

# Is education ruining New Zealand's economy?

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STUDENT DEBT: Is the big price tag of a degree really worth it?

## Stuff Nation 📰

I have been wondering about university vs the school of life after reading a lot of stories about the number of young New Zealanders leaving for better pay and opportunities overseas and its implications for not only the country, but regions like my own, Hawke's Bay, where our economy has been suffering.

First I will state for the record that I have never been to university. I don't have a degree, or a crippling student loan. My highest qualification is a Diploma in Marketing (one year's full time study) from EIT, from which I have not gained a single 'marketable' job in the 15 years since I achieved it. Whether this makes my opinions more or less valid (or biased) I don't know, but here goes.

When I finished high school in 1995, the only thing I wanted to do was become a radio announcer, and I was for all of six months, but I was in the minority. Virtually every other member of my seventh form year went off to university, it was just what you did (and what you still do?), primary, intermediate, high school, university, work. But I didn't know what I would do at university. The one thing I did know was that I didn't want to spend three years studying something I wasn't committed to and be burdened with a \$30,000+ debt, to find at the end of those three years I still didn't know what I wanted to do, or the job I had worked towards wasn't there.

I read dozens of news items last year that showed little has changed in the last 18 years. Hundreds of tertiary graduates leave New Zealand each year because the jobs they trained for just aren't there. One focus was on teaching, there were far more students studying the

'glamour subjects' of Physical Education or English (who had to go overseas to find work) and too few studying to teach Maths and Physics. I wondered how much influence the universities, polytechnics and institutes of technology could have on this, or how responsible they would be in identifying workforce needs and setting subjects and class sizes accordingly. But I doubt they would be too willing to turn down the \$30,000+ cash injection per student, either.

Almost as fiscally bad as not being able to find the job you trained for, would be going to university with no clear idea of what you want and gaining a generic BA, BSc or the like. Sure, a degree used to be the only way in to a lot of jobs, it often didn't matter what in, as long as it was a degree, but how practical or helpful to the job were these degrees and the time and money spent on them? Many have gotten these basic degrees, only to end up in a minimum wage job to make ends meet with the student debt hanging over them.

Debt is a worry to me. I don't like owing anyone anything, from money to favours; I like to pay people back as soon as possible. So I'm inclined to draw a link between the readiness with which our young people are taught, once their standard 12 years of institutional learning is over, to continue on and attain higher learning supported by student loans which lead to a reliance on credit, overdrafts and other forms of debt later in life, which has become endemic in our economy and puts us in the country (and world's) current economic state.

And where does the on-going qualification versus experience debate currently stand? When I was job hunting many years ago, qualifications far outweighed experience. More recently, practical experience has become far more attractive in potential employees, but you can't get experience without a job, and all too often you can't get that job without a qualification. Cue picture of a snake eating its own tail, or a good old circular reference error.

Mark Twain once said "I never let my education get in the way of my learning" which reminds me that some of the world's richest and most successful business men (Bill Gates and Sir Richard Branson to name two) dropped out of tertiary study and earned their millions through practical experience.

What do you think?

## Comments

[Buzzlightyear198](#) 12 days ago



The 'kiwi cricket' generation has ruined our ability to conduct an unbiased assessment of ourselves. Kiwi Cricket is a game that I learned when I moved back to NZ from Australia in 1992. I could not understand this game, no outs, everyone gets the same amount of bowls and no one keeps score. As an eight year old who had cut his teeth on the barren dusty cricket pitches of Melbourne and Sydney, the idea of not keeping score and everybody wins simply outraged me. Needless to say that day my passion for cricket died.

This 'kiwi cricket' and NCEA generation has been raised to think that life is fair. That someone will always help them out and no one will keep score. Nice thought isn't it.


Unfortunately, one must have the ability to know when they can't do something. So they

can either improve it, or move onto something more suited to their talents. I am 28 now, I am relatively successful, I have a degree and I enjoy my life. I was never handed something for nothing, and I was never under an illusion as to what my strengths and weaknesses were. My most successful friends are those who chose career paths based on their strengths and weakness. My least successful friends on the other hand chose either romantic or ill suited careers, because they did not accurately assess how they compared with other people in those fields. Some people are smart, some people are pretty, others are fast and strong. Some people are good with children, others are good with the sick. Some people are good at building things, others at tearing them down. You get the point.

The best piece of advice I have ever been given is maximise and use your strengths while you minimise and guard your weaknesses. Unfortunately, we now have a whole generation kiwi cricketers.

Life is not fair, and everyone is keeping score.


[Spr.](#) 12 days ago



Well I'm just going to sit here and get my IT degree so I can get that serious work I've been offered. It's all about what degree you get, the content. There needs to be more education in where the employment is going to be in a couple of years once you get your degree. I know when I started this degree that the possible work out there would be continuing to get bigger.


The lifestyle certainly keeps you thin, I must admit that!

