
Mapping the territory:

a survey of Bridging Education in New Zealand

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Abstract

Amid calls to 'catch the knowledge wave' and build a 'learning society' in New Zealand, there has been a growing surge of interest in the means to increase the numbers and extend the nature of participation in tertiary education. It is clear that if these goals are to be achieved, there will need to be innovative strategies developed and these will need to be implemented widely. The emerging field of *bridging education* has developed significantly and in a variety of ways over recent years and yet little is known about the field, its student body, the people who teach it and the programmes themselves. This paper provides an overview of this developing field as shown in a national survey of this form of provision in tertiary institutions.

Introduction

‘The principle of equality of opportunity to participate in higher education is now well founded, but the means for achieving this remain flawed’ (Smith & Webster, 1997, p. 110, quoted in Slowey, 2000, p. 101)

Any attempt to graph the proportion of adults participating in post-school education over the previous century, would show a remarkable rise in numbers, especially over the past couple of decades. At the turn of the 20th century the numbers of people who went from school on to university (as the only substantial form of post-school education available then) in most countries was miniscule and was certainly drawn almost exclusively from the ranks of the social élite. And there were even smaller numbers of mature age students within this select group. But by the end of the 20th century there had been not only a proliferation of providers offering learning opportunities for adults, the nature of the student body had also changed dramatically (Bourgeois, 1999).

From being the exception to the rule, participating in tertiary education is now increasingly becoming the norm. Even as recently as 1988, only 16.8% of New Zealand men and 14.5% of women had a degree (OECD, 1992) and there was widespread concern about New Zealand lagging behind comparable countries in this respect. A decade later, New Zealand has the highest entry rate of school leavers into Type A tertiary programmes (degree level) of 22 countries in a recent OECD report (OECD, 2000) is rated second for Type B (practically-oriented) programmes and rates in the top three countries in graduation rates (op.cit., p. 161). For the Type A and B programmes the participation rates are

68% and 36% respectively. Over the 1990s student numbers grew by over 40% (Schuetze and Slowey, 2000)¹. New Zealand also tops the scale for the highest rates of participation in workplace training programmes. Moreover, the nature of the student body has been changing, with New Zealand having one of the highest rates of participation for mature-age students (more than 20% aged 27+ years – op.cit., p. 155).

These figures reflect substantial changes in the education of adults in New Zealand society, but they are still not seen as sufficient for a country in the 21st century. The Tertiary Education Advisory Commission (TEAC) that has recently reviewed tertiary education clearly underlined the need to extend the present boundaries of educational participation beyond what has been achieved to date. Throughout its initial report, TEAC has signalled that we need to strive for “lifelong equitable access... all New Zealand citizens should have equitable and affordable access to tertiary education of an international standard of excellence, to the extent of their ability throughout their adult life” (TEAC, 2000), p. 13). More specifically (op.cit., p. 18) the Commission states that a “fair, inclusive and democratic” society and economy will require a tertiary education system that “provides equitable and affordable access” which highlights the problems of “unequal access and outcomes for many individuals and communities and particularly the poor, Maori, Pacific peoples, those with disabilities and recent immigrants.”

¹ There are various ‘fish-hooks’ in these data. For example, while there has been widespread increases in participation across the board, the proportions of non-traditional learners is still greatest in the lower level, low-prestige institutions such as Private Training Establishments, while the high status institutions are still dominated by people with high levels of schooling (Ministry of Education, 1998).

TEAC states that these problems raise a number of challenges and opportunities, including that of “ensuring equitable access”. These concerns are reiterated in the Commission’s second report *Shaping the system* (<http://www.teac.govt.nz>). Section 2.2.5 sub-titled ‘Inequitable access’ outlines some of the specific groups that the Commission identifies as needing particular attention, “notwithstanding the significant strides that have been made in increasing the overall participation rates since the mid-1980s.”

