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Progress or Paradox?

NZQA: The Genesis of a Radical Reconstruction of Qualifications Policy in New Zealand

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the origins of, and influences on, the policy developments that preceded the establishment of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). It is a case study of qualifications policy and draws heavily on material gathered from interviews with key-players and an analysis of a range of reports and other documents. The report traces the policy origins from developments in early New Zealand educational history.

An essential ingredient to the policy mix that produced NZQA is its frequently paradoxical nature. This study investigates the extent of this paradox and seeks to describe it explain it. It does this by a description of events and developments, and relating them, where appropriate, to relevant theory. The chapter on centralisation and control focuses on the contradiction of what appears to be a centralising development amidst a sea of devolutionary rhetoric is examined. The period of more detailed examination coincides with the tenure of the Labour Government from 1984 to 1990. The role of legitimisation is discussed in explaining the paradox apparent in the policy mix that produced NZQA.

The impact of the new structure and its associated framework on curriculum, particularly that of secondary schools, is analysed. Here the problematic nature of the split between curriculum and assessment is discussed. This section reinforces the discussion on centralisation, as it unveils the potentially centralist and controlling nature of the new curriculum structure. Concern is voiced over the National Curriculum and Achievement Initiative and how they

may combine with the qualifications framework to provide a greater measure of centralised curriculum extending from primary school level and up.

The impacts of a modular, or units-of-learning, approach to increasing motivation, flexibility, and efficiency is also scrutinised. Concern is voiced again about controlling influences and the impact of managerialist ideologies. While the potential advantages of modularisation are acknowledged, a critical account is given of its short-coming and dangers as a means of legitimating essentially controlling mechanisms.

All three aspects of the policy, curriculum, centralisation and modularisation are shown to be instruments capable of moving the locus of control ever closer to the centre. This inherent susceptibility is in turn related to the prevailing ideologies, and in particular those associated with managerialism and neo-Friedmanite economics.

Specific attention is paid to debunking the pejorative association of conspiracy theories with the searches for explanations for policy developments, and care is taken to explain that despite the existence of ideological pressures, much policy occurs in a rather arbitrary, even ad hoc manner. A range of factors that aided the shaping of this particular policy are described and explained.

The thesis concludes that explanations of policy developments need to consider a whole raft of factors that shape a particular policy. Furthermore the thesis also demonstrates that there are several inherent tensions and contradictions that remain unresolved in the policy example it examines.

PART I

Setting the Scene

The aim of this, the first part of this thesis is to 'set the scene' for the reader. This part of the thesis introduces the topic but goes further than that. The nature and functioning of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority is described to provide a guide to its structure, purpose, and functioning. The Research, Design and Methodology are set out, as is the theoretical position taken for this study, its framework and research boundaries. The notion of the 'grand plan' or conspiracy is briefly considered as a possible explanation for the development of policy. This idea is however specifically rejected as an explanation for the reformation of qualifications policy in New Zealand.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The re-election of the Labour Government in 1987 marked the beginning of a period of intense, rapid and far-reaching change in educational policy and administration in New Zealand's education system. These changes have been dominated in the main by the restructuring associated with the implementation of Tomorrow's Schools, yet there have also been major alterations to the national educational qualifications structure. These reforms, initiated by the Picot Report, were thrust into the post-compulsory sector of the education system by the Hawke Report, Learning for Life and Learning for Life 2. In many ways much of this second phase of reforming activity can be described as culminating with the passing of the Education Amendment Act in 1990.

An important part of this reform was the establishment of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. It is an authority with jurisdiction covering all national qualifications in the post-compulsory sector of the education system. As such it has responsibility for qualifications gained in secondary schools, polytechnics, private institutions, and indirectly, the universities. The qualifications involved cover an extensive range over trade, technical and academic areas. Chapter Two describes the Authority in more detail. Despite the radical nature of the change NZQA represents, and its potential impact on New Zealand society, this particular policy development has received limited

attention and even less critical analysis. What comment has been made has tended to be marked by its enthusiastic optimism, underpinned by a large measure of dependence on a common sense ideology that suggests that this approach will do much to ameliorate, if not solve, New Zealand's current educational and employment crises. This inquiry does not however, set out to argue a contrary case. Rather, it is designed, not only to provide a case study in the development of a particular aspect of the educational policy development, but it is also intended to expose and explain the forces, influences and effects that helped to shape it. In addition it should stimulate some debate about important issues that hitherto have not been the subject of this kind of analysis.

