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**Tertiary education policy: a case study of student  
interpretations and personal effects for school leavers**

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**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Arts in Education**

**Education Department  
Massey University**

**Susan D. Mortlock  
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## **Abstract**

Tertiary education policy is produced in a political context with the purpose of bringing about specific planned effects. The manner in which individuals actively process policy messages within their own particular context of experience results in policy effects at times differing from projected effects for various individuals.

The thesis is based on a case study research project which examines the decision making processes of ten senior secondary school students from a single secondary school in their final year of schooling. The research aims to identify the messages that students receive from Government tertiary policy and to evaluate the extent to which these messages are incorporated into individual decision making. Additional factors which influence the post school destination eventually chosen by students are also discussed.

The personal effects of tertiary education policy differ from its ostensibly stated effects for most students. It is suggested that principles of 'fairness' and 'greater personal choice' are not realised for the majority of students. Instead, the position, disposition and communication effects of each student are shown to influence their post school destination. While all students respond to aspects of policy in the manner that it is envisaged that they would, the agency of individuals in making rational decisions within the structures of their own circumstances means that policy effects differ for each student.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

Tertiary education policy in New Zealand has undergone significant change within the last six years. During that time, universal provision of tertiary education has been replaced by a regime of higher student fees, targeted student allowances and a student loan scheme. In common with other social services, the tertiary education sector has been restructured in a manner which reflects the Government's aim to provide services which, it is purported, are fair, encourage self-reliance and efficiency and promote greater personal choice (Bolger, 1990).

Rising national unemployment, particularly for youth, and a burgeoning overseas debt preceded restructuring of the state sector and changes in tertiary education. It will be suggested that recent tertiary education policy has been formulated in response to a decline in capital accumulation in both the state and private sectors and seeks to enhance the accumulation of profit by preparing, through post compulsory education, a workforce which is 'adaptable, creative and innovative' (Haines and Callister, 1989).

Policy, which is formulated with particular purported desirable outcomes, such as a more educated workforce, incorporates values and philosophy which are part of the policy context. An understanding of the policy context then assists an examination of policy effects, which are manifest in the actions of individuals involved with policy. The effects of policy do not have a direct, linear relationship to projected outcomes, as the messages conveyed by policy are incorporated into the experience of individuals, processed variably by them in the context of their own knowledge, and then acted upon. Policy effects, then, may differ from projected outcomes.



This research examines the manner in which ten 7th form students made decisions about their post school destinations. A case study approach is utilised to place the final post school decision for each student in a personal context. As these students prepare to leave school and enter tertiary education, the effects of tertiary education policy, along with the social and material effects upon each student are discussed to examine the extent to which these factors influence their final decisions.

The research is particularly concerned with ascertaining what messages are conveyed to students through tertiary education policy, the extent to which these messages are incorporated into their decision making and what additional factors may have influenced their decision making. It is shown that the manner in which students receive and process policy messages and then decide on their post school destination varies for each student, depending on the social and material effects upon the individual. Therefore, the effects of policy, are for some students, at variance with its stated ostensibly desirable outcomes.

The literature review describes the historical antecedents which have led to the formulation of recent tertiary education policy. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of the state in capital accumulation and the relationship which the state has with its citizens to achieve this goal. The work of the social theorist, Claus Offe, is utilised to provide a framework for this section.

Capital accumulation is dependent upon the efficient use of labour and so the following chapter examines the economic and social context of work. Here, work is defined as paid employment. It is argued that work is the cultural norm in New Zealand society, and as such, is contestable as it is seen to have dual goals: the goal of social benefit on the one hand, and the goal of assisting in the process of expanding the economy and increasing

productivity on the other hand.

Recent tertiary education policy has defined clear links between education and work (Goff, 1987). Within official discourse, education is seen to be the key to a more prosperous economic future (Smith, 1991). This link is critically examined in the present study and it is argued that a direct cause and effect between education and economic growth, while suggested, cannot be proven. Tertiary education does offer specific job training to a number of students, but it is argued that for many more, their continued existence in the education system is more to do with aspects of social control and maintenance of a reserve labour force.

Lastly, the literature review discusses the manner in which individuals make decisions about their educational futures. The framework of this discussion draws on views about family reproduction strategies, youth sub-cultural production and rational choice theory. However, it is rational choice theory and in particular, the theories of Raymond Boudon which provide the structure for this research. Boudon's suggestion that it is the situation effects (knowledge gained through the individual's position in the social order and the socialisation process of the individual) and the communication effects (the degree of authority that is ascribed to knowledge by the socially situated individual) which form the frame of reference in which individual decisions are made, which has particular relevance for this research.

Changes to tertiary education policy over recent years occurred in a context of educational reform and wider national policy reform and restructuring. The sixth chapter of this thesis is concerned with policy issues and discusses the process and philosophy of tertiary education policy changes in the context of the political, social and economic issues raised in the literature review. Major changes in the areas of the awarding of qualifications, the provision of training and the funding of tertiary education are considered briefly, while the

policies directly affecting the students in this research (study right, student allowance scheme, student loan scheme) are outlined more fully.

Policy is formulated to encourage particular outcomes, although these are not always explicit in statements of philosophy. Nevertheless, by studying the nature and effects of policy on the lives of individuals, it is possible to recognise and describe the purpose of the policy. The seventh chapter in the thesis describes the design of the research project, which aimed to show, through interviews with ten seventh form students, the manner in which they absorbed policy messages and acted upon them. This chapter outlines the context in which student responses were collected and contains a description of, and rationale for, the qualitative method which was utilised.

Case histories of each student are included in the appendices, as are examples of consent forms, information sheets, and accounts of interviews with students, school staff and Ministry of Education officials.

Several consistent themes emerged in the course of the research and they are discussed in chapters eight and nine of the thesis, using excerpts from the field notes to illustrate their application to the experiences of the students. Within this section, the specific objectives of current tertiary policy are outlined and student responses in the areas of the interpretation of policy, attitudes to education as a private good and factors influencing student choice are discussed. The implications of the study right, student loan and student allowance policies are compared with the eventual outcomes for individuals within the group of students involved in this research.

Within the discussion chapters, it is argued that constraints, in the form of a structured and shrinking labour market, and the individual resources that students have access to, intersect with the choices that students make. Therefore, choices are made in a context of knowledge of likely outcomes.

This knowledge is derived from the situational and communication effects which then form a frame of reference for each student. It is demonstrated that factors of gender, ethnicity and social class contribute to these effects.

The position, disposition and communication effects of each student, are shown to influence the post school destination. Thus, those students with greater access to economic and social resources have less difficulty in choosing their future course of action than those whose socialisation and financial circumstances restrict the choices that they make. The definition of choice that is utilised in this thesis, therefore, is wider than that of 'absence of coercion' (Codd, 1991).

It is argued that policy principles of 'fairness' and 'greater personal choice' were not realised for the majority of students participating in this research. As eventual destinations are compared with preferred destinations, the factors which influenced the changes in decision making are outlined.

Therefore, the personal effects of tertiary education policy differed from its ostensibly stated outcomes. Contradictory outcomes are not surprising, as an individualistic, market approach to education which assumes that all enter the market with equal ability to choose, does not account for the agency of individuals in planning their future trajectory in a rational manner; a manner which makes the most sense within the boundaries of their own experience.