Such concerns are not peculiar to New Zealand. Internationally, countries as diverse as Slovenia, Finland and Japan have been building their educational policies around the concepts of *lifelong learning*, and increasingly, the *learning society*. While the debate as to what constitutes a learning society is extensive and on-going (see for example, Benseman, 2002; Jarvis, 2001; Ranson, 1998; Field and Schuller, 1999; Tuijnman, 1999), the issue of participation is undoubtedly central to most writers’ contributions in this debate. In brief, the call has been to not only increase the total numbers of participants in tertiary education, but also to widen or extend the patterns of participation to include learners from social groups that have been under-represented historically (Benseman, 1996). The implications of lifelong learning are seen as having extensive implications for all sectors of education. A 1999 OECD report on lifelong learning (quoted in Schuetze and Slowey, 2000, p. 12) said,

In contrast to other far-reaching reforms or new initiatives in education, the lifelong learning mandate poses a particularly complex resource challenge

because it poses so many parameters at once. It implies: quantitative expansion of learning opportunities to widen access to all; qualitative changes in the content of existing educational activities; qualitatively and quantitatively different learning activities and new settings; and changes in the timing of learning activities over a lifetime.

Bringing 'non-traditional learners' into tertiary education is, however, not a straightforward matter, many of whom have had largely negative or limited educational experiences previously. Conventional recruitment strategies often fail to achieve the desired results or merely increase the participation rates without altering the nature of the student body (Hodgson, 2000). Many formal tertiary institutions have operated on the expectation of 'the mountain coming to Mohammed' for many years and find it difficult to become sympathetic, active recruiters in communities with which they have traditionally had little contact or empathy.

Bridging programmes

It is in this context that the concept of *bridging* or *access*² programmes have developed. The term *bridging education* is interpreted in a diversity of ways, but generally refers to programmes aimed at giving learners the requisite academic skills that will enable them to enrol in other tertiary programmes to which they would not otherwise have been able to gain entry. It can be argued of course, that many informal programmes serve a 'bridging' function by helping prepare

² The term 'access' is used as the generic term in Britain, while 'development education' is more common in the US.

learners staircase on to more formal programmes, but the term is used in this article to refer to specific programmes in tertiary institutions with an explicit bridging function. While these bridging programmes are by no means entirely new, what is new is that they are now increasingly identified as a distinct category of tertiary provision and have become much more widespread as this study attests.

In Britain these programmes were first offered in 1978 (Hodgson, 2000) and have since developed a distinct identity, its own research literature and presence in educational policy. Bridging education has been somewhat slower to develop in New Zealand, probably because of a liberal open entry policy whereby students have automatic entry to universities once they reach 20 years (previously 21) unless there are specific entry-level requirements such as medicine³. The bridging programmes that have developed have therefore been more oriented to teaching academic skills and offering introductions to tertiary subjects than ensuring access to academic programmes per se – although there has also been a strong strand of programmes aimed at recruiting specific groups such as women, Maori and Pasifika people. Most of these bridging programmes have developed within individual institutions rather than as a result of national initiatives. As a result, they have developed in a diversity of ways and directions (as typified in the range of titles they go under) that would probably not have happened if they had been driven by Ministry policy for example.

³ Many overseas countries operate strict entry-level requirements to universities, with no equivalent of this age entry option.

The research on the programmes is still very limited and mostly restricted to universities. These have included historical accounts of programmes, student withdrawal, student learning, motivational studies and studies of the impact of participation on students' lives (Davis, 1978; Davis and Cairns, 1990; MacLaren, 1996; Delowe et al., 1995; Heppner, 1995; Rudge, 1999; Anderson, 1998). Although the Ministry of Education keeps some data (based on self-definition by the institutions) on bridging programmes, these tend to be seen as poorly defined, having poor rates of coverage across and within institutions and lacking in detail.

This study therefore has set out to map some broad parameters of this growing field of educational provision and start the process of exploring what bridging education programmes do, how they do it and to whom. It is very much a beginning step in what is hoped will become a more comprehensive and thorough research programme into an area that is rapidly coming of age educationally and moving from the fringes of educational policy into centre stage.

Methodology

The survey covered all universities (8) and polytechnics (23) in New Zealand. Some broad criteria were set for inclusion in the study from the outset:

- they involve some form of programmes aimed at equipping students with academic and personal skills to cope with academic study and/or facilitating entry to other programmes without traditional credentials
- and
- are primarily academic in nature, rather than simply an introductory level in a vocational area
- and
- are of at least 10 week duration, including part-time study.

