



Labour's 'Fees-Free' Tertiary Funding Policy Pledge

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At the end of January 2016, New Zealand's Labour Party leader, Andrew Little, launched the new political year with a policy announcement that, under a Labour government, every New Zealander, no matter their age or course of study, would be entitled to study for three years for free.

Despite its apparent boldness, this policy is *not* bold or innovative. Other parties in New Zealand promote bolder and more comprehensive tertiary education policies;¹ as a nation we have been much bolder in the past; and, many other countries have already implemented far more expansive free education policies².

Nor is the policy announcement innovative because it challenges the way we are talking and thinking about tertiary education right now. Indeed, Andrew Little and others continue to promote the policy to Labour's potential supporters as an investment in the economy and in jobs, reducing education to instrumental value only: "[the policy] will mean our businesses will always be able to find the skilled workers they need to succeed".³ These ideas mirror the way the current tertiary education minister talks about education. Politicians are continuing to leave to one side the long-held views that education is about creating a fairer and more democratic world where everyone has the skills to participate.

This is not to diminish the importance of Labour's policy—that Labour chose to begin its long election campaign with a tertiary education policy is exciting. The onus now falls on those working or studying in the tertiary

¹ Although lately reticent about its tertiary education policy, the Green Party policy is to work towards a public 'fee-free' tertiary education system by capping and then progressively reducing student fees, as well as working towards a universal student allowance which allows for a higher cost of living (<https://home.greens.org.nz/policysummary/tertiary-education-policy-summary#sthash.gg7cmf5X.dpuf>). New Zealand First would also introduce a universal living allowance. Its policy reads: "While its contribution to the economy cannot be overstated, skills for employment cannot be allowed to overwhelm the fundamental nature of education as a public good." (<http://nzfirst.org.nz/policy/education>). United Future will remove tuition fees for tertiary education in New Zealand, accompanied by a push to increase the quality of tertiary education and protect the value of New Zealand degrees (http://www.unitednz.co.nz/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/United-Future-Policy-Manifesto_2016.pdf).

² These include Brazil, Germany, Finland, France, Iceland, Ireland, Norway, Scotland, Slovenia and Sweden.

³ Three years free education for the 21st century economy, Andrew Little 31 January 2016, retrieved 14 March 2016 from http://www.labour.org.nz/three_years_free_education_for_the_21st_century_economy

education sector to take that momentum and use it. The announcement of three years free tertiary education for all is important for two reasons.

First, it finally changes the debate about tertiary education to one about access and equity—the fundamental belief that everybody should have a decent chance to learn and to share new skills and knowledge with their local communities. And second, it directly places the need to commit public money to tertiary education right in the path of tax cuts being hinted at by the National Party.

Labour's policy is likely to be one of several big-ticket policies it will announce before the next election to outline the issues and the values upon which it wants to define itself. It is reasonable to assume it will soon have similar policies relating to health, housing, and other social justice areas where it believes it has stronger voter support than the National Party.

For all in the tertiary education sector the policy announcement must be taken up as a way of changing the public conversation about tertiary education. The first task is to start talking more about the purpose of education. Politicians and employers have for several decades worked to redefine tertiary education as being a tool to achieve economic ends, ignoring the non-instrumental gains that are very hard to count and measure. This new policy though opens the door to finally reverse that narrow definition of the role of tertiary education. People can study anything and at any time in their lives.

These new students might use their three years to learn skills that carry them forward into a 21st century economy. Or they might discover something about their history and culture that serves no direct economic purpose. They might end up reading books to children in libraries. They might fix their neighbour's leaky showerhead. They might vote. Education is valuable because it opens our minds and transforms our lives, not just because it helps us get a job.

The second task is to acknowledge openly that spending money on tertiary education comes at a cost—it means rejecting future tax cuts, and potentially increasing taxes. Like all social spending, education is an investment, not a cost. Investing in public health saves money in the long term, investing in infrastructure saves future generations the costly repairs and upgrades of roads not fit for purpose. Tax cuts are short-term decisions that leave the present and future generations of New Zealand worse off.

Investing in high quality free tertiary education does have a cost. And that cost is one that tax payers and citizens must meet. Three years free tertiary education is not really the right way to talk about this. The point is that, although free for students at the time of delivery, this education will be tax-payer funded, but justifiably so. Tertiary education is an important public good, it enables social mobility, improves our communities and democracy, and, contributes to social and economic well-being.