



JIM FLYNN

Jim is Emeritus Professor of Political Studies at the University of Otago. He is famous for his work on intelligence and in particular the identification of a trend toward increasing IQ scores, known as the Flynn Effect. In 2013 he was invited to give a TED talk in Long Island, California. With his expertise in social science, Jim provides a unique perspective on talent.

1. In the context of your professional background, what does 'talent' mean to you?

I'm someone who works in philosophy and psychology. When I think of producing more talented students, I think in terms of students that read widely, students who have learnt to do critical thinking. And students that have at their fingertips the sort of cognitive skills to make use of the information from the modern world. These people should be better performers on almost anything except where you require highly specialised skills.

2. Are you aware of any talent gaps that exist or might arise within the next ten years?

Well, I think the main problem with the secondary schools is that we have an ageing and increasingly demoralised workforce. Half the people leave teaching within seven years to go into the workforce. But there is nothing worse than a teacher who is 20 years from retirement, who has lost interest, and is hanging on for the pension.

There are a lot of idealistic young people who would really like to give teaching a go, but are not really sure if they're willing to sign up. Many of them would sign back on if they knew that at the end of seven years, they would have an escape hatch or at least some relief from teaching. That is, every full-time

you would get a more willing workforce that is better trained and don't feel trapped.

3. How do successful organisations attract, keep and grow talent?

I think the organisations that do the best try to emphasise the person and their liveliness of mind. I am told by the philosophers that businessmen often prefer graduates because they find they are interviewing lively people with critical minds. Many people over-specialise at university. The best thing universities could do would be to have all students to take courses in which they would learn how to read widely, that is learn to read the literature of the world, to learn how nations work in the present situation.

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teacher would be given a full year sabbatical and be paid their salary so they could take advantage of a number of options. They might choose to retrain during that year off to get a head start in another profession, take courses to upgrade their credentials, or relax and broaden their minds. In the long term,

I published a book recently. It says that you're bombarded with an enormous amount of information from the external world and the way to keep on top of that is to develop certain skills: elementary market analysis, what a good social science survey looks like so you won't be fooled by the data, how to detect flaws in logical or moral argument. It

even has a section on how to look at international politics. I have strong feelings about universities broadening their base in terms of turning out critical and well-informed minds. Employers, even with present university structures, can go for that.

4. Think about talent hubs around the world, what is cool and why?

Well the only experience I have of that, I was invited to give a talk at TED this year. A lot of the talks were just getting the people to see that young people had made innovations in using the internet for dozens of different purposes and I thought it was impressive. That's the only experience I have in that sort of environment. They also try to match these people who have made seminal departures for the internet with philanthropists. There were lots of newspaper writers to publish what was going on and, in a way, it's a very elite group. But that does attract a very monied group who can afford to back these things.

I'm not too sure whether we have an analogy to Silicon Valley. That is, if there is any area in the country that can create that type of atmosphere, where you're in an area where everyone's working in some innovative area of technology. Maybe a nascent group exists in Wellington. At present, about the only place I see this going on is at universities.

5. Can you assess New Zealand's performance in attracting talent on a global scale?

With keeping people, obviously salaries help. It's crazy that some people go overseas to earn the money to pay off their student loan because they can get better salaries there. I don't mind that they're getting experience over

there, but I don't like it to be financially driven. Of course some of them may be tempted to stay.

But giving people more satisfaction in their work is more important than money. When I talk to people in the hospitals, they are less obsessed that they make lower salaries than in Australia. It is that they can't do the work they want to do in hospitals that are cutting corners. They feel they are inadequately financed and there are shortages in crucial areas. You're not going to get highly paid professionals working in a certain area when they are not getting a certain sense of satisfaction.

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6. What does New Zealand need to do in order to attract, keep and grow talent?

The main difference between the general atmosphere here from when I arrived has been the erosion of the welfare state, and the sense that you're dependent on your own income for your security. I came here as a highly trained professional for about three-eighths of my US salary and the reason was, I was coming to a country where I had a sense of security and bonding with my fellow citizens. We had a social contract, and that was you never had to worry about yourself or your children getting ill, having a bad education or

facing poverty in retirement. And that meant that really the money you were paid was really mortgage money and disposable income.

The quicker that sense of security goes down, the more the fabric unravels. That is, the more you feel dependent on your own private savings for these necessities, the more loath you are to pay taxes. Eventually you have people who have no sense that they can depend on their fellow citizens for these necessities. And I think that also leads to a sense of division and lack of harmony, where there is no collective feeling that everyone in society deserves a decent life without bad luck. You're more focused on yourself as a money spender, rather than a person who lives in a congenial society with mutual respect.

7. Any final thoughts for young people?

I would ask all of them to broaden their education, to read widely, to get the basic tools to analyse the world's data rather than be at the mercy of it. I certainly wouldn't become obsessed with getting the narrow technical specialisation without this wider training. Expertise can be a tyranny.

Imagine you're 30 years old. Looking back on 10 years, what would give you the greatest satisfaction? If you think at the end of that time, what would make you the most fulfilled person is to teach at a low-decile school – go for it. Look into your soul and see what, 20 years from now, will make you feel that you spent your life meaningfully.

Interviewed by Darren Zhang at the University of Otago in Dunedin, on 4 June 2013. Photograph provided by *The New Zealand Herald*.