We initially surveyed all these institutions either by way of their calendars, prospecti or web pages for any course or programme⁴ that looked like a potential bridging programme, irrespective of the title used and could potentially satisfy the above criteria. Initially we cast our sampling net very widely, looking for any programmes that contained a range of key words like *bridging*, *access* and *foundation*. This process produced 45 potential courses. A second cast of the sampling net was done by reading all certificate level course descriptions which identified a further 41 potential courses.

The programmes could be aimed at recruiting students from groups that have been historically under-represented in tertiary education, but not necessarily. Entry requirements could be either 'open' (involving interviews, demonstration of motivation and/or ESOL requisites) or set at below conventional entry levels (e.g. Maori/Pasifika⁵ programmes in Medical School). The sampling did not

⁴ We have used the term 'course' to refer to a specific course (often stand-alone and not part of a wider programme), while 'programme' refers to a range of individual courses.

⁵ The term Pasifika refers to all Pacific Island populations.

include programmes aimed predominantly at Speakers of English as a Second Language or programmes linking into secondary schools. The level of the programmes and the source of funding (e.g. Ministry of Education vs. Skill New Zealand) were seen as irrelevant for purposes of the study.

Once potential programmes/courses were identified, a questionnaire was sent to the co-ordinator of the programme for completion. Further follow-up was carried out by a second mail-out and phone calls.

Results

Twenty-nine questionnaires that met the study's criteria were returned from a total of 86 mailed out. As many courses did not provide enough information to evaluate against the criteria, questionnaires were mailed to these programmes anyway. It is therefore difficult to calculate an accurate return rate for the study as not all the programmes contacted turned out to meet the study's criteria for inclusion and were not returned for this reason. This was confirmed both in anecdotal feedback and correspondence received with non-completed questionnaires. It is reasonable however to conclude that the 29 returns provides a broad overview of bridging programmes in New Zealand. Recently introduced measures by the Ministry of Education to monitor these programmes as a separate statistical category in the annual *Single Data Return* should provide a useful baseline for quantifying the area in the future and will also provide a point of comparison with the returns from this study.

All of the returned questionnaires were used for the analysis, even though some questionnaires did not include data for all the questions. Non-completion was usually because the data was not available (as indicated by written comments and oral feedback) and was therefore not seen as invalidating the overall validity of the questionnaire. The totals for the different questions therefore vary according to the number of respondents who were able to supply the data. The questionnaires were analysed using Excel; some additional qualitative data was recorded and analysed separately.

The programmes

Use of terminology

Each of the programmes contacted was asked what terms they used to identify their programmes/courses. The responses received are shown in Table 1 below (respondents were able to tick more than one option).

Table 1 – Terminology used to identify programmes

<i>Term used</i>	<i>N</i>
Bridging education	15
Foundation education/studies	17
Introductory/entry level	2
2 nd chance education	1
New Start	1
Access education	1
Development education	1
Training Opportunities - Adult	1
Strand	
Gateway	1
Vocational Preparation	1

Nine respondents identified two terms; of these respondents, seven said that they used both 'Bridging' and 'Foundation'. It is not surprising therefore to note that the newly formed national association of educators involved in this work chose the term Bridging for their title.

Historical duration of bridging programmes

There is a common perception that Bridging is a fairly recent development in New Zealand education, but the results from the question on the history of the programmes clearly show that this is a misconception of the field, as the

average number of years that the programmes/courses had been running was 10.3 years. Only one programme had been running less than two years, seven had been running 2-5 years, two for 6-9 years, 12 for 10-13 years and seven had been running for more than 14 years. These figures also suggest a reasonable degree of stability for the programmes, although of course they do not include programmes that no longer exist.

