

Across The Ditch - August 2009

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The last couple of months in New Zealand have shown a back peddling by the government on its election promise to boost funding for adult education and, in particular, skills based training. The recent budget signalled that the tertiary sector will receive increases of only 1.95%, an effective cut when inflation is running at over 3%¹. Industry training programmes aimed at the young, Maori and Pacific Islanders have been cut, after CPI adjustments, by \$9m, and the Tertiary Education Union lists a range of cuts that mean many adult training courses will be fighting for survival².

The parliamentary debate on education cuts has the usual spin on both sides³. Unsurprisingly, the Government says it is only cutting non-essential courses at a time when belts need to tighten due to the recession. Equally unsurprising, opposition parties predict the end of learning as we know it. Once again training has become the pawn in the political game.

In the private sector, training is also at risk. Business New Zealand Chief Executive Phil O'Reilly acknowledges that there is a temptation to slash corporate training as organisations try to preserve their bottom line for investors. However, he urges businesses to resist this trend. He warns that reducing their investment in training will cause business to lose momentum coming out of the recession and put them at risk from their competitors. "You can never give away basic training - the customer services and technical skills, for example. Never give up on that because your competitors won't and you will suffer in the long run", he says.³

Professor Susan Geertshuis, University of Auckland Director of Continuing Education and Professor of Lifelong Learning, believes that business would see more value in training if they start focusing more on deeply understanding the issues the learners and their organisations need to address³. Her message is not a new one but perhaps takes on special significance in the current economic climate. "It's quite possible to send an employee off to training and see few benefits", she says. "Businesses should be demanding demonstrable results from training... they should be asking, 'what will the employee do differently when they come back to work and how will it help our business?' ".

Of course the predictions of doom and gloom and call to reign in the training dollar closely echo what was being said during the recession of the early 1990s and every little economic blip and since then. The reality is that everyone agrees that training and learning is important but they differ in how the dollars should be spent. Inevitably, pressure to justify spending is amplified when times are tough.

Continued on next page

Ultimately, the purist would say that learning should transcend thoughts of funding. But, in times of scarce resources, organisations have no choice but to demand a return on their investment. As learning professionals, we should not feel threatened by this. It is merely a call to good discipline. Learning and organisational return are not the same thing. However, knowing how learning, in its many and various forms translates into better performance for both individuals and their associated organisations, is nothing more than a call to get back to basics: alignment to strategy, clear learning objectives and sound assessment and evaluation.

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- 1 <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PA0906/S00003.htm>
- 2 <http://www.teu.ac.nz/?p=2660>
- 3 http://www.parliament.nz/en-NZ/PB/Business/QOA/9/3/5/49HansQ_20090604_00000324-6-Vote-Education-Cuts.htm
- 4 http://www.nzherald.co.nz/trainingcourses/news/article.cfm?c_id=349&objectid=10578841&pnum=0

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