

Notes on curriculum and qualifications reforms

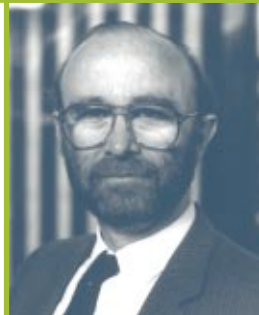
Michael Irwin

Introduction

We have been introducing massive changes in education since the mid 1980s.

Two broad sets of reforms:

- administrative and financial (Picot, TS, Hawke, LfL1 & 2, *Education to be More, Before 5* etc.)
- 'academic' curriculum and qualifications.



Why does it all come at once? There were of course antecedents as others (e.g. John Barrington in the case of the administrative reforms) have pointed out. Also the curriculum framework followed the review of 1987 and the draft national curriculum statement of 1988 which themselves had antecedents going back to the Thomas review of the 1940s.

Perhaps the administrative and financial 'reforms' should be seen as part of the wider reforms of the public service. But why the 'academic' reforms? Is it the case that they were caught up in the same process and if, as I argue, they were poorly conceived, is it not the case that the educational bureaucracy failed to manage the process in a way that recognised and preserved vital aspects of education?

My concern in this tutorial is with the policy reforms in the 'academic' (i.e. curriculum and qualifications) areas:

- perhaps ultimately more important – what is taught and how it is assessed cf. the way the process is managed and financed.
[Of course there are connections and I am not belittling the importance of achieving optimal administrative and finance

arrangements – incentive structures are particularly important to consider.]

- they have been given much less attention – lots of straining at (relative) 'gnats' e.g. salary bulk funding and the like while there has been much swallowing of curricular 'camels'!

I pick up the issue of the relative neglect of the 'academic' reforms in part 3 below.

Main Problem Areas

(a) the New Zealand Curriculum Framework

There appears to have been no thorough analysis of problems with the previous curriculum arrangements. The framework (Ministry of Education, 1993a, pp. 27-28) provides a very brief discussion of the 'context' of the new framework but nothing that could be called an analysis. Maybe it was assumed that a new one was needed because:

- i the previous curriculum had remained much the same since the 'Thomas' reforms of the 1940s;
- ii the alleged lack of coherence in existing subject syllabi (perhaps especially at secondary levels) and a perceived need to encapsulate or, perhaps, restrain them within a 'framework';
- iii the perceived need to acknowledge the place of the Treaty in education and to emphasise other issues such as bi- and multi-culturalism, and those of gender and race; and
- iv the world had clearly changed dramatically in all sorts of ways (economically and in terms of technology) and

**Today's 'solution'
so often becomes
tomorrow's problem
when hard thinking is
dispensed with.**

it was assumed that 'education' must change with the rest of the world.

But are these factors true and, if they are, how relevant are they to schooling?

Do they constitute grounds for a new 'framework' and for the particular type of framework actually adopted? It is usually vital to be clear about the need for change and to identify and evaluate options before making decisions. How else does one avoid repeating errors, and/or creating new ones, making or reinforcing wrong assumptions etc. etc.? Today's 'solution' so often becomes tomorrow's problem when hard thinking is dispensed with.

The first issue is, of course, whether we need a framework at all. If we decide provisionally that a framework is desirable, all sorts of questions arise in its construction. After addressing these questions it may be concluded that a framework is not after all what is wanted. Such issues include:

- What are the purposes of schooling that should underlie the framework, and how should these purposes influence curricular content?
- Should the framework cover all the years of schooling or only, say, those up to the senior secondary school?
- If the framework is to be extended to the senior secondary school how should it be related to school summative assessments?
- Should the framework provide only a core, leaving schools to expand beyond the core? If a core is to be adopted, how much of the total school curriculum should it cover at the various stages of schooling, and of what should it consist?
- Should the framework provide for curricular differentiation or assume that all pupils will progress along the same track, albeit at different rates and to different end points?
- Should the framework be structured in terms of ages, stages or levels, and how many and which ones?
- How should content be presented? In subjects, learning areas or cross-curricular approaches, and which ones? Should there be only one structure for all subjects or should content determine the best structure for each subject?
- How is the balance to be drawn between providing firm curricular support for weak teachers and giving freedom to able teachers to extend and innovate?
- How should skills be handled and what is their relationship to curricular content?

- What if any assumptions about pedagogy should be adopted and why?