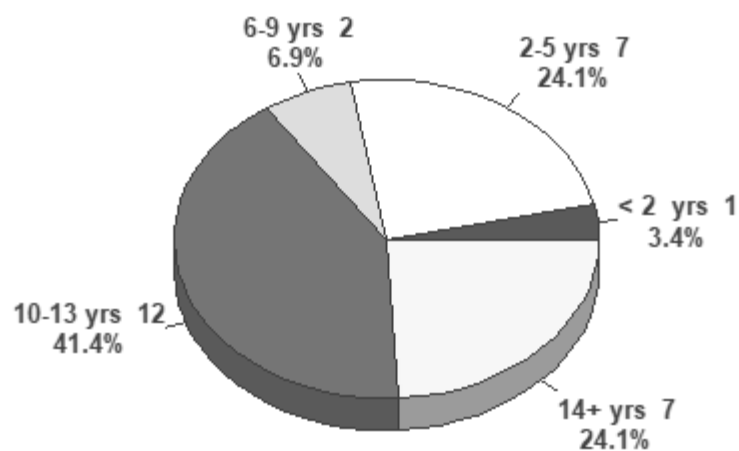


Figure 1 – Duration of the Programmes

Qualifications awarded

The qualification most commonly awarded for achievement is a certificate. A few courses are assessed for unit standards on the national Qualifications Framework (QF)⁶ and one course gives a record of achievement that is specific to that institute only.

⁶ An eight level framework based on unit standards covering most qualifications outside the universities, both vocational and non-vocational.

Table 2 – Type of qualification awarded

<i>Qualification awarded</i>	<i>No. Courses</i>
Certificate	32
QF units (not a complete certificate)	3
Record of achievement	1

Missing data: 15 courses

Subjects taught in Bridging

Of the 26 programmes that responded to the question on what subjects they teach (Table 3), over half (19; 69%) teach communication skills and over half (15; 62%) teach mathematics. Computing is the third most commonly taught subject (12; 46%) followed by the sciences (chemistry, 8; 31%; physics, 7; 27%). Maori is also taught by six (23%) of the programmes.

All mathematics, computing, chemistry, physics and study skills papers were taught to level three or lower of the Qualifications Framework. Two programmes reported teaching Maori and communication skills to level four and one programme taught a health science paper to level five⁷.

⁷ Equivalent to undergraduate degree level.

Table 3 - Levels of subjects taught on Bridging programmes

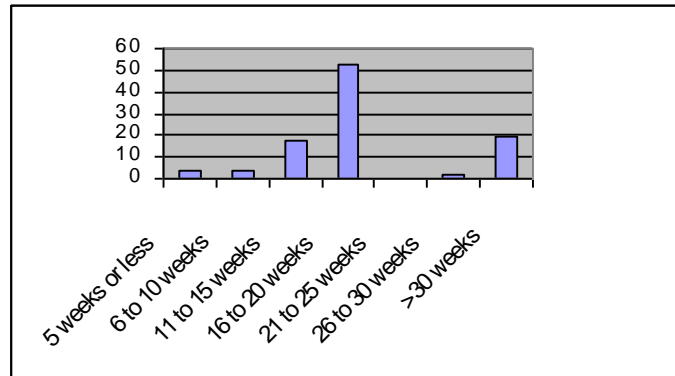
Subject	To Level 1	To Level 2	To Level 3	To Level 4	To Level 5
Communication	3	7	7	2	0
Mathematics	5	4	6	0	0
Computing	2	5	5	0	0
Chemistry	0	3	5	0	0
Physics	0	3	4	0	0
Study skills	0	4	1	1	0
Maori	2	1	1	2	0
Science	0	0	0	0	1

In keeping with the nature of bridging, the majority of subjects taught are on levels one, two or three. Levels two and three are the most common, accounting for 76% of the total.

Course duration

The great majority of courses fall into the 11 -30 weeks plus categories; over half the courses are taught within a 16 to 20 week time frame (Figure 2).

Figure 2 - Course Duration



Course contact hours

Most of the courses (31; 62.7%) have between 16 and 25 classroom contact hours per week (Figure 3). One in five (19.6%) has more than 25 hours contact per week and a slightly smaller number (9; 17.7%) have fewer than 16 hours contact per week.

