

# Shovel-ready social infrastructure

**M**y tendency is to focus on that middle of road, rail, port, power, housing and healthcare infrastructure

projects Auckland so badly needs and apparently shovel-ready by Government definitions – but not by mine.

It seems to take government agencies a lifetime to get to shovel-ready and then we adopt the confetti sprinkling approach to implementation with many firms and many projects all running in parallel, delivering maximum havoc at minimum pace. We could think differently, combine workforces, have fewer projects on the go at once but complete them quicker and more efficiently and then move on to the next.

I will say no more, but if business trod at that cadenced pace, they would be obsolete, overtaken by a world changing and reinventing at a pace that delivers world firsts.

Shovel-ready must extend to the economic, educational and social infrastructure needed to futureproof Auckland and New Zealand.

Covid's impact has unshackled us and generated a reason to urgently transform our economy to become a globally recognised high value-added, productive, innovative, research driven, tech hub, attracting world class skills and deep pocketed multinationals seeking the best. The question is, will we respond.

To reap the rewards of a high performing knowledge economy, New Zealand needs a critical mass of labour, capital and expertise in the IT, medical, engineering, agritech and manufacturing sectors to build global competitiveness and critical mass.

Implicit is the need for our education system and its curriculum to get with the programme and become agile, and fast at delivering learning and competencies that are applicable and relevant for our social and economic future.

But believe me it will take more than lip service and tweaking the edges of established courses, no matter how well they have served as money machines attracting overseas students for our education sector.

Our first challenge is how quickly can the universities see value in moving away from the belief that “we

desperately need foreign students so we can make money” to “New Zealand desperately needs graduates who can engage in medicine, technology automation, coding, robotics, gene treatments and create new ideas and process through research to meet our future business needs”.

Now is the time for Government to invest in our universities as a priority shovel-ready infrastructure project. Be strategic and stop competition between campuses and cultivate specialisation and global excellence

to attract top talent and top dollar from multi-nationals seeking research partnerships. Just look at the symbiosis between Microsoft and Stanford University.

From early childhood through to high school, the teaching and learning outcomes also need overhauling so we have students with the necessary skills, especially in engineering, programming and science to think, create and thrive in the digital era.

Universities have a pivotal role in steering our future towards becoming an innovation-led economy that can stretch, flex and grow as opportunities emerge.

Perhaps our universities need to learn from the private sector what speed and agility mean in action and

get over their hierarchical and cumbersome operating models.

As a country we have shown we are resilient and adaptable. We need to become more agile and braver at thinking big, thinking global not regional, not parochial, not all about me and thinking how we attract the right multi-national investment and expertise that will support national growth, improve process, productivity, speed and scale.

It will mean working together doing what is best for the country rather than together apart, and pursuing centres of excellence and specialisation – the only clusters we do not want to eliminate!

I am motivated by the work by Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures,

a think tank and research centre at the University of Auckland, led by Professor Sir Peter Gluckman, which is identifying the building blocks towards a sustainable economic future.

These big thinkers are advocating educational, industry and urban

agglomerations or a hubs and spokes concept. Auckland, as our largest and most internationally positioned city, and only city of any scale, should be the prime knowledge hub with other institutions contributing knowledge and research, complemented by industry-specific clusters located around the country. Essential elements are ensuring affordable housing, education, healthcare, social amenities and welfare and environmental care so quality of life and opportunity, not just incomes, improve.

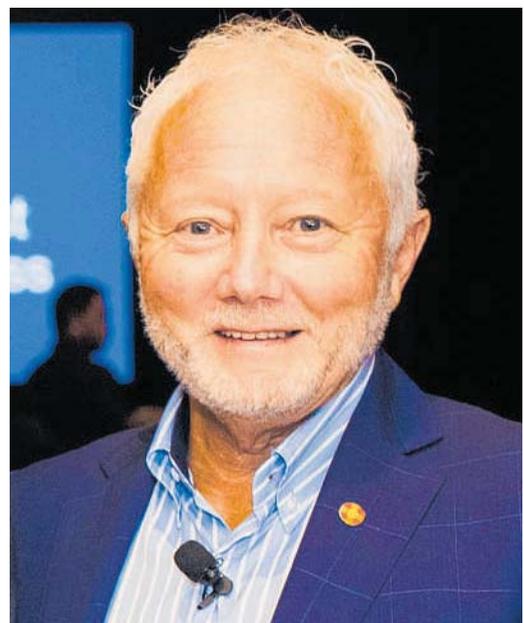
So, what has to change to make Auckland the coding capital of the world or Tauranga robotic fruit picking international centre of excellence?

New Zealand has a moment in time to capitalise on our current reputation for managing the virus, leadership, stability, cohesiveness, corruption-free status and social and environmental care.

We are attractive to investors and partners and have the capacity to build a diversified, resilient, sustainable digitally attuned economy but we need to get the basics right – our infrastructure: our roadways to learning, our bridges to knowledge, our natural powerhouse – our people and their capacity to innovate, dream and deliver a sustainable future.

● *Michael Barnett is CEO of the Auckland Business Chamber.*

Now is the time for Government to invest in our universities as a priority infrastructure project, writes **Michael Barnett**



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