But no analysis and discussion of these issues exist as far as I know – perhaps bits and pieces – but no comprehensive analysis that seeks to explain the framework as a

coherent document. Some of the answers to the issues I have raised are apparent from the text, but we don't know the reasons for them. This makes debate difficult – often impossible. The ministry was presumably operating on the gut feel of experience (which can often be unreliable) and was probably pushed this way and that by its massive 'consultation' process (which was not based on any published analysis of the issues such as those listed above). From memory, the first published document on the framework was a first draft of the framework (Ministry of Education, 1991) which was, misleadingly in my view, subtitled "a discussion document".

Any critic should come out with alternative structure and in my own analysis (Irwin, 1994c) I proposed different answers to just about all these questions.

Problem areas with the curriculum framework (see Irwin, 1994a and c, and 1996b) include:

- one predetermined structure of strands, achievement aims and objectives, (usually) eight levels, etc. is to fit everything. Should not curricular content determine best structure, the number, if any, of levels, etc.?
- the assumption is made that clear learning outcomes can be specified in such a way that students' achievement can be assessed against them (Ministry of Education, 1993a, p. 5). We have here, potentially, the same problems with the 'competence-based' approach which bedevil the National Qualifications Framework (Irwin *et al.* 1995, Irwin, 1994c, 1995, Wolf, 1995)
- just about everything is reduced to 'skills'. Sounds like an over zealous and unhealthy interest in producing particular attitudes. Also there is little guidance as to the context in which skills might be developed or warning about the limits of transferability of skills between contexts;
- it is an underlying premise that the individual student is the centre of all teaching and learning (Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 6). This is either an unfortunate slip of the pen or a deliberate and major statement of official educational thinking. At best it is a gross exaggeration. This view is reflected in various subject curricula [e.g. the experiences,

***If the possibility of resort
to law is to be used to
uphold political correctness,
how can teachers
encourage critical and
reflective stances?***

ideas, and beliefs of all students are to be acknowledged as a basis for learning science (Ministry of Education, 1993b)].

- The individual child-centredness discourages a 'whole class' pedagogy, which surely still has a place, in favour of a heavy emphasis on group work, discovery methodology etc. This is unhelpful. In any case why should teachers be patronised in this way? If they lack a suitable armoury of pedagogical methods and the knowledge of when and how to apply them this should be brought out into the open and addressed. See also patronising statements about the importance of treating girls and boys justly – does a body of 'professionals' need this sort of admonition? If they do, this is also a major problem to be addressed directly.
- the contradictions, including:
 - the school curricula must "respect" the values of all students (even if they cheat or bully?) who are to be helped to "develop and clarify their own values and beliefs" (Ministry of Education, 1993a, p. 21) which cuts off the moral branch on which the ministry seeks to sit when it says that certain specific values are to be "reinforced" (*ibid.*, pp. 7 and 21, Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 30); and
 - the urge to teach 'critical thinking skills' while seeking to impose certain views of the Treaty both as an historical event and as having instituted a 'partnership' between Maori and other settlers (Ministry of Education 1996, p. 29). Also, "[social studies] programmes should be consistent with human rights legislation" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 30). If the possibility of resort to law is to be used to uphold political correctness, how can teachers encourage critical and reflective stances?
- the tampering with children's personalities. For example:
 - we need a learning environment which enables the development of "appropriate personal qualities" (Appropriate for what? The international market place!? Who is to decide what is "appropriate"? Are teachers to decide, if so why has this become their responsibility?). [cf. Oakeshott on the 'intellectual virtues' such as the importance of acquiring "disinterested curiosity, patience, honesty, exactness, industry, concentration and doubt ... a sensibility to small differences ... the ability to recognise intellectual elegance ... the disposition to submit to

refutation ... the love of truth and justice [while] escaping the reproach of fanaticism"].

