



Students First

The strategic partnership between:

WelTec &
Whitireia



“By saying ‘Students First’, it is not about the organisations – and that has driven so much of what we have done.”

Chief Executive WelTec

“I’m surprised at what we have been able to achieve in a relatively short time with growing confidence amongst staff.”

Chief Executive Whitireia

The Students First initiative, now known as the Choice Protocol, is a strategic partnership between WelTec and Whitireia.

The purpose of Students First is to strengthen the provision of vocational tertiary education in the Wellington region. Working strategically in partnership, the two institutions’ intent is to increase student access to a diverse range of programmes to give students education choices that matter. The aim is to provide a region-wide approach to tertiary education.





A strategic partnership would include:

- + *Highly collaborative relationships at all levels within each organisation*
- + *Retaining the identity of each institution*
- + *Building on the existing strengths and cultures of the institutions*
- + *Shifting the focus from institutional competition to shared success for students*
- + *Aligning curriculum portfolios to extend choice for students*
- + *Retaining multiple delivery of entry-level courses*
- + *Consolidating the delivery of higher level programmes*
- + *Co-locating programmes in complementary areas to maximise learning synergies*
- + *Creating joint Centres of Excellence*
- + *Rationalising areas of duplication*
- + *Increased flexibility and responsiveness*
- + *Reduced operating costs*

The initiative is made up of nine priority projects:



+ Combined council

The genesis of the Students First initiative came from the Minister's appointment of four common council members across the WelTec and Whitireia councils and Roger Sowry as Chair of both councils. This sent a strong message that the two councils needed to look at how they could better work together. As a result, the councils jointly commissioned an independent study to identify options for working more closely. The primary objective was to improve benefits for students in the Wellington region. The options considered were:

- project-based collaboration
- shared services
- strategic partnership
- full integration.

Strategic partnership was recommended as the preferred option for the Students First initiative, as it provided the greatest net benefits for students, industry and communities in the greater Wellington region (see www.weltec.ac.nz/students-first/Students%20First%20Project%20Final%20Report%2026-5-11.pdf).

The Minister agreed the recommendations made by each council that a new combined council be established, and the combined council formed a strategic partnership across the two institutions. The combined council developed the nine projects, each with explicit Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). "Our KPIs are the same, 80% relate to the projects, and 20% relate to business as usual. The KPIs for each project have been clear and each year we have a new set of KPIs. The 80% weighting meant we had to work together", Chief Executive Whitireia.

"At each monthly council meeting there are reports presented on each of the Students First projects. The council have been very rigorous on deadlines and performance payments for the chief executives. Each year they have more challenging KPIs based around the nine Students First projects", Combined Council Chair.

"The council gave us nine projects, it is an inspired way to go about it, it gets runs on the board."

Chief Executive WelTec

The council commissioned an external consultant to manage the process initially. The consultant reported directly to the chief executives and delivered reports to the council. The purpose of the consultant was to support collaboration and work with different groups to overcome resistance and get decisions made. The consultant was able to successfully get groups of people together to make decisions.

As a result, nothing was escalated to the council, and decisions were made at the appropriate times. The Students First initiative is in its third year, and the consultant is no longer required.



Combined academic board

The role of the combined academic board was to look across both institutions to develop an academic regional portfolio where students can easily move between the two institutions. An aligned Quality Management System is seen as the backbone of common regional provision. There has been a significant amount of work aligning both systems, with the combined academic board making huge inroads into common credit values, grade keys, sharing the self-assessment process and best practice. A shared Quality Management System will create a way to leverage off each institution's strengths. Appointing an external Chair has been seen as critical to the success and provides an essential link between the council and the academic board.

"We got agreement to a common credit value in principle very early; it was a quick decision by the two chief executives, it's a strong indication of how well the institutions are working together", Combined Academic Board Chair.

A common Quality Management System is expected to be completed in 2014 with the intent of assuring NZQA that the two institutions are aligned.

"The combined academic board is much more strategic, it has to operate at that level. The purpose was to join two organisations together at the strategic level", Academic Director WelTec.



A shared services strategy

The intent of the shared services strategy is for the two institutions to work together to support a consistent, seamless, quality experience wherever the students are. It is about designing systems and processes that meet students' needs in the future. The shared model is still in development but is seen to have significant potential in improving student experiences and achieving major cost savings through improved efficiencies in areas such as IT and procurement.

The shared services project has already saved an estimated \$1 million between the two institutions. They have been able to acquire better business opportunities and make savings through the power of joint purchasing for computers and printer supplies, where they have collectively negotiated cost savings of \$400,000 per year.



"Everything on both institutions is laid out at council meetings, all our reporting is aligned, same format, same look and feel. Open meetings provide a platform for the development of trust and the commitment to do things differently – it's not a cake walk at all, it's a learning experience."

Chief Executive WelTec

"The Students First initiative would not have happened without the governance changes and without shared members across councils. Council members would have not seen the 'sharedness' of the organisation. The Chair's leadership underpins it all – they keep the big picture in mind and are less involved with the nuts and bolts. Common membership and good strategic leadership with the right people involved were critical."

Chief Executive Whitireia



"This model worked well to promote collaboration between two institutions, they spend more time with the other organisation's counterpart than their own staff. No way in the world this would that have happened without a combined council."

Deputy Chief Executive Operations Whitireia

"Academic gains are starting to come through, for example, both institutions offer business degrees, but they are very different products. Now, students can graduate with either qualification. This would not have happened without the combined academic board, we are solving issues together and getting useful outcomes."

Chief Financial Officer WelTec



Impact on learners

The Students First project is creating a positive cultural change across the two institutions, and strong cross-organisation working relationships have developed; good progress is being made across the nine projects.

Staff found the combined council consultation process and Students First implementation helped deal with staffing concerns that this was a merger in 'disguise'. Both chief executives and the Chair fronted numerous staff meetings with the consistent messaging and vision of Students First.

If Whitireia and WelTec had gone down the full merger route, there is a strong sense that each institution would not have seen the positive drive for improvement but, instead, could have taken 'their eye off the ball' – as may happen in mergers.

Currently, the two institutions are working on a project with Victoria University and Massey University to recruit more international students into Wellington. Both chief executives agree this would not have happened without the strategic partnership.

The strategic partnership is innovative for the tertiary sector. The challenge is how best to deal with this new model. To support the partnership, the two institutions talked about the need for flexibility in funding and a different approach for this unique type of partnership where the strength of two is delivering benefits.

Everyone agrees there are challenges, and a willingness to collaborate is key. The model allows both institutions to remain separate, with each trying to improve their own performance. The chief executives describe this as "healthy competition" and a continual sense of "upping the ante".

Next steps

As the strategic partnership is innovative and breaking new ground, there are questions around where it is heading; it is an evolving process.

A significant next step will be the development of centres of excellence to specialise in fields of study such as health, trades and the performing arts. centres of excellence provide an opportunity to build on each institution's strengths to become a leader in the provision of education and skills for that industry.

This means the future is likely to see more joint bids for funding from WelTec and Whitireia.

"Students First is breaking new ground and has forced staff to think in a new way."

Combined Council Chair

www.thechoiceprotocol.ac.nz

This case study is the first in a series that the TEC is publishing as part of a wider project to review the 2010 governance changes in the polytechnic sector: www.tec.govt.nz/Funding/Monitoring-and-reporting/Evaluation-of-changes-to-governance



Tertiary Education Commission
Te Amorangi Mātauranga Matua