

## A framework for lifelong learning? Adult and community education and the NZQA

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### ABSTRACT

What follows is an examination of some of the assumptions and intentions of the National Qualifications Framework, and an analysis of how these might impact on both the provision and practice of adult and community education in New Zealand. In particular, the paper focuses on the possible effects on adult learners. The sections which follow first examine the three main elements of change (standards based assessment, unit standards, and mapping qualifications onto a hierarchical 'framework'), incorporating a consideration of the special issue of competence and excellence. The paper ends with a brief discussion and some tentative conclusions.

### Introduction: The NZQA framework

As many readers will know, New Zealand is but one of a number of developed countries who have introduced major reforms in vocational education and training. The extent to which certain aspects of these reforms could impact on adult and community education is the main subject of this paper.

Recent reforms in education have arisen in tandem with unusually high levels of unemployment, difficulties with the balance of payments, and the growing tendency of central governments to withdraw from direct provision of services - while in many cases retaining significant control over the financing and delivery of such services. In short, all recent educational reforms have taken place within the context of a New Right approach by government (Peters, Marshall & Massey, 1994). Within this broad political context, reforms in vocational education and training are aimed at upskilling the population in a way which will assist economic recovery and growth. In New Zealand, this has been publicly acknowledged by both Labour and National government politicians over several years.

The impetus for educational reform came both from the politicians themselves, and from a wide range of supporting documents and publications. Perhaps the critical turning point came with the two-volume Treasury brief to the incoming government in 1987, of which one complete volume was dedicated to education (New Zealand Treasury, 1987). In the organisation and administration of education, the subsequent Picot Report (*Administering for Excellence*, 1988) led the way. The national importance of 'relevant' education was the key theme of an influential publication by the New Zealand Planning Council (Callister & Haines, 1991), and was also an important issue in the Porter-led analysis of New Zealand's (potential) competitive advantage in the international economy (Crocombe et al., 1991). Government consideration of non-formal adult education has

been almost invisible during these developments, as can be seen clearly in the most recent general statements on education (notably, *Education for the 21st Century*, 1994).

The pattern of vocational education reforms which began in the late 1980s, has tended to be similar across countries, although the rate of development has differed. In New Zealand, Australia, Scotland, England and Wales, the USA, and South Africa, developments appear to be building on a single broad template. This in turn appears to be modelled on what are perceived to be successful reforms in vocational training in Europe, particularly in Germany and to a lesser extent in France. It is also pertinent to note that these training 'successes' may have been more dependent on the success of these European economies than has been acknowledged to date. A recent slump in the German economy, for example, has reportedly undermined the system of vocational training in that country (Tenfelde, 1996).

In all of these vocational education reforms, there are three main elements:

- A shift away from norm-referenced written examinations to forms of standards-based assessment, with much more emphasis on the assessment of valid and reliable performances demonstrating that skills have been learned;
- Learning organised by carefully specified units or modules of various kinds and sizes, with students having to reach the pre-fixed standard in all requirements to gain credit for that unit, along with an abandonment of the old apprentice 'time-served' approach to completion of qualifications;
- Units and, deriving from this, qualifications mapped onto a hierarchical 'framework' generally of five to eight 'levels', with more advanced units placed at higher levels, and more advanced qualifications requiring a significant proportion of units from these higher levels.

In New Zealand, the reforms in qualifications and vocational education have been driven by a new government agency, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). This agency arose out of major structural reforms relating to central educational administration. These structural reforms came largely from the recommendations of the Picot Report, along with a range of other educational reports appearing at about the same time. NZQA also had its origins in two significant reviews of examinations and assessment in New Zealand schools (*Learning and Achieving*, 1986; *Tomorrow's Standards*, 1990). NZQA was formally established as a body (and completely separate from the new Ministry of Education) by the Education Amendment Act of 1990. As a key task, NZQA was charged with rationalising what was at the time a very complex vocational qualifications system. This was to be done by "developing a framework of national qualifications in secondary schools and in post-school education and training" (Education Amendment Act, 1990: Section 253).