- an aim of social studies education is to enable students to be 'confident' in a changing society (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 7). Why is this the specific business of teachers? On what is confidence – likewise self-esteem – to be based? Indeed, is confidence always a good thing – even when it has no foundation?
- the considerable emphasis on skills i.e. to turning out students with particular attitudes, attributes and values (cf. giving them access to the knowledge, theory and concepts and letting them develop what 'skills', attitudes etc. they may.) (NB skills tend to be context specific – not 'free-floating' between contexts);
- the ideological intentions seen in, for example:
 - the English curriculum with its requirement for gender balance in the selection of authors and texts;
 - the population of New Zealand is either "Maori" or "Pakeha" (e.g. Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 7). Do Maori really see themselves as one collectivity for all purposes? The lumping together of all non-Maori in another collective called 'Pakeha' is a travesty and offensive to many people. Is this what 'biculturalism' identity involves and why should it be imposed on children in this surreptitious way, without public debate? How does this view of NZ identity fit with the references to our multicultural society? Are the two concepts compatible?
 - the ahistorical interpretation of the Treaty (p. 29, revised draft of social studies curriculum statement) – presumably in an attempt to bed down beyond challenge one particular view (the ministry's) within the NZ 'mindset';
 - the almost total absence of references to New Zealand's British heritage without which its legal and political institutions and procedures cannot possibly be understood. Is New Zealand to be presented in its curricula as "born fully formed from the brow of Jove, without antecedents?" (Foreword to Education Forum, 1996). Why is the ministry so spectacularly 'in denial' (as the psychologists would say) of New Zealand's British heritage?
 - references to gender and sexism which require gender balance in selection of authors and texts – a misguided attempt to correct, *ex post*, gender imbalance in authorship of texts. (Ministry of Education, 1993, p. 7). What

*Some of the reports in
the 'non-academic' areas
of education have
addressed first-order issues
. . . . Why can't the education
bureaucracy do likewise in
the 'academic' areas?*

- happened to concern for the intrinsic merits of literature irrespective of gender, race etc. of author?; and
- lack of references to wisdom, the western intellectual heritage, the need to develop powers of discrimination between good and evil, truth and propaganda etc. etc.

Withal an impoverished and narrowly utilitarian view of the purposes of school education.

(b) Problems with the National Qualifications Framework

Others (especially. Elley and Hall) have dealt with these in several places (see bibliography). A summary of the main difficulties and the likely consequences are given in the Annex.

Some key difficulties might be summarised as:

- the impossibility in many areas of education and training of setting standards in such a way that many assessors can make consistent assessments against them (both across many assessors and over time) and the consequences of this for the consistency, complexity and cost of the assessment process and credibility of the qualifications;
- the lack of information about student achievement; and
- the lack of incentive to achieve beyond the 'standard'.

It is a system that has some modest application, but applied to the whole education and training system or even major parts of it is a pending disaster, and will make New Zealand into an educational laughing-stock.

Why are our academic 'reforms' so unsatisfactory?

Why has there been so little quality debate about the NQF, and why has so much of what debate there has been come so late?

The quality of analysis in other areas is very much greater and has international respect (see Henderson, 1996, and Teece, 1996).

Some of the reports in the 'non-academic' areas of education have addressed first-order issues (e.g. the Titter report on school property, the Picot report on education administration, the Todd report on funding tertiary growth – NB this is not to say their results were satisfactory and that all relevant issues were considered – they weren't). Why can't the education bureaucracy do likewise in the 'academic' areas?

I suggest below some reasons without seeking to evaluate or rank them. No doubt there are others.

- Much attention within the education sector has been directed elsewhere – school salary bulk funding, tertiary funding, school property, capital charging. But note that there has been much restructuring elsewhere and other over-stretched agencies such as the Treasury manage to maintain high quality analyses.

- The new curricula do not impact on teachers and teaching as directly as the qualifications framework will on the senior secondary school. More able and experienced teachers can disregard whatever they dislike in the new curricula and perhaps consider they need not bother making a fuss – but less able and/or inexperienced teachers are likely to use curricular documents as blueprints so it is important they are of high quality.
- The absence of any professional teacher body which has the resources to critique the curricular, qualifications – and other – school reforms objectively and professionally. Subject associations have limited resources (do any have full-time research staff?) The teacher unions are, at present, the only teacher organisations with the necessary funds but their prime concern is, understandably, the welfare of their members. The NZEI contribute to discussion on the curricular documents (does the PPTA?). Instead of treating them on their own merits, the unions have used some of these reforms as bargaining levers in industrial negotiations. Recently, the PPTA appears to have decided that perhaps there are problems with the NQF (is this their first realisation of difficulties after some five years of NQF construction?).
- Several of the analyses of the 'academic' reforms has been published by the Education Forum, and their arguments may not have been treated on their merits by the education bureaucracy and education academics for ideological reasons. Are Education Forum publications listed in relevant student reading lists by university education departments and colleges of education?
- These 'academic' issues are a lot harder to analyse than the more concrete administrative and financial reforms within education. Of course, this isn't be an acceptable excuse for poor performance – lots of issues in public policy are very complex.