As the title of this thesis suggests there is an irony about the emergence of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. Not only is there a paradox, but it is interesting to observe that qualifications reform has become a focus at a time when, for so many young people, a crucial feature of their preparation for the adult world is that, for many of them, there simply may be no jobs. The implicit suggestion appears to be that greater attention to training education and the acquisition of qualifications will ensure jobs. When employment prospects have become depressingly pessimistic, there has been a major development in the country's qualifications structure it may be tempting to see this as a diversionary tactic. This is not the paradox however. The paradox, and a major area of interest for this thesis, concerns the essentially centralist nature of the Qualifications Authority and its emergence during a period characterised by devolutionary rhetoric. The exploration of this essentially contradictory element is a dominant theme in this examination of policy development.

This thesis is concerned to describe the background and circumstances in which the Qualifications Authority could be established. To do this, attention is given not only to some policy developments in the history of New Zealand education, but also to the nature and purpose of assessment, qualifications and credentials. As the concept of a National Qualifications Authority is a new one to New Zealand and possibly unique in the world, it was considered useful to describe the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) in some detail. Chapter Two is concerned with providing that kind of background information.

This thesis, like any other serious investigation needs to be set out within a suitable theoretical framework and it also needs to be circumscribed by some boundaries. These matters are discussed and described in Chapter Three.

Chapter Five explores some of the issues, and provides an indication of the framework for much of this inquiry. The notions raised in this chapter concern such sociological phenomena as selectivity, class reproduction and social control, along with other issues like accountability, motivation, and assessment and certification procedures. All of these are fundamental to the arguments that are analysed in subsequent chapters. Apart from that background, it is also necessary to clarify the nature of the arguments themselves. Policy analysis must be concerned with identifying and examining those forces that are influential in shaping policy. Chapter Six was written with the intention of providing such clarification. There is a predisposition in some quarters to ascribe this kind of explanatory material to, or confuse it with, an adherence to conspiracism. While perhaps on some occasions such a conclusion may

have its justification, its ready and pejorative use can also represent an attempt to discredit alternative competing views, and to escape the rigour of critical analysis and debate. Consequently this matter is taken up, and exposed so that the ensuing discussion can be set in the context for which it was intended.

This first Part of the thesis was designed to set the scene of this investigation for the reader. Part II moves on from there to endeavour to paint a broad background picture that should be helpful in providing a suitable context for the more recent changes. It is, as such, therefore mainly descriptive and historical in nature.

While the period of greatest activity in this policy area arguably occurred during the 1984-90 period, there was nevertheless relevant activity happening well before this time. Not only are these policy activities of consequence, but it is also useful to have an overview of earlier developments. Chapter Seven sets out to describe some of this early history and gives particular attention to the emergence of technical education and the forces that influenced it, and the attitudes and values that accompanied it. While there are no readily identifiable landmarks to determine a particular end point, this chapter deals with the time span from the late nineteenth century up to the mid 1950s when the Parkyn Report was published.

In the main this thesis concerns developments in the secondary and post-compulsory non-university sectors. The universities however, while in many respects a special case, are given attention in Chapter Six which starts with the publication of the 1959 Hughes Parry Report on New Zealand's universities. The Report, among other things, questioned the effectiveness of

the unit system and as a consequence is among the very few early documents that raise issues relating to modularisation. While Hughes Parry is perhaps notable for its specific focus on the university situation, the Educational Development Conference is significant for the enormous level of public participation at all levels that it engendered. Aspects of the associated Nordmeyer and Lawrence Reports are discussed, in the second half of Chapter Eight.

The impact of the fourth Labour Government is recognised in Chapter Nine which commences with the publication of the Hercus-Young Report in 1984, and continues on to the 1987 Probine-Fargher Report. While the Hercus-Young Report is not notable for any particular contribution to qualifications policy, it being primarily concerned with the management of technical institutes, it is useful for the insight it provides into the tension between the Department of Education and the Technical Institutes. The same issue was also a concern of the Probine-Fargher Report, but it went much further. The Probine-Fargher Report focussed attention on the lack of integration in education and training and gave specific pointers to the way ahead with its advocacy of a national validation authority. A particularly ironic feature of that Report is its lack of enthusiasm for a binary system of tertiary education. It also is significant for its demonstration of the complex relationships between senior secondary schooling and the polytechnics.