[kittehkat](#) 12 days ago




im verging on 30 and i still have not been able to break into my trained (preferred) field of work. i have a diploma in visual arts design and am having to try and work for myself while working in a crummy retail job part time. back when i left high school to get a higher qualification, i was told that i should go for my dreams and make something of myself. now i wish i had just done better in other subjects like maths and english so i wouldn't end up where i am now (maybe).....working a stressful and extremely demeaning job that has caused me many many breakdowns all for minimum wage. it has so not been worth it :(

[Onymateau](#) 12 days ago



I wouldn't have got as far without my bachelor's degrees; I only have to look at those I work with who don't have them. The investment has definitely paid off.

[Yola](#) 12 days ago




It is really a question of motivation not qualification.  
People always overlook that a generic degree gives you options. That is the most important thing.  
After graduating people with a BA may be on the same salary as those without. And may remain this way for the rest of their career.  
However, they have the option to return to university and carry out post graduate studies. Very few people without an undergraduate degree are accepted into MBAs, or


other such post grad courses. Any university degree will open that door and a significant increase in salary upon completion.

But it does require people to be motivated enough to sacrifice their living standards etc for a year or so.


[ChemGirl](#) 12 days ago

 I'm not going to comment on the validity of a degree in other fields, but I definitely think that getting degrees in the sciences are important for a number of reasons. Those who graduate with bachelors get an in-depth knowledge of the basics (and hopefully more) of their field that employers don't have to waste 3-4 years teaching them, not to mention gaining all the valuable knowledge seeking, time management etc skills that uni gives you. Those who go higher are involved in fundamental research which not only fuels the economy, but provides them with practical skills they can apply elsewhere. Sure Bill Gates dropped out to make his software, but the chips that run it were designed in a lab somewhere, probably by an army of postgrads!

[GlenW](#) 12 days ago

 No the chips that run it were probably made in a little back alley by some chinesse workers that didnt go to uni and yet are happy to just have a job.....

[ChemGirl](#) 11 days ago

 I didn't say made, I said designed - there's a big difference. There's a huge amount of research that goes into each new innovation in the materials that are used in technology, a lot of which is done in universities. Once something is ready to be manufactured, it's a different story, which is what you're talking about.

[Lloyd Shaw](#) 12 days ago

(a) Never take advice from an academic. Most are "marketers", out to market how important they are. When in fact most would be fired after a day in the real world.

(b) If you are trying to get a job in a large company. Education counts, as the HR departments are run by academic types ( Who actually think using terms like "work life balance" is a qualification in itself ).

(c) If you want to work for a smaller company. The founder of the company will only gloss over your education and look for potential.

Note: Our country is run by people who have neither worked for themselves, created jobs from scratch etc... or in Helens case. Never actually had a job outside politics. Now we have a banker in charge. Where everything is "on paper".

No wonder even the words "work" or "vocation" is seldom motioned in education. Now people just have a job.

[courts](#) 12 days ago



In my opinion higher education is an investment, of money and of time too. Neither should be invested in something you do not enjoy, believe in or stand for. You should only go into higher education if it is a degree in something you actually want to do and have an interest in, and you should also assess the value of that degree too. For instance I myself am doing a degree in Fine Arts, on the whole a somewhat useless degree, however I am doing it because I want to, and always have wanted to, be an art teacher and therefore I had factored in that there would also be an extra year of study at the end to get my post grad and achieve my goal. I see a lot of students in my class who had very romantic views of the degree but now they are nearly finished and have realised there are not many job opportunities gained from a Fine Arts degree and are freaking out. Some are looking to teaching as a way of making their degree useful which yes is what I also am doing, but it was something they didn't have their hearts on or had planned for, therefore now they have to spend more money and time to make their 4 years in Fine Arts worth while.

I also believe that job experience is almost as important though, and therefore I have (LUCKILY) gained part time employment within the education sector so I am gaining on the job knowledge and not just theoretical academic knowledge so I will come out (hopefully) as a well rounded employable person... we will see though

[lora13](#) 12 days ago



I'm in my mid 20's in Auckland and have worked full time since leaving school at 17. Started as a office assistant and have worked my way up to an above average earner however when I was 21 it became very clear that sheer motivation and determination will only get so far. I knew that eventually I would hit that dam ceiling so decided to go to Uni to get my 'Generic' BA.

It is already evident that over the past few years i would not have gotten as far as I am now without my learning's from study and I find that I apply everything I learn to something I've done at work. Study has without a doubt made me significantly better in my field and helped me to decide exactly where i want to be career within the next 10 years while some of my other friends who only worked from leaving school are in low/average jobs with no potential for growth.

I think its important to have a balance between work experience and study and that it is a very individual decision but unless you are the Branson's of this world it is highly unlikely you will get as far as you want without that background commitment shown during a period of study

[missybear](#) 12 days ago



I have missed out on lots of jobs and promotions over the years because I went to polytech instead of uni. If I could go back in time I would have chosen a student loan over paying my own way though part-time jobs as I have always had a boring low paid admin job.

Because I don't earn very much I really struggle to pay my share of our mortgage. My friends who went to uni all earn twice what I do. It's catch 22 because I can't afford to leave my job to study if I study part time it will take far too long : (