The argument that

New Zealand is 'different' from other educational jurisdictions is, of course, true. But we are not that much different from many other jurisdictions.

- New Zealand is a very small country and the size of our education community reflects that. There are only a handful of experts in any particular curriculum area. There isn't the range of views one would expect in a larger educational jurisdiction, and hence the danger of intellectual incest and 'capture' by a small clique. But there are lots of ways today, with easy international communications and travel, for compensating for our small size including the use of overseas consultants and quality referees.
- The ministry has lacked high quality analytical leadership and has lost experienced staff. Its morale has suffered from the uncertainty of frequent restructuring. The extent of the reforms – managerial and financial as well as in the 'academic' areas – has overstretched its capacities. Again this is not much of an excuse – other agencies have been through similar trauma. Responsibility is partly that of the State Services Commission.
- The 'academic' areas are ones in which agencies outside the educational bureaucracy (e.g. the Treasury) have little, if any, expertise and, by and large, do not participate to any significant degree. There is, therefore, little contestability of advice to government in these 'academic' areas of education policy from within the bureaucracy. This highlights the importance of the ministry seeking external reviews of its quality.
- The ministry's policy development procedures have been deficient. As far as I can tell, it doesn't as a general rule put out 'thinkpieces' to identify issues, problems etc. and to evaluate costs and benefits of options. It tends to go straight into first drafts e.g. the curriculum framework, and the draft social studies curriculum statement (NB there was been some initial work on technology – a new curriculum area/subject – and a consultant's reports on Health and Physical-well-being).

The ministry may assume that since the curriculum framework is part of an evolving policy there is no need to revisit assumptions and raise first order issues. If so this is dangerous: it may just reinforce invalid assumptions and address symptoms rather than the causes of problems. Today's 'solution' will become tomorrow's problem. In any case it is not explicit. Quality analysis requires: identifying the issues and possible approaches; analysing and evaluating possible solutions; and arriving at conclusions and recommendations

consistent with the analysis. In this process assumptions and information should be made explicit and research and information deficiencies acknowledged. Tensions and trade-offs should be clearly addressed.

– The development of such quality thinkpieces would: provide an important internal discipline on ministry staff because the quality of its analysis (including its coverage, command

of the relevant literature, knowledge of local and international developments, the explicitness of its assumptions and presuppositions, awareness of the broader school curriculum context, the manner in which tensions and trade-offs are identified and resolved, the logical development of the analysis, and so on) would be open to scrutiny and challenge;

- greatly increase the quality of the feedback from the education and wider community (who have a right to be properly informed as a basis for consultation), and also the quality of the education debate which, in my view, depends very much on the ministry's own leadership and input; and
- enhance the ministry's standing in the education community and hence its ability to provide the education policy leadership it was established to deliver.
- The ministry appears to use local consultants for the bulk of its work. Why not adopt a policy of using as consultants whoever is best (and, of course, available) for the job? The argument that New Zealand is 'different' from other educational jurisdictions is, of course, true. But we are not that much different from many other jurisdictions. We share a lot of problems with other countries and can learn from their experiences. The ministry should be able to discern what from overseas practice should not be applied here, perhaps with the assistance of local referees.
- As regards the NQF, the ministry seems to be unable to contribute to the analysis of this key development. Why? The separation of policy for the qualifications framework from that for the curriculum framework in terms of statutory responsibility doesn't help but, again, is not a satisfactory reason for poor performance in this area. Should not the ministry assume a coordination and monitoring role and responsibility over all educational policy development including this very important one?

Bibliography:

Education Forum (1994a), *English in the New Zealand Curriculum – A Submission on the Draft*, prepared with the assistance of C.K. Stead, Education Forum, April.

Education Forum (1994b), *Technology in the New Zealand Curriculum – A Submission on the Draft*, prepared with the assistance of A. Breckon, Education Forum, November.

Education Forum (1995), *Social Studies in the New Zealand Curriculum – A Submission on the Draft*, prepared with the assistance of G. Partington, Education Forum, August.