The developments in early technical education discussed in Chapter Seven do not cover the emergence of the Polytechnics and the accompanying changes to the qualifications structure. These matters are the focus of Chapter Ten. Some background to the establishment of the AAVA is discussed, as are the

recommendations for the awarding of high level qualifications of national standing, after the successful completion of approved courses at Polytechnics. The issue of a binary system is also one that emerges. During the time from the early 1960s to the late 1970s, the former technical colleges had changed to technical institutes only to undergo a further metamorphosis to re-emerge, in most cases, as polytechnics. As this happened policy developments also lead to the establishment of two national polytechnics. Such changes certainly accompanied and perhaps reflected the broadening of the official view of technical education. These changes were not however restricted to the tertiary technical sector. The secondary school system also underwent some transition. The Minister of Education commissioned an inquiry into curriculum, assessment, and qualifications in Forms 5 to 7. The Committee set up for this purpose produced two reports which made strong criticisms of the existing arrangements and suggested ways in which they could be improved. This had implications for the School Certificate and University Entrance examinations. These examinations were administered separately by two different bodies. As a way of rationalising the situation the establishment of a Board of Studies was recommended. This duly happened in June 1987 and the Board of Studies was operational by early 1988.

While measures were in place to provide some degree of rationalisation to the awards and assessment scene in senior secondary schools, the technical education situation continued to be a vexatious one. The two statutory bodies, AAVA and TCB that were responsible for trade and technical qualifications are discussed in Chapter Eleven. Both these bodies are described and their functions explained. The UNESCO Report on Technical and Vocational Education is cited to provide illustrations of the problems, and to give some

prescient comment on how matters might be improved. The Coad-Lawrence Review also features to demonstrate the difficulties and tensions that existed and which worked against attempts to rationalise this aspect of the qualifications system. The emergence of the Board of Studies (BOS) and the associated issues and developments of curriculum, assessment and qualifications are the subjects of Chapter Twelve.

At this stage in this thesis the focus moves to more recent developments. As a consequence the range is somewhat narrower and the level of detail provided rather greater. More attention too is placed in the next part, Part III on the emerging themes and issues. It also covers that period when the pace of change in the New Zealand education system really began to accelerate. However not everything is dealt with strictly in chronological order. In some cases it made more sense to use other criteria to determine the order of appearance.

In 1986 the Minister of Education, in a speech to the Technical Institutes Association, drew attention to the themes of equity, responsiveness and the recognition of qualifications. These issues had been given the attention of a Cabinet Ad Hoc Committee on Employment and Training which had decided that an independent validation authority ought to be established to endorse certificates provided by various training and educational institutions. Further impetus to this kind of thinking was provided by the visit of Tom Mc Cool, the Chief Executive of the Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC), to New Zealand in 1987. To a marked extent his visit and the meetings held during it, galvanised support for change, particularly for a system comparable to that of the SCOTVEC model. Subsequent to this visit a short life working

group was established. It worked in conjunction with the Achievement Post-School Planning Committee to produce a discussion paper on Post-Compulsory National Certification. These matters are the topics of Chapter Thirteen.

A far-reaching public discussion of tertiary education was initiated in early 1987, this was the 'Tertiary Review' which is discussed in Chapter Fourteen. Although this initiative resulted in a substantial response, it was overtaken by the general election and the ensuing political changes. These developments moved the focus well away from the discussions and the recommendations made by the people who responded to the 'Tertiary Review'. In anticipation of the strength and direction of political change, the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors Committee published the Watts Report. This was a response to the growing concern over the performance of the University Grants Committee in particular, and the Universities in general. Apart from endeavouring to capture some policy high ground, the Watts Report also drew attention to the continuing mixed relationships between the Universities and other tertiary education institutions. The notion of a binary system in which both the Polytechnics and Universities could confer degrees, a question of continuing debate, was also one that this committee had views on.

The background then is set for the widespread reform that was about to take place. Chapters Fifteen and Sixteen deal with the impact of the Picot and Hawke Reports. Picot essentially prepared the ground for Hawke. While there were some disparities in their recommendations, for example on the fate of the Board of Studies, the thrusts of their suggested reforms were very much in the same direction. They were both enthusiastic promoters of

decentralisation. Also, by this time, the relative positions of the Education and Labour Departments had altered. Education now was a much more powerful player in shaping policy relating to post-compulsory education and training. This ascendancy being especially noticeable from the time of Hawke and on.

Following the publication of the Hawke Report, matters moved very rapidly. Learning for Life was published early in 1989. This was quickly followed by the establishment of a raft of Working Groups to investigate related issues and operational requirements. The Working Party on the National Qualifications Authority was among them. This, and the Report of the Officials Overview Group, are among the topics of Chapter Seventeen. By August 1989 the resultant policy decisions had been made, and they were published in Learning for Life Two. This led on to the passing of the Education Amendment Act in the middle of 1990. The changes that occurred, and some of the factors that influenced their formation are items covered in Chapter Fourteen.

The background to this point has been quite comprehensively described and the forces of change documented and analysed. Part IV is the section of this thesis that deals in detail with the major themes and issues.

