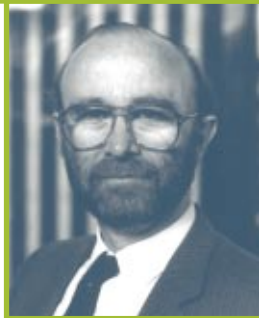


## Excellence, universities and the qualifications framework

Michael Irwin

**The relations between universities and governmental authorities have often been, at best, uneasy. Indeed the universities in England appear to have had their origin in the clash between King and church<sup>1</sup>. A dispute in 1167 between Henry II and Thomas à Beckett, Archbishop of Canterbury, led to the King banning English clergymen from attending the University of Paris which led the King of France to retaliate by expelling all remaining English scholars from France. Expelled scholars gathered in Oxford, eventually forming what became a university. At least this clash had some positive results.**



Eight hundred or so years later, the participants in disputes involving universities have changed – monarchs and bishops have left the fray. However, there remains a mutual suspicion between university and state authorities. Each entertains a caricature about the other. Universities tend to doubt the government's appreciation of their educational mission. Governments tend to see universities as badly managed, lazy, out of touch with the times and promoting ideological views.

The problem with caricatures is that they have some element of truth – they take an aspect which has some substance in fact and, while exaggerating it, leave the picture

still recognisable. To that extent, universities need to take caricatures seriously. In this regard, it is pleasing that the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee has initiated an audit system for our universities to strengthen their quality controls. No doubt other measures could be taken. For its part, the government needs to understand the universities' mission better than some of its advisors, and I refer in particular to the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA).

In its December 1993 brief to the incoming government, the NZQA advised that "(l)egislative amendment appears necessary to indicate that degrees are national qualifications and consequently part of the (NZQA's qualifications) framework." The reasons given for urging legislative action were that the universities uphold the view that their qualifications are outside the framework and that, as long as this is the case, "New Zealand will be in danger of entrenching a dual academic-vocational system, with its barriers to credit transfer and inbuilt perceptions of first and second class qualifications." The NZQA is quite right in saying that universities regard their qualifications as outside the framework. I would like to suggest two good reasons for this.

First, the NZQA appear to see the distinction between academic and vocational work as some sort of 'public bad' – inequitable, socially destructive and, perhaps, politically incorrect. It is no such thing. The NZQA is unduly troubled about the distinction. The simple fact is that general education opens up a wide range of vocational possibilities. The reverse is not, however, true. Vocational training tends to be job

<sup>1</sup> Rashdal, H. (1936), *Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages*, Oxford.

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specific. Moreover, as Professor James Marshall of the University of Auckland has pointed out in reference to the curriculum framework for schools, skills cannot be readily abstracted from the content area in which they were acquired and transferred to another area.<sup>2</sup> It is also the case that the vocations which are the most complex and demanding in our society are those which require a high degree of general education before specific vocational training can begin. Those which are less complex and demanding need less general education and specific vocational training can therefore begin earlier. These are realities which cannot be changed by ministerial or bureaucratic fiat.

Universities are in the business of enhancing the general education of young people to enable them to take on the intellectually more demanding positions that our society has to offer. Some university students begin specific vocational education at university but in the context of a broad, coherent approach to a particular discipline. In many cases they will complete their specific vocational training after leaving university. The danger of the NZQA approach is that, in ignoring or downplaying the distinction between academic and vocational work, it will reduce all vocational training to a watered down academic training or, alternatively, seek to introduce specific job-related training long before it is appropriate to do so. Universities must take care to avoid both dangers to the content, structure and coherence of their programmes.

My second problem with the NZQA's framework relates more specifically to universities but is relevant, I suspect, to much general academic education wherever it takes place. This is that there is little room for *excellence* within the framework. Universities are not in the business of simply achieving competence – rather they aim for excellence. Not

all students will achieve it, but excellence must, nonetheless, be the aim of universities. But how will excellence be recognised within a framework based on a building block – the unit standard – which requires clear specification of outcomes and performance criteria? New Zealand academics have pointed out how difficult it is to define excellence in outcome

terms. Professor John Codd and some of his colleagues in the Department of Education at Massey University, in one of the earliest reviews of the framework<sup>3</sup>, pointed out the problems of reducing all learning to modules and of seeking to specify learning outcomes.