Education Forum (1996), *Social Studies in the New Zealand Curriculum – A Submission on the Revised Draft*, prepared with the assistance of G. Partington and with a foreword by K. Minogue, Education Forum, in draft, October.

Elley, W.E. (1994), "Fundamental Flaw at the Heart of the new Qualifications Plan", *The Press*, 17 October (reprinted in the *Education Digest*, Vol. 3 No. 2, August 1995).

Hall, C. (1995), *Why Universities do not want Unit Standards*, NZVCC Newsletter, August.

Hall, C. *Following Principles which Accord with the National Qualifications Framework, but without Unit Standards* (Draft Discussion Paper) VUW:UTDC, May.

Hall, C. *Obstacles to the Integration of University Qualifications into the National Qualifications Framework*, Higher Education In New Zealand, Occasional Paper no. 1, Syndicate of Educational Development Centres of New Zealand Universities, 1994.

Henderson, D. (1996), *New Zealand in an International Perspective*, New Zealand Business Roundtable, Wellington, August.

Howson, G. (1994), *Mathematics in the New Zealand Curriculum*, Education Forum, August.

Irwin, M., Elley, W., and Hall, C. (1995), *Unit Standards in the National Qualifications Framework*, Education Forum, May.

Irwin, M.D.R. (1994), *Curriculum, Assessment and Qualifications – An Evaluation of Current Reforms*, Education Forum, Auckland, May.

Irwin, M.D.R. (1994a), *Cucumbers, Stale Bread and Educational Frameworks*. Paper delivered to the New Zealand Secondary Principals Association Conference, Wellington, 29 March.

Irwin, M.D.R. (1994b), *The Humanities in the New Zealand Curriculum*. Paper delivered at the New Zealand Social Studies Curriculum and Change Conference, Hamilton, 11 May.

Irwin, M.D.R. (1994c), *Curriculum, Assessment and Qualifications – An Evaluation of Current Reforms*, Education Forum, May.

Irwin, M.D.R. (1995), *The National Qualifications Framework – Notes for Meeting with the New Zealand Council for Teacher Education*, 26 September.

Irwin, M.D.R. (1996), *Minority and Majority Cultures and Education*. Paper delivered to the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority Conference on 'Curriculum, Culture and Society', London, 9 February.

Ministry of Education (1991), *The National Curriculum of New Zealand – A Discussion Document*, Learning Media, Wellington.

Ministry of Education (1993a), *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework*, Learning Media, Wellington.

Ministry of Education (1993b), *Science in the New Zealand Curriculum*, Learning Media, Wellington.

Ministry of Education (1994), *Social Studies in the New Zealand Curriculum – Draft*, Learning Media, Wellington.

Ministry of Education (1996), *Social Studies in the New Zealand Curriculum – Revised Draft*, Learning Media, Wellington.

Teece, D., Evans, L. and Wilkinson, B. (1996), "Economic Reform in New Zealand 1984-1995: the Pursuit of Efficiency", *Journal of Economic Literature*, forthcoming.

Wolf, A. (1995), *Competence-based Assessment*, Open University Press, Buckingham.

ANNEX

Extract from: Irwin, M D R, (1995), *The National Qualifications Framework – Notes for Meeting with New Zealand Council for Teacher Education*, unpublished paper, 26 September.

The NQF's weaknesses and limitations

The acknowledgement of problems with the old system and acceptance of good intentions doesn't guarantee success – or even that the new system will be an improvement. In my view the new system will, in fact, make matters a lot worse, and we should put further development on hold pending a critical appraisal. In brief, I see the NQF as undermining general or academic education and not meeting the urgent need for credible, high quality vocational qualifications for those in the senior school for whom the Bursary route to university is not suitable. Indeed on the vocational front it seems set to weaken a number of

qualifications that are well structured and highly regarded locally and overseas.

The NQF is based on the notion of competency which has a long history – mainly in the vocations and the professions. What is new, certainly in New Zealand, is the application of a competency-based approach to all education and training at all levels from Form 5. Competency-based assessment (Wolf 1995) means that:

- i the assessment is derived from the specification of a set of outcomes that are so clearly stated that assessors, students, teachers and others can all make reasonably objective judgments about student achievement or non-achievement of those outcomes;
- ii student progress is certified on the basis of demonstrated achievement of those outcomes; and
- iii assessments are not dependent on time served or on attendance at a formal educational establishment.