NZQA began with preliminary survey work to ascertain opinions about a framework and other recommended developments. This was accompanied by consultations, mainly with the education sector and industry, and with government. Following analysis of the results, NZQA announced that *all* nationally recognised qualifications, including school examinations in academic and general education, would be part of what was to be known as the National Qualifications Framework (henceforth, the Framework). The only initial exception was for university qualifications, as these were protected by a separate part of the Act.<sup>1</sup> The Framework continues to develop at the time of writing (July, 1996), albeit more slowly than was originally conceived. Taking into account its extensive associated requirements, the Framework incorporates all three of the elements of change listed above.

In the early consultations over the developing Framework, NZQA approached directly or received submissions from a wide range of groups. Results were published in a 1991 document entitled *Developing The National Qualifications Framework* (NZQA, 1991). In the list of people and organisations who were consulted, adult and community educators are conspicuous by their absence. One Rural Education Activities Programme centre appears on the list. With the significant

exception of a number of whanau and other Maori groups, no other adult or community education groups seem to have been consulted or made a submission.

This in itself is not so surprising. The Framework was set up to deal primarily with qualifications in formal education, and especially to have an important role in the field of vocational education and training. The only perceived link at the time with most adult and community non-formal education would therefore be in the area of training for adult educators. Here some formal qualifications already existed, and it probably did not seem problematic that Framework qualifications in this area would be developed. When in 1994-95 a good deal of work was done on these qualifications major reservations were expressed about the procedures and the outcomes by academic adult educators associated with the development process. That particular development, however, is not the main focus of this paper.

What follows is a more detailed examination of some of the assumptions and intentions of the Framework, and an analysis of how these might impact on both the provision and practice of adult and community education in New Zealand. In particular, the paper focuses on the possible effects on adult learners. The sections which follow first examine the three main elements of change noted in the Introduction, incorporating a consideration of the special issue of competence and excellence. The paper ends with a brief discussion and some tentative conclusions.

## Standards and standards-based assessment

In general, there is nothing odd about standards-based assessment within the ambit of adult and community education. It could be argued that such an approach sits much more easily with theories of adult teaching and learning than does any form of norm-based assessment aimed at ranking students. Indeed, it could be argued that for adult learners to have clear and unequivocal standards to aim at in any learning programme is probably a very positive development. This applies either when adult learners are auditing or when they are formally enrolled in a course which carries some credit towards a qualification.

Yet it is equally certain that many adults learn for the sake of learning, and are not at all interested in undergoing any type of formal assessment. Would such learners be interested in knowing what the appropriate 'standard' was for courses in which they did not want to be assessed? Would knowing such standards assist in either motivation or (eventual) achievement? Those are empirical questions. What is not an empirical question, but rather relates to assessment theory, is how such a 'standard' might be set. For adult learners would almost certainly want to know using what criteria and through what process the standards had been developed.

It has been argued elsewhere (Peddie, 1992, 1993b; Peddie & Tuck, 1995), that standards are not waiting, objectively 'out there' for some NZQA unit writer to come along, identify and place into units. Instead, standards are based primarily on the experience and/or expectations of the unit writer or teacher. Put another way, they are to some degree norm-based. On the other hand, the focus in developing such standards is on the actual course goals, rather than just on testing to produce a ranked list of learners. This tends to make a standards-based approach more valid and, if properly assessed, more reliable. And if standards are developed partly on the basis of known norms of an identifiable group of learners, there is a good chance that they will be both valid for the learning programme and appropriate for that group.

Perhaps unfortunately for those in favour of a standards-based approach, however, adult learners tend to display a very wide range of prior experience, learning abilities and specific aptitudes (Jarvis, 1995). This means that it is not really possible to say what standard a 'typical' group of adult learners might reach in any particular learning task.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in a formal learning situation in which the course is based on one or more units on the Framework, the suitability of the prescribed standards for a range of adult learners may well be suspect. Of course, in many such situations, the standards will be those required by industry. In the case of adult learners seeking qualifications for

work, or an upgrade of their current qualifications, such standards may then be seen as quite valid and appropriate.

