

Across The Ditch - February 2010

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As 2009 drew to an end, adult learning had been hitting the headlines, but not always in a good way. Screaming out of the NZ Herald was the worrying headline: "Adult Learners' Week has been more about commiserating than celebrating as supporters battle the National Government's 80 per cent cuts to night-class funding" ⁽¹⁾.

The budget had announced that in 2010 all ACE (Adult Community Education) funding will be replaced with a new approach, re-focusing on what the government calls "priority areas" such as literacy and numeracy. ⁽²⁾ Yet the "change in focus" appears to be nothing more than spin. The reality is that only 20% of the former budget will be available for the 220,000 New Zealanders who take advantage of ACE funding each year. Feeling was running high with more than 53,000 people signing a petition which was delivered to Parliament in October. ⁽³⁾

But it is not all bad news. Local stories continue to show that where the government is withdrawing support, communities are stepping in. In South Auckland, the Mangere Making A Difference (MMAD) youth project is providing community based training in the form of work experience to the young unemployed. Training is being offered in practical trade related skills such as water blasting, house renovation and gardening, and its first graduates credit the programme for teaching them about what to expect of work ⁽⁴⁾.

A little further south in Waikato, a trade jobs and training initiative driven by the district's employers and delivered through the Waikato Institute of Technology, has been credited with eliminating youth unemployment, providing more skilled workers and drastically reducing crime. It is now being used as a model by one mayoral candidate for the imminent Auckland "Super City" ⁽⁵⁾ – the amalgamation of eight local and regional councils into one.

Outside the community sector, in a PricewaterhouseCoopers survey of 620 NZ businesses 21% of all NZ respondents credited training as having the biggest positive impact on performance over the last year. This is a marked change from just eight months ago, when cost control and survival were top of mind ⁽⁶⁾. The same survey showed that 44% of businesses are planning to grow revenue through better customer focus, which indicates that customer service training is likely to be a growth area in 2010.

And New Zealand excellence in learning design is being recognised on the international stage. Wellington based company Wavelength picked up two major awards at the global Brandon Hall Excellence in Learning Awards in New York in November 2009. Winning a gold award (the only one awarded in 2009) in the Best Learning Results category, and a silver award in the Best Use of Blended Learning Category, they showcase NZ organisations that are still investing in training. ⁷

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All this signals to me is that during difficult economic times, training is seen as an easy target by those who are under pressure to cut costs. Learning must resist the financial reporting trap, where short term thinking, prompted by shareholder demands for paper profits, forces the hand of both governments and senior corporate executives to forego their common sense. But the value of training shines through by those who recognise its contribution to the bottom line. It is good to see that communities are fighting back and in the private sector, progressive businesses are preparing to invest in the future, with the support of world class learning providers to support them.

- 1 11 Sept 2009, NZ Herald "Emotions run high over Govt funding cuts for night classes"
- 2 Budget 2009 Fact Sheet on the website of the Tertiary Education Commission
www.tec.govt.nz
- 3 <http://www.stopnightclasscuts.org.nz/>
- 4 21 October 2009 NZ Herald "Work scheme changes lives"
- 5 15 October 2009 NZ Herald "Mayor looking at jobs initiative for Manukau"
- 6 29 Sept 2009, NZ Herald, "Kiwi businesses putting customers first, says new survey"
- 7 <http://www.wl.co.nz/news.html>