The curriculum framework is not the subject of this discussion but I would note that national curriculum statements being developed in the context of the Curriculum Framework are to “specify clear learning outcomes against which students’ achievement can be assessed” (*Framework* p. 5) and the concept of levels of achievement are also employed. Also, of course, Unit Standards are to be derived from the achievement objectives specified in these statements.

Thus in both the curriculum and qualifications frameworks we have a concern with outcomes. I have no problem with a focus on outcomes – the process of education and training is meant to make a difference and it is useful to know *ex ante* what differences are aimed at and to assess *ex post* whether they were achieved. So the debate is not about setting objectives and seeing whether they have been achieved but about the means of doing so, how outcomes are to be specified, and how far we can go in specifying them without educational cost. We are particularly likely to run into problems when the focus on objectives is coupled with the notions that:

- all education and training outcomes can be specified in advance;
- all outcomes can be related on a ‘seamless’ matrix by assignment to one of a predetermined number of levels;

... the debate is not about setting objectives and seeing whether they have been achieved but about the means of doing so, how outcomes are to be specified, and how far we can go in specifying them without educational cost.

- all outcomes can be specified so clearly and transparently that students can be assessed against them in a consistent way by many different providers applying different assessment tasks in varying contexts and under varying rules; and
- the outcomes and related assessment criteria need to be registered on a national framework.

Some specific problems are as follows:

- Unit Standards are collections of outcomes and can assist in developing programmes. But they are not, as frequently claimed, achievement standards except in those cases where the outcome virtually defines the standard of achievement required (e.g. as in the case of repetitive skills such as typing and reading a thermometer).
- Clear standards of achievement are particularly difficult to specify for measuring understanding of large blocks of knowledge, or students’ ability to use generic skills such as writing and problem solving – especially in areas using a large knowledge base (Elley 1994).
- The specification of outcomes into Unit Standards seems likely to involve the breaking down of knowledge, concepts, and understandings into a multitude of discrete elements which are to be mastered separately. Problems arise with material that cannot be mastered in this fashion, but in which elements are interdependent and need to be learnt and assessed as a whole.
- The actual performance standards to be achieved for the award of credit will, in most cases, be determined in moderation processes and, contrary to much official rhetoric, will not be “clear and transparent”.
- The allocation of knowledge and understandings to one of a hierarchy of levels assumes that learning takes place in a more-or-less smooth, upward progression. In fact, the pattern of much learning is often unpredictable and erratic (see Neyland, 1994, on mathematics).
- The heavy reliance on internal assessment, lack of uniformity in assessment tasks, and absence of common rules² are consistent with the belief that “clear and transparent standards” can be predetermined. However, because such standards don’t, for the most part, exist, the resulting

2 For example, rules about the number of resits allowed and whether the ‘standard’ has to be achieved only once or more than once.

These long established procedures have their problems. But before jettisoning them we should ensure their replacements are better – and I don't think they are.

assessment processes will be inconsistent between providers.

- Ensuring consistency of judgment about student performance against the standards from year to year presents problems because it is impossible to set assessment tasks at predetermined levels of difficulty. The rejection of scaling is also consistent with the belief that “clear and transparent” standards can be predetermined. But here again, because such standards usually don't exist, we will run into problems and can expect significant variations in the assessment of performance over time.

I would note at this point that educational jurisdictions worldwide usually address the issue of consistency between providers by the provision of externally set and administered assessment tasks, often in combination with varying amounts of externally moderated internal assessment. Also, scaling has long been used to adjust for variations in difficulty of assessment tasks from year to year which ensures reasonable consistency over time. Further, careful sample testing avoids any need to try and define and test all relevant knowledge and skills which presents insuperable problems in areas with a large knowledge and conceptual base. Further, contrary to official rhetoric, norm-based assessment does provide valuable information about standards reached as well as relative performance. These long established procedures have their problems. But before jettisoning them we should ensure their replacements are better – and I don't think they are.

- The pass/fail system employed by the NQF cannot encourage or recognise excellence – or any achievement above the 'standard' required for credit. It won't differentiate between those who passed first time and those who pass only after multiple resits. It can recognise speed of accumulation of credits but this is not necessarily related to high achievement.
- Much of what has to be assessed isn't a matter of pass or fail but of how much has been learnt, how much understanding has been demonstrated, how much originality has been displayed, and so on. Adjectival statements – not just verbal statements – about performance are involved. The Unit Standard format of pass/fail or achieved/not achieved

'the' required standards is quite unsuited to such assessment. The professional judgment of experienced markers who work hard at developing, clarifying and maintaining common understandings about marking criteria is required (See Wolf, 1995, on this essential 'socialisation' of the assessment process). Clearly normative assumptions underlie such understandings.