In Chapter Eighteen a core theme of this thesis is explored, that is the contradiction of a centralising development arising during a devolutionary trend is scrutinised. The political rhetoric and the community feelings of dissatisfaction and disaffection with aspects of the education system provide evidence of devolutionary forces, while NZQA is identified as a national unifying approach to the recognition of qualifications. In that sense at least, it

appears to represent a centralising move. Chapter Eighteen argues however, that the centralising effect may be much more extensive than that. The qualifications framework, the centralising of the data management of student progress and results, pressures for the maintenance of national standards, legislative trends and provisions, the selection and appointment of the NZQA Board, the validation and accreditation processes, and funding are among the factors discussed that reveal or reflect centralising forces. Views from diverse sources are used to seek explanations for the contradiction. These sources range over a wide political and theoretical spectrum and cover viewpoints as divergent as Sexton and Offe. Particular attention is given to the legitimising effects of the devolutionary rhetoric. Questions are asked about the coincidence of changes that had been evident in the political wings for some time, suddenly moving to centre stage at a time when the change revolution was drawing substantially from an enterprise culture derived from a particular ideological strategy.

The centralist theme, which creates the paradox referred to in the title of this thesis, is explored even further in the next two chapters. Modularisation is identified as a key feature and benefit of the new qualifications structure. As such it warranted a close inspection. The history of modularisation is described briefly and its implementation is found to be readily associated with managerialist imperatives. This identification is further exacerbated by a lack of a theoretical case for modularisation. The potential effects of a 'units of learning' approach on the operation of the senior secondary school is also canvassed. The latent deskilling and degradation of labour effects are analysed. Not only is doubt cast over the claimed educational benefits of modularisation, but it is also shown to be a process with potential for

enhancing central control. It is however, the much larger area of curriculum, where the greatest problems are distinguished. Pre-eminent among these is the impact of the new qualifications structure on the senior secondary school and its inherent capacity to affect ultimately the remaining secondary, and possibly even the primary school curricula. Special attention is accorded to the relationship between assessment and curriculum and the consequent dangers implicit in attempting the separation of one from the other. The disestablishment of the BOS and the transferal of its assessment responsibilities to the NZQA is a pivotal aspect of the discussion. The nature of the relationship between assessment and curriculum is problematic and is debated at some length. Whether or not assessment always has the power to dictate curricula there can be little doubt about the close and strong links between them. If there is to be reform in assessment procedures, so the curriculum must be adapted to accommodate the developments. The role of assessment as a motivational device is investigated, and while acknowledgement is paid to it as an educational process, attention is drawn to the danger of it becoming a socio-political process. Such a process would provide the state with a mechanism for adjusting perceptions and expectations as part of a strategy of political crisis management. Even when there has been devolution of curriculum responsibilities in some areas, overseas experience indicates that it can often be accompanied by a centralisation of curriculum control. In this environment teachers may collaborate to implement, but not to change curriculum.

Although the focus in this section is primarily on schools, attention is also given to the post-school area as well. The convenient allying of educationalists with the economic 'dries' in the march for greater autonomy, particularly for

the Polytechnics, is highlighted as an anomalous portent. It is argued that educationalists may have foregone their traditional commitment to broad based training and skill portability while simultaneously, and probably unwittingly, carrying forward an agenda for skill fragmentation and skill market deregulation. The call for more autonomy by the Polytechnics is exposed as a source of tension, particularly in regards to the needs for the maintenance of national standards with its associated centralist requirements. Some areas of ostensible untidiness are disclosed. They pertain to the relationship between ETSA and NZQA over Access courses and some aspects of apprenticeship training. While NZQA is regarded as having the capacity to initiate comprehensive curriculum reform with eventual benefits for students, some disquiet is expressed about the possibility of it becoming a tool to facilitate greater state control.

In keeping with the notion of policy formation as an evolutionary process, Chapter Twenty-One deals with some of the range of other issues and influences that can be identified as agents that helped fashion the qualifications policy. Several such factors are looked at separately, but their influence is set in a context where it is difficult to attribute changes exclusively to a particular influence. Change is often the product of various forces working interactively to alter the policy environment in a host of often unpredictable ways. Nevertheless despite this arbitrary quality it is still felt that some elements can be indicated as more significant in providing an appropriate environment for change.

Part V contains the concluding chapter of the thesis. This chapter tries to pull together the more substantial threads exposed in this analysis and summarise

them in a coherent fashion. In this manner it also tries to demonstrate just what has been found out by this investigation. That part is then followed by Part VI which contains the supporting tables, glossary, appendices, sources and bibliography.