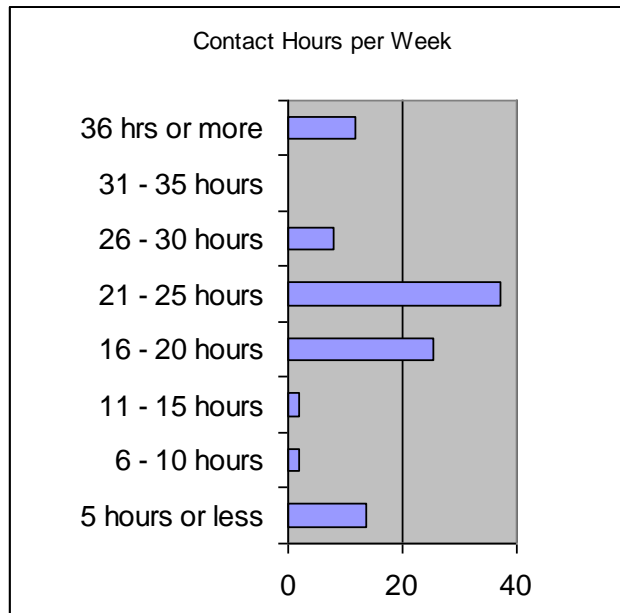


Figure 3 - Course Contact Hours Per Week

Patterns of attendance

Most of the courses offered on bridging programmes are either full-time (21: 41%), or offer the option of both full and part-time (21; 41%). Less than one fifth (9) of the courses are solely part-time. The majority of courses are taught during the day (42; 82%), 12% (6) are offered only in the evening and three respondents (6%) stated that they offered both day and evening options.

Targeting of specific vocational groups

Of the 29 programmes surveyed, 51 different course clusters were identified. Of these, about half (26) are targeted at a specific vocational group. The vocational groups that these courses targeted fell into the following categories:

Table 4 – Vocational groups targeted by programmes

<i>Category</i>	<i>No. of courses targeting this vocational group</i>
Nursing/health	8
Science &/or engineering	6
Business	5
Police/security	2
Teaching	2
Childcare	1
Office administration	1
Fine arts	1

Initial selection of students

Of the courses taught on the programmes surveyed, the majority (20; 70%) had a selection process to determine who would come onto the course.

Students

Numbers

Figure 4 shows both the total number students and Equivalent Full Times (EFTs) for the past three years. With such a short time span, it is difficult to generalise much, but for these three years the numbers of students appear constant around the 1500 mark in total, translating into approximately 620 EFTs⁸.

⁸ New Zealand has a total population of approximately 3.8 million people.

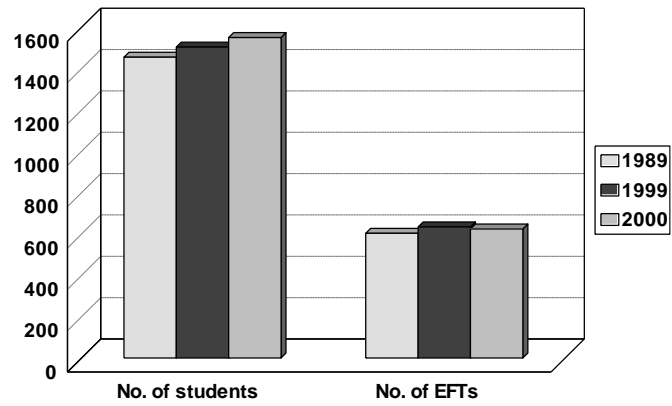


Figure 4 – Total Numbers of Students and EFTs, 1989, 1999 & 2000

Characteristics

The next three graphs show the gender, ethnicity and age groups of the students for the year 2000. Nearly two-thirds (959; 64.4%) of the students are women and one third (531; 35.6%) men (Figure 5).

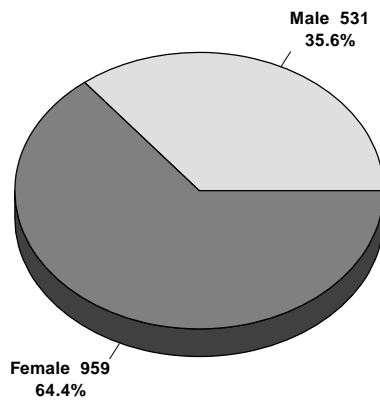


Figure 5 – Gender of Bridging Students

Missing data: 3 programmes

Ethnicity details were provided for all but three of the programmes surveyed. Of these students, nearly half (726; 46.5%) are Pakeha⁹, just under one fifth of the students are Maori (455: 29.2%), one tenth (240: 15.4%) are Pasifika and less than 5% (69; 4.4%) are Asian (Figure 6).