- Since the focus of competency-based assessment is on final performance, there will be a tendency to reject elements of knowing and understanding underlying theories. For the same reason, basic skills such as mathematics and communication tend in competency-based systems to occur only in the context of performance and not as separately listed and assessed concerns (Wolf p. 20). Unit Standards in general academic areas deviate from the strict performance philosophy of the competency-based model – and run into the problems outlined above.

The likely consequences of the introduction of the NQF

I suggest the NQF will be introduced with the following consequences:

- an increasing awareness that many Unit Standards don't and can't describe clear and transparent achievement standards;
- lack of clarity about standards may lead to tighter and tighter definitions of outcomes and performance criteria and ever more complex methodology – exacerbating problems of a narrow atomistic approach to teaching and assessment and imposing even more exhaustive assessment, and related administrative, burdens on providers. This could well lead to assessors deciding (and making different decisions about) what assessment tasks are the most important and omitting or fudging the rest. Thus a system designed to achieve greater assessment validity may lead to unpredictable and uncontrollable variation (Wolf p. 115);
- the idea of free-standing achievement standards independent of curricula, courses, time service, and providers sounds attractive but may be seen to involve a significant cost in terms of quality of learning and reliability of assessment;
- registration of Unit Standards will be seen as imposing an unwelcome rigidity on teaching programmes;

- difficulty in achieving consistent assessment will be coupled with the perception that Unit Standards are easier to attain in some institutions and in some years than in other institutions and other years;
- comparability between diverse subject material at the same level in terms of difficulty will be seen as largely chimerical. In much general education, the same material can be studied at a variety of levels depending on the depth of knowledge and understanding required: the level will depend on the nature of specific assessment tasks which are assessor-determined and not registered in Unit Standards;
- the pass/fail approach of Unit Standards will not provide the degree of differentiation between students and trainees in terms of learning and understanding sought by parents, tertiary institutions, employers, and the students themselves. It will not encourage the pursuit of excellent, though it might encourage speed and extent of accumulation of credits;
- where 'standards' of achievement are obscured in moderation processes, a Unit Standard may not reveal very much about the level of knowledge and skill to be associated with it;
- to the extent that Unit Standard credits do not reveal much about a student's performance – either in absolute terms or relative to that of other students – employers and tertiary institutions are likely to be dissatisfied with Unit Standards as an indicator of ability and achievement and hence suitability for placement or employment – particularly in high demand courses or jobs requiring high or very specific ability;
- some lowering of achievement standards could result from the varying interpretations of what is required at the various levels, and if some providers do not want to be seen as making stricter judgments about student performance against the 'standards' than other providers;
- some schools may introduce alternative means of providing the quality exit certification which they perceive their students to need for entry to tertiary education and employment. This may be facilitated by universities and employer groups;
 - increasing amounts of public money and

... the pass/fail approach of Unit Standards will not provide the degree of differentiation between students and trainees in terms of learning and understanding sought by parents, tertiary institutions, employers, and the students themselves.

teacher time will be spent on moderation, accreditation, audit, and other quality management processes in an effort to solve consistency problems and win acceptance of NQF qualifications. Some forms of scaling may well be introduced unofficially;

- the tension between claims that "clear and transparent" standards have been identified and the extensive moderation and other processes required – which are based on the assumption that such standards don't in practice exist – will be increasingly recognised; and
- implementation of the NQF may be accompanied by legislative action or strong financial inducements to ensure widespread development and use of qualifications on the NQF. In other words large-scale competency-based awards will last as long as government funding and political enthusiasm last (Wolf p. 137). After those have been exhausted, it is likely to be largely confined to where it started and for which it is most suited – the traditional crafts and the professions, though in a holistic – not narrow behavioural and atomistic – way. Other sectors, including the schools, may have gained something in terms of some greater clarity about, for example, their objectives, but the costs for teachers, schools and other providers, and students will, in my view, far outweigh the benefits. The international reputation of New Zealand qualifications and the ability of our students to gain tertiary places and employment overseas may well be damaged.

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
Web: www.educationforum.org.nz