

Editorial: Unitec's role should simply be to educate

Unitec is nothing if not ambitious. Not content with being a top-ranked polytechnic, it has spent much time and effort trying to win university status.

That campaign has been opposed by the country's universities, which say that existing standards must be protected. It seems also to have befuddled successive Ministers of Education. Now, it has sparked a \$3.5 million lawsuit against the Government, which, Unitec claims, broke multiple laws in blocking its application to become New Zealand's ninth university.

Unitec must surely have thought long and hard about such action. It is, after all, bound to sour relations and highlight the question of why Unitec is so determined to be a university. Why is it not happy, like other polytechnics, to be the best it can be at producing the skills craved by a needy economy?

Unitec has never fully explained this, other than to say it meets Education Act criteria for university status. That is disputed by the universities, which argue that to meet those requirements, most teaching must be done by people involved in research. What is clear is that Unitec bears little resemblance to a traditional research-led university. As much was intimated last year when it ranked 12th of all tertiary institutes in the Performance-based Research Fund rankings.

That rating confirmed what was surely already apparent: that Auckland, Canterbury, Victoria and Otago Universities are the country's top-ranked tertiary institutions. It is important that their status is not devalued. This would occur if there were no longer a distinction in title between them and institutes of a much different nature.

This is not a question of universities avoiding competition; it is about standards of intellectual rigour. Which is not to paint Unitec as a poor cousin. It plays an equally critical educational role. And if its standing is high, those who graduate from it will care not a jot about the 'university' word.