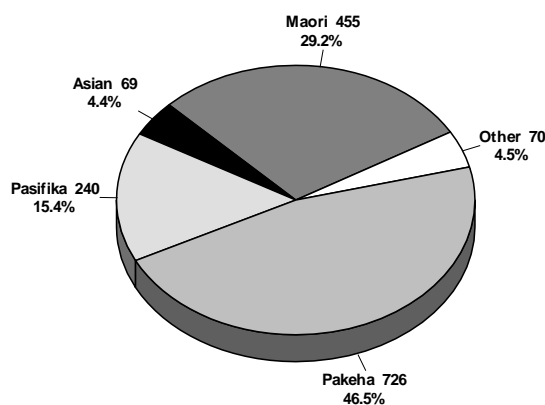


Figure 6 – Ethnicity of Bridging Students

Missing data: 3 programmes

Age characteristics were provided for all but five of the programmes' students (Figure 7). Over one half of the students (672; 53.2%) are under 25 years of age, with the remainder in the 'mature age' category – 44.2% (558) aged 25-50 years and only 32 (2.5%) students over 51 years.

⁹ Refers largely to people of European origin.

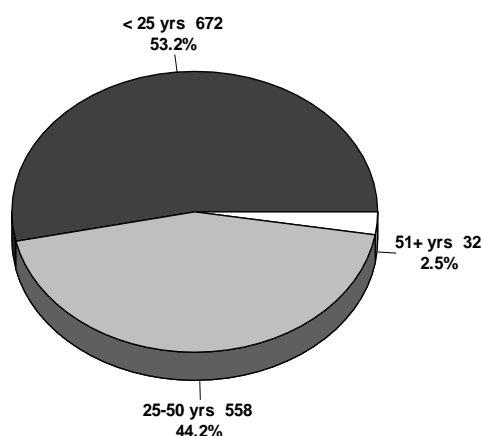


Figure 7 – Age Groups of Bridging Students

Missing data: 5 programmes

Qualifications

Sixteen of the 29 programmes provided data on the educational qualifications of their students. Consistent with being Bridging programmes, most (10) reported that 80-100% of their students did not have any school qualifications, one programme reported 60-79% didn't have school qualifications, two reported 40- 59 % and three others reported 0-39%.

Bridging Education Teaching Staff

Figure 8 shows the total number of staff numbers and the full-time equivalents (FTEs) reported by the respondents. Overall, the programmes have an average of 6.9 teaching staff and 4.0 FTEs. The majority (16) have fewer than six teaching staff members, eight have 6-10 and only four have over 10 teaching staff. There is clearly a high use of part-time teaching staff in the programmes, as reflected in the lower numbers of FTEs in the right hand side of the graph.

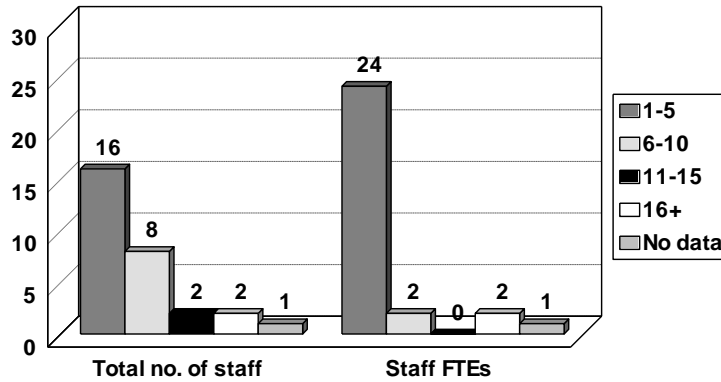


Figure 8 – Total Numbers and Full-time Equivalents (FTEs) of Teaching Staff

Missing data: 1 programme

Over half (116; 59.5%) of the teaching staff are female and 79 (41.5%) are male.

