was being redefined (Ferguson, 2009). The language shifted from «technical» to «technological» education as the economy required technicians as well as artisans and technical education was seen as rigid and purely skills based (Jones & Compton, 2009). More advanced technical training increasingly belonged beyond the secondary school. The Education Act amendments of the early 1960s separated senior technical work from technical high schools and recognised technical institutes as distinct from post-

primary schools (Body, 2010). In 1963, technical education was removed from the post-primary framework and technical institutes that in many cases took over from technical high schools were recognised as different from secondary schools (Maurice-Takerei, 2016).

Thus, the disappearance of technical high schools was accompanied by the growth of technical institutes. Polytechnics and technical institutes evolved from technical schools and colleges, some former technical high school properties being co-opted to house the new technical institutes in the process. However, the purpose was different: technical institutes were firmly located in post-school education and focused on continuing and further education at the junction between schooling and work (Maurice-Takerei, 2016).

7 Relocation

The relocation of technical education into the tertiary sector was not necessarily harmful. Indeed, it reflected real economic and technological change. Post-war Aotearoa New Zealand needed more advanced technicians, technologists, and specialist workers.

In post-war Aotearoa New Zealand there was a long-established and widely accepted belief in free and universal access to education. This often discussed and much celebrated egalitarianism was seen as a central and distinctive aspect of New Zealand's national identity as part of an established welfare state developed in the 1930s (McCulloch, 1988). A 1962 national report, The Report of the Commission on Education in New Zealand (1962) known as The Currie Report named after the chair of the commission provided a picture of education as being provided fairly and equally by a benevolent state (McCulloch, 1988). However, the report was accused of avoiding issues relating to differences and inequalities and of maintaining the status quo by extending the current conditions (Ewing, 1972).

The Currie Commission supported separate tertiary-level technical institutes in major centres to meet demand for specialist technical workers, tradespeople, and scientists in an increasingly industrial economy (Commission on Education in New Zealand, 1962). Between 1960 and 1965 a number of technical institutes were developed in major centres, and they were formally recognised by the Education Act of 1964. During the 1980s, technical institutes and community colleges were reclassified as polytechnics to reflect their wider range of courses.

However, the transfer of technical education to the tertiary sector created a gap at secondary level. Technical learning became something students might pursue after school, rather than a respected and integrated part of school education itself. Secondary schools increasingly focused on general education, academic subjects, and credentials and while vocational education at school survived in various forms, it often lacked the institutional coherence and social prominence once provided by technical high schools.

In this way school-to-work transitions became more uncertain. A student interested in practical or technical work might no longer encounter a strong technical culture within secondary schooling. Instead, they had to navigate separate systems: school subjects, apprenticeships, polytechnic courses, employer training, and later industry training organisations. Coordination between these sectors was uneven. New Zealand's vocational education system became a hybrid system shaped by multiple tributaries, including schools, polytechnics, apprenticeships, employers, state agencies, and later Māori and community initiatives (Maurice-Takerei, 2016). Hybrid systems can be flexible, but they can also be fragmented.

8 Economic Restructuring and Neo-Liberalism

The weakening of technical education was compounded by economic restructuring in the late twentieth century. During the 1980s, many forms of trade-related education and training disappeared along with the government departments and state enterprises that had provided them. Training had been linked to organisations such as the Ministry of Works, Railways, the

Post Office, the Forestry Service, and the Electricity Department and these institutions trained apprentices, technicians, carpenters, engineers, plumbers, mechanics, and electricians. When state-owned enterprises were broken up, corporatised, or sold, many cadetships and apprenticeship pathways were reduced or ended (Maurice-Takerei, 2016).

This was crucial to the later skills crisis. The decline of technical high schools was only one part of the story. The larger problem was that several pillars of vocational formation weakened over time: school-based technical education lost status and institutional identity; employer investment in training remained inconsistent; state-sector training was reduced through restructuring; and tertiary vocational education carried the burden of preparing skilled workers after they had already left school.