While the standards themselves may draw a mixed response from adult learners in formal programmes, the use of standards-based assessment is likely to be welcomed. NZQA has rightly stressed the importance of having valid and reliable assessment against the unit standards, assessment which, to cite a frequently used phrase, is 'fit for purpose'. NZQA has pressed for multiple opportunities to be offered to learners to reach the standards, and has rejected totally the notion of a fully norm-based assessment system in which only a set percentage of students can 'pass'. This downplaying of an artificial pass/fail approach will undoubtedly please many adult learners.

It is still somewhat unclear to what extent NZQA will encourage assessments of deep learning (Ramsden, 1992) and understanding as opposed to observable demonstrations of skills. It is also unclear whether NZQA is committed to find ways of assessing attitudes and values. Yet, for many adults, such aspects lie at the core of any valid educational programme. While this is an important point, it is worth noting that previous formal examinations and other types of assessment hardly touched on these same critical aspects of learning.

One further point needs mentioning here. Older adults are just as keen to learn as their younger colleagues, but some are physically less able to perform the tasks required to demonstrate the acquisition of some skills. At times their physical condition can also affect their learning styles (Knox, 1977). Yet they can enjoy skill-based courses, and can successfully acquire the understanding and knowledge of a process or skill without ever wanting or needing to put their learning into practice. If such persons are involved in a formal learning situation with standards-based assessment, they may be placed at a significant disadvantage in such assessment, even if they achieve the knowledge and understanding which they set out to achieve.

Most of what has been discussed in this section applies only to those adults who enrol in formal learning for courses registered on the Framework (discussed later in this paper). Yet in an age where it is increasingly obvious that most adults will have to retrain at least once during their working careers, the points made here are very important.

## Modularisation and unit standards

The second major shift in recent NZQA reforms is towards the carefully regulated packaging of learning outcomes into what are called 'unit standards'. It is very important to stress that, in NZQA's eyes, these are *not* to be equated with 'parts of a taught curriculum'. The unit standards comprise a closely related group of learning outcomes, along with statements of purpose, 'range' statements, indicating more clearly how much/what is required, and sometimes other points of clarification, which look very much like curriculum units.

The unit standards do normally leave the choice of specific content and all decisions on teaching methods and techniques to the teacher. These choices will, however, be made on the basis of information contained in the unit standards, information which appears to display very little difference from other curriculum packages. In some cases, the unit standards are *more* restrictive. This is not so surprising, as the aim of the unit standards is to produce a very clearly defined set of learning outcomes.

The difference, in theory, lies in the fact that these are indeed outcome-based units which can be combined into a broader curriculum package by the teacher. The actual teaching/learning package, then, might consist of a semester-long block of learning, in the process of which the students covered (and were assessed against), the outcomes for three or four different unit standards. It may even be the case that the outcomes for one unit standard are assessed in two distinct teaching/learning packages, taught in two different semesters or even years.<sup>3</sup>

That is the theory, or at least that is the strong view of NZQA. Indeed, the first Chief Executive Officer of NZQA argued strongly that the unit standards approach actually gives much greater professional responsibility to teachers than have previous approaches to curriculum planning and implementation (David Hood, personal communication, 1995).

In practice, it is nevertheless quite likely that teachers will increasingly teach more and more in terms of individual unit standards (see Peddie, 1995). There are three main reasons for this claim. First, each unit standard *does* comprise, or at least point towards, a coherent teaching/learning package. It will often be far simpler and less time-consuming for the teacher to select content, plan appropriate methods of presentation, and assess a single unit standard than to look for ways of combining them. This is particularly true when the unit standards are broadly arranged in a hierarchical sequence (see later in this paper). Secondly, the practical difficulties of re-assessing students are possibly more easily handled if a class is moving through a series of relatively small modules arranged in a closely regulated pattern.

Thirdly, and most importantly, one of the more positive and widely accepted arguments for a unit standard approach is that the students will know in advance exactly what they are to do, and on what they will