Of the 22 programmes that provided data on their teaching staff’s ethnicity, over two-thirds (122: 67.0%) are Pakeha, 39 (21.4%) are Maori, 10 (5.5%) are Pasifika, five (2.7%) are Asian and six (3.3%) come from other ethnic groups.

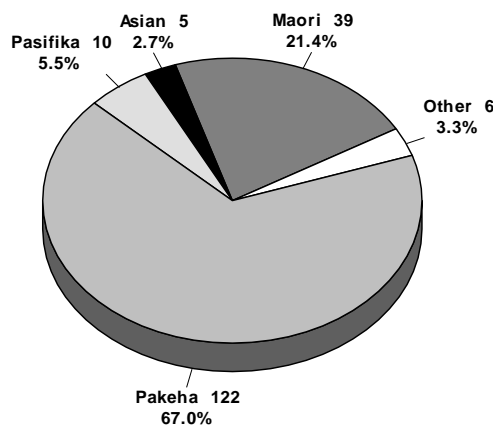


Figure 9 – Ethnicity of Bridging Education Teaching Staff

Missing data: 7 programmes

Of the 29 programmes, all but four provided data on the age groupings of 188 of their staff. Twenty teaching staff members (10.6%) are aged under 25 years, nearly two-thirds (123: 65.4%) are aged 25-50 years and 45 (23.9%) are over 50 years of age (Figure 10).

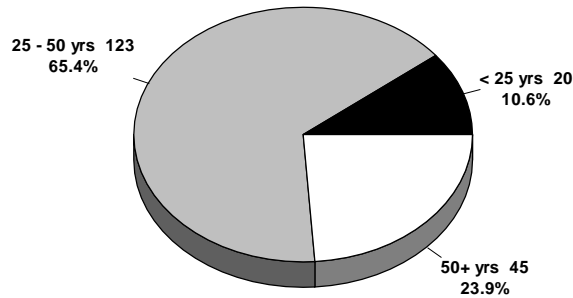


Figure 10 – Age Groups of Bridging Education Teaching Staff

Missing data: 4 programmes

Professional qualifications and experience of teaching staff

Eighteen programmes responded about the professional qualifications of their teaching staff. A total of 55 staff members have either primary or secondary teacher qualifications and a similar number (59) had some form of adult education qualification (some staff may have both). Nearly half (73) of the teaching staff in the programmes have been involved in the field for more than four years, which indicates a reasonably stable involvement for a large proportion of the teaching staff involved.

Bridging Education Policy

Twenty-one of the programmes responded to the question about Bridging Education policy in their departments and/or institutions. Four had a policy only

at the institutional level and ten had policies for both their department and their institution. Eight indicated that they had no policy at any level of their institution; the remainder did not indicate what form of policy they had.

Models of Bridging Education

The respondents were asked to indicate which of three general models of Bridging Education their programme matched most closely. The models and number of replies were as follows:

- A – programmes in a department specifically designed to bring students' academic skills up to a level where they can gain entry into a higher level of programme in other academic departments (14 responses)
- B – programmes within a conventional academic department aimed at bringing students' academic skills/qualifications up to a level where they can gain entry into other programmes within that department (16 responses)
- C – programmes that allow students with lower levels of qualifications entry into programmes and then provide on-going support for them while they are in that programme (3 responses)
- None of these models - (1 response)

Data collected

Nineteen of the 29 programmes replied that they kept additional data on the students who attended their programmes. Several of those who indicated that they did not collect data said that they found it difficult to track the students

and/or too demanding of their time. The responses for the different types of data were as follows:

Table 5- Types of data collected

<i>Data collected</i>	<i>N</i>
Enrolments in their own institution	17
Work outcomes	10
Enrolments in other institutions	9
Pass rates	13
Withdrawals	13
Skill New Zealand reporting	3

Funding for Programmes

Respondents were asked to indicate which of the following sources they accessed to fund their programmes. Nineteen programmes supplied the following data (some programmes indicated more than one source of funding).

