

Andrew Codling: Why Unitec deserves to be given the elusive U-word

News lately has highlighted two examples of controversy over the use of the word "university".

One is Unitec's ongoing attempt to be classified as a university and the legal action against the Government it has felt compelled to take to preserve its right to a fair and timely assessment. The other is Te Wananga o Aotearoa's defiant use of the title "The University of New Zealand" without any attempt to seek such an assessment.

Why is the word "university" so important to these institutions and, indeed, to those that have the legal right to use it?

In New Zealand we are closely tied to the British university model, which has evolved somewhat differently to counterparts in Europe and the United States. Until the mid-19th century in England, there were only two universities - Oxford and Cambridge. When the new breed of technological and vocational universities, such as London, Durham and Manchester, were mooted, they received a reception not unlike that which Unitec is receiving now.

Cries that England had enough universities, and that these new institutions were not real universities, filled the press at that time.

A similar cry was heard 100 years later when the British Government created about 100 new universities overnight from the former polytechnics. Many of these new universities have gone on to become well-established members of their new club, while others have struggled.

But there has been no suggestion that the reputation of one poorly performing new university affects the reputation of another well-established one. Oxford's reputation hasn't dimmed because a small provincial university has struggled.

Unitec is the only institution in New Zealand seeking formal classification as a university. It is hard to see how its future success or otherwise as a university could either enhance or devalue the independent reputation of Auckland, Canterbury, Victoria and Otago Universities.

At the heart of perceptions of the traditional university is this thing called "research", which has assumed such a dominance in the culture and language of this kind of university that it would be easy to presume that they don't do much else, or at least they don't value much else.

Universities are, of course, about a lot more than research. In fact, their main function is to teach, and there is a consensus that this teaching will be much enhanced if it is done by teachers who themselves are active in research. Research is, therefore, seen as

fundamental to a traditional university.

Is it appropriate to determine the status of a university solely on a basis of the research it produces? According to a Weekend Herald editorial, yes, that is appropriate. Yet quality of teaching is surely as important.

Unitec makes no pretence about its modest research performance, or about the importance of having teachers who are active in research. But it does not seek to be a research-led university, and rather seeks to emphasise its distinctiveness as a high-quality provider of vocational and professional education which is underpinned by research, not driven by it.

So why does Unitec want to use the word "university"?

As a member of the International Association of Universities it might say that it is already operating as a university, but cannot yet use that title. It has more than 6000 degree students, considerably more than Lincoln University.

It has more undergraduate and postgraduate degree students than Auckland University of Technology (AUT) and Waikato University had when they were established as universities, and it has a similar performance-based research fund rating to AUT. All Unitec degrees are approved by the Qualifications Authority by a process many university academics acknowledge as more rigorous than that they are required to meet in their own universities.

Unitec has consistently asked for a fair assessment of its performance against the legislated definition of a university and the authority guidelines. Surely if it passes that test, arguments about whether it meets the standards of a university should go away.

The Weekend Herald editorial concluded by stating that if Unitec's standing was high, those who graduated from it would care not a jot about the "university" word. Is that so? Ask any degree student from Unitec whether he or she would prefer their degree certificate to have the word university on it or not. The answer is a resounding "yes".

These students do work of the same standard and rigor as their university counterparts, they are taught by people of the same academic quality (many of whom have come from other universities) and therefore deserve the parity of esteem that the university name provides.

Just ask international students who willingly go to Unitec for the first two years of their degree and then transfer to a university just for their final papers so that they can graduate from a university.

The reality is that Unitec has not been like other polytechnics for some years. It has evolved to offer a broad range of qualifications from certificates to PhDs. By any yardstick, it does a fine job. It is not the same as Auckland University and neither does it wish to be. Auckland is but one of a wide range of types of university on the international landscape.

Unitec wishes to be seen as different type, one that provides a wide range of professional qualifications, taught by research-active staff up to date in their professional knowledge. Its aim is to help New Zealanders further their careers and employment potential and thereby to add value to the economy.

Being called a university will enhance its capability to do this, and will give

international recognition to its graduates.

* Dr Andrew Codling is the deputy president, academic, at Unitec.

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