Polytechnic reforms threaten widespread benefits

(Dunedin – Tuesday, 12 March 2019) Otago Polytechnic has long played an important role in Dunedin’s development as New Zealand’s centre of educational excellence and has contributed to the city and wider region in many other ways, writes Mayor Dave Cull.

The Government’s proposal to restructure the country’s vocational education sector has the potential to weaken the innovative autonomy of Otago Polytechnic and deprive the city of the considerable benefits the Polytechnic and its predecessors have brought for nearly 150 years.

Indeed, Otago Polytechnic’s history can be traced all the way back to 1870 when the Dunedin School of Art – the oldest teaching department in the polytechnic sector – first opened. The school has contributed enormously to Dunedin’s vibrant arts and cultural scene over the years, and has produced some of New Zealand’s finest artists including Frances Hodgkins, Colin McCahon and Ralph Hotere.

In 1889, the Dunedin Technical School – later known as King Edward Technical College – opened, providing technical classes such as carpentry, chemistry and cookery.

In 1921, the Technical College took over the Dunedin School of Art and by the 1950s, the Technical College was the largest in the country with 2,500 students and over 250 classes.

Growth led to the school splitting into two divisions in 1966 – Otago Polytechnic and King Edward Technical School, with the latter separating in 1974 to become Logan Park High School. The Polytechnic’s Forth Street campus formally opened in May 1989.

Otago Polytechnic has been one of the country’s top performing polytechnics ever since. Today it is financially viable; has excellent management and academic staff; and collaborates superbly with local businesses, industries and the Council to address community, training and employment needs.

Perhaps what isn’t quite so well known, is the many other ways in which Otago Polytechnic contributes to the city and to the community.

The Polytechnic has more than 80 international partnerships, and Study Abroad and Exchange opportunities, which bring significant economic and cultural benefits to the city.

It has particularly close connections with technical institutes in China’s Guandong Province, including Guangzhou and our friendship city Qingyuan, and in recent years has launched a Bachelor of Engineering Technology qualification delivered in partnership with China’s Dalian Ocean University. This partnership alone brings up to 120 Chinese students to Dunedin each year.

Otago Polytechnic is also a key contributor to one of our city’s premier events – iD Dunedin Fashion Week. The Polytechnic is the principal sponsor of the iD International Emerging Designer Show – Australasia’s only international young designer competition. Through the Polytechnic’s School of Design, Dunedin is increasingly becoming the destination of choice for future designers looking for a strong foundation and skills to flourish in the industry.
Otago Polytechnic has also helped to raise over $1 million for local charities over the past decade through its involvement in the Charity House project. This project sees Otago Polytechnic carpentry students further learn and hone their trade by building a new house, which is then auctioned off and profits returned to Otago charities.

The Polytechnic’s partnership with the Dunedin Wildlife Hospital is another win-win. School of Veterinary Nursing students gain unprecedented practical experience at the on-campus hospital, while being a crucial part of the movement to save the region’s endangered wildlife – remembering that conservation-based tourism generates tens of millions of dollars each year for our economy.

So, there is much at stake for our city and indeed the wider Otago region.

As it stands, the proposed merger of the country’s vocational education sector risks undoing a lot of the good work and could see Otago Polytechnic being subservient to an organisational structure that doesn’t understand or care about our local needs.

Clearly national consistency of standards and qualifications and the elimination of wasteful and uncoordinated competition is desirable, and reform of that is overdue. However, that should not involve throwing the regional baby out with the national bathwater and penalising successful polytechnics such as Otago for the failings of others.

That’s why the Dunedin City Council is right behind Otago’s ‘Protect Our Polytechnic’ campaign. I’m calling on the Government to guarantee the autonomy of regional polytechnics in matters other than standards and qualifications.

Pleasingly, and to his credit, the Tertiary Education Minister appears to be listening to our region’s concerns, describing Otago Polytechnic’s argument as “compelling” (ODT, 8.3.2019).

Minister Hipkins and his colleagues would be well served to continue to look towards Otago Polytechnic and Dunedin as an exemplar of how best to deliver educational excellence.

Dave Cull
Mayor of Dunedin