Table 6- Sources of programme funding

<i>Funding source</i>	<i>N</i>
Ministry of Education	9
Training Opportunities Programme	5
International student fees	6
Entrepreneurial activities	3
Charities	3
Private	1
Other Government departments	1
Rugby clubs	1

Issues in Bridging

Asked to identify their most pressing issues for the programmes, the respondents from all but four of the programmes listed a wide range of topics (Table 7).

Table 7 - Current issues in Bridging Education

<i>Issue</i>	<i>N</i>
Funding	8
Student pastoral care	4
Staff retention/recruitment	4
Quality of teaching	4
Time pressure/increased workloads for staff	3
Lack of institutional recognition	3
Student debt	2
Lack of recognition by Ministry of Ed.	2
Disability education	1
Co-ordination with other courses	1
Professional development	1
Developing distance programmes	1
Work experience/placements	1
Developing pathways	1
Competition from other departments	1

Research

Only five respondents indicated that they had either initiated or been involved in some form of research about their programmes. Information about these research studies was supplied by three of these respondents.

Definitions of Bridging Education

Nine respondents said that they had a definition of Bridging Education for their purposes. A selection of these included:

- Preparing students for tertiary study
- Addressing equal educational opportunities by providing learning and generic skills to provide success in students' choice of vocational training
- To give educational opportunity at an introductory level with pastoral support for those wanting to gain tertiary qualifications
- To build confidence by gaining basic skills and familiarity leading to independence to pursue education or employment
- A second chance or new start in areas necessary for them to enter chosen vocations or courses
- A catch-up programme to fill in the gaps.

Conclusion

A major review of the New Zealand tertiary education system in 2001 (TEAC, 2001) stressed the need to not only increase the numbers of adults participating in post-school education, but also to extend this provision to groups under-represented at present. The four TEAC reports included strong recommendations for the support of bridging education as a key strategy to achieve these goals. Bridging's time, it would seem, may well have come in New Zealand.

Bridging programmes already exist (albeit to varying degrees and in a myriad of forms) in most universities and polytechnics as this study has shown; the first

national conference on Bridging Education and the forming of a national organisation of Bridging Educators both occurred in 2001. Although bridging education has had a relatively low profile area in New Zealand education to date, this situation looks set to change significantly when the new Tertiary Education Commission comes into existence in mid-2002.

This survey has shown that bridging is a well-established activity in many tertiary institutions, with a majority of the programmes in existence for over ten years and the teaching staff well established in their careers. There is considerable variation in the programmes themselves in terms of the terminology used, the programme content, their length and even the clientele they serve. Despite the diversity of approach, bridging education is making a distinctive contribution, especially in terms of social equity ideals by bringing in over 1500 students who may well not have participated in tertiary education otherwise. They include a disproportionately high number of groups that have been under-represented in New Zealand tertiary education such as Maori and Pasifika people (these two groups making up nearly half of the total of all bridging students). Long-standing calls to extend the nature (and not simply increase) of participation in New Zealand post-school education have only ever achieved limited success in the past. The results of this survey show that bridging programmes can make a significant contribution to this goal both in attracting non-traditional students into tertiary education and by providing them with academic skills that will increase the likelihood of their succeeding in subsequent programmes.

There is also considerable variation across institutions with regard to the size of their bridging programmes. Two of the programmes account for over half of the total number of bridging students in the country and at the other end of the spectrum, some institutions (some of which are quite large) have no bridging programmes at all. While their specific locations may explain this imbalance to some degree, it still points to the potential for most other institutions to increase their numbers in this area. Both from an 'enrolment economy' perspective and a concern for social equity (given that bridging is an effective means of recruiting non-traditional learner groups) most institutions would appear to have considerable room for future development in bridging education.

This survey has provided an overview of bridging education provision in New Zealand tertiary education. There is an urgent need to collect such information on a systematic basis in order to monitor this type of activity, something that is now being taken up by the Ministry of Education nationally. More importantly, there is a need to start additional research that starts to peel back the layers of issues that arise in bridging education. The understanding that such research can provide is an essential element in the overall quest for what the OECD (1996) calls, "lifelong learning for all".

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