By the 1990s, post compulsory education in Aotearoa New Zealand was completely transformed. The Report of the Working Party on Post Compulsory Education and Training in New Zealand (1988) known as the Hawke Report made recommendations that led to the reform of tertiary education based on neo-liberal, market-based principles. Subsequent legislation including the Education Amendment Act (1990) allowed, among other things, polytechnics to offer degree level programmes. The changes, accused of being hasty and lacking in consultation (Patterson, 1991) created a deregulated and liberalised, laissez-faire, market model which saw polytechnics change at a rapid rate. Academic drift, combined with a drop in the number of apprentices (Department of Labour, 1989) through prior deregulation of the state sector, saw degree level provision outnumber sub degree provision by the early 1990s (Abbott, 2000).

9 Discontinuity and Decline

While reports, reforms, technical institutes, polytechnics, and industry training systems all show that technical education remained visible over the next 20 years the system increasingly lacked status, coherence and continuity.

Technical education was repeatedly reorganised rather than consistently embedded (Maurice-Takerei, 2025). It had first been placed in technical schools because academic secondary schools resisted practical subjects. It was then partly absorbed into comprehensive secondary schooling in the name of equality. It was transferred into technical institutes because advanced technical training required post-school provision. Post-school provision underwent drastic reform. Later, technical training was affected by labour-market reforms and the decline of state-sector training. Each stage had a rationale, but together they produced discontinuity.

Just as secondary schools can be seen to have crowded out technical high schools, polytechnics, in the 1990s, seeking to offer degree level qualifications once again blurred the boundaries between academic and vocational education. Technical education, not yet sitting sustainably within industry training environments became further unsettled and crowded out.

While the former technical high school system had serious problems, especially its association with class and ability sorting its disappearance did not produce equal esteem for vocational learning. Instead, the comprehensive system universalised academic aspirations while leaving vocational learning less visible. In that sense, Aotearoa New Zealand neglected to sustain the educational structures needed to develop VET consistently.

10 Skill Shortages

By the 2000s, Aotearoa New Zealand faced significant concern about skill shortages in trades, technical occupations, and parts of industry. A widely discussed «skills crisis» in relation to a skilled, trained, home-grown workforce took hold especially in relation to an increased need for skills following earthquakes in 2011 and the subsequent rebuild of Christchurch. The lack of skills was linked partly to the disappearance of trade training and cadetships in state

enterprises, but also to the broader historical pattern of fragmented vocational education (Maurice-Takerei, 2014)

The decline of technical high schools along with changing economic cycles, industry restructuring, the changing nature of technology, employer training behaviour and the policy design of tertiary and industry training systems all contributed to a weak VET system and a reliance on immigration to provide skills for infrastructure in Aotearoa. While a stronger secondary technical pathway might not have solved all skill shortages, it could have helped build a broader base of practical capability, career awareness, and respect for vocational learning. The loss of technical high schools meant that the education system relied more heavily on post-school correction which became increasingly fragmented through ongoing reforms (Maurice-Takerei, in press).

11 Conclusion

Technical education in Aotearoa New Zealand declined at high-school level through a long and complex process. Technical high schools emerged because academic secondary schools failed to provide practical and vocational education. They became important institutions in the early twentieth century, supporting apprenticeships, trades, commercial education, and practical learning. Yet they were always burdened by lower social status, because technical schooling was associated with students considered less academic and with occupations seen as less prestigious.

Their dismantling was the result of reforms designed to democratise secondary schooling and provide equal educational opportunity. The common core curriculum, universal secondary schooling, and a comprehensive school ideal blurred the differences between technical and academic schools. By 1965, technical high schools had been absorbed into the general category of secondary schools. At the same time, technical education was transferred into technical institutes and later polytechnics, reflecting the growing complexity of technological work. Reforms in the public sector and in tertiary education did little to provide for sustainable vocational pathways.

The result was a paradox. Reforms intended to overcome hierarchy and broaden opportunity also weakened one of the main institutional homes of practical and vocational learning. Technical education did not disappear, but it moved away from the secondary school mainstream. Later economic restructuring, employer reluctance to invest in training, and the decline of state-sector apprenticeships further weakened New Zealand's training capacity. By the 2000s, concerns about skill shortages reflected these accumulated historical decisions.

New Zealand did not simply forget technical education; it repeatedly reorganised it, displaced it, and undervalued it. The lesson from this history is that VET, a central part of a balanced education system can be side-lined and crowded out. A society that recognises the need for skilled technicians, tradespeople, engineers, builders, and applied technologists cannot afford to marginalise the forms of knowledge that produce them.

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