*While there is obvious value in expressing objectives as learning outcomes, the overall quality of a subject may derive as much from the mortar as from the bricks. Unanticipated outcomes can be as important as those that are planned. Other important outcomes may be open-ended and not specifiable in terms of precisely what has to be learned. These may include components of higher level thinking, including creative thinking, evaluation, analysis and synthesis. These aspects of learning could be overlooked or trivialised through an insistence on statements of outcomes.*

In breaking down academic subjects into many particular outcomes the coherence of our programmes is put at risk. The NZQA would be well advised to consult Cardinal Newman on this issue. For him coherence of intellectual design was all important: "How many writers are there ... who, breaking up their subject into details, destroy its life, and defraud us of the whole in their anxiety about the parts".<sup>4</sup>

In a recent paper, Dr Cedric Hall of Victoria University of Wellington has emphasised the difficulty of identifying precise criteria to describe excellence in university work.<sup>5</sup> He reminds

2 Marshall, J.D. (1992), *Principles and the National Curriculum: Centralised 'Development'*, unpublished mimeo, University of Auckland.

3 Codd, J., McAlpine, D. and Poskitt, J. (1991), *A Position paper on Problems and Issues in the Restructuring of National Qualifications*, unpublished mimeo, Education Department, Massey University, Palmerston North.

4 Newman, J.H. (1852), *The Idea of a University – Defined and Illustrated*, Longmans, Green, and Co.

5 Hall, C. (1994), *Obstacles to the Integration of University Qualifications and Courses into the National Qualifications Framework*, University Teaching Development Centre, Victoria University of Wellington, draft dated March.

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us of the widely held university view that excellence is far easier to recognise *after* the event than to define in advance. In contrast the NZQA approach is precisely to define everything in advance as if a simple competency test of the can do/can't do variety will be satisfactory. Professor Warwick Elley of the University of Canterbury has pointed out on many occasions that, in general academic education, such tests simply will not do. In a recent article he wrote:

*... it should be stressed that educators in many other countries have tried to develop clear stand-alone standards in general subjects, at the secondary and tertiary level, but none has succeeded. Neither has the NZQA. In many vocational topics the standards can be neatly described and widely agreed upon. The skills are clear-cut, the domain of knowledge easy to specify, and competency-based assessment makes sense (e.g. can type 50 wpm, can weigh seeds accurately). In academic subjects, however, the standards to be attained usually cannot be spelled out precisely (e.g. can write effectively on complex topics, can investigate and describe the diversity of scientific thought on the origins of humans, can manipulate algebraic expressions). Such statements represent vague mixtures of knowledge and skill, capable of many different interpretations.<sup>6</sup>*

The NZQA approach is inimical to the excellence to which universities should aspire. To use a phrase employed by Dr Hall, excellence is "an elusive concept".<sup>7</sup> The concept cannot be incorporated within the framework as presently designed and, as long as this remains the case, universities must resolutely insist that their qualifications remain outside it.

6 Elley, W. (1993), "Qualifications Authority Plans a Recipe for Assessment Chaos", *The Press*, December 3.

7 Ibid.

8 Stead, C.K. (1994), "English for the Sake of English", *The Dominion*, March 22.

9 Kipling, R. "The Plea of the Simla Dancers", *Barrack Room Ballads, Departmental Ditties and Other Verses*, Rand, McNally and Company.

There will be considerable pressure on universities and other institutions to compromise on this issue. But, as Professor Emeritus Karl Stead recently reminded us, "compromise is the death of academic standards".<sup>8</sup> We need to be clear about our mission, and uncompromising in our commitment to the pursuit of excellence. This means resisting the NZQA's siren call to participate in the development of an all-embracing – but suffocating – framework of qualifications. And we should not be slow in declaring our opposition. Rudyard Kipling<sup>9</sup> wrote about the danger of procrastination:

Too late! alas! the song  
To remedy the wrong:–  
The rooms are taken from us, swept and garnished  
for their fate.  
But these tear-besprinkled pages  
Shall attest to future ages  
That we cried against the crime of it – too late,  
alas! too late!

At the time of writing, Michael Irwin was a policy analyst for the New Zealand Business Roundtable specialising in education issues.

**Education Forum**

P.O. Box 10 539  
Manners Street  
Wellington, New Zealand  
Telephone: +64 21 607 636  
Fax: +64 4 471 1304  
Email: [info@educationforum.org.nz](mailto:info@educationforum.org.nz)  
Web: [www.educationforum.org.nz](http://www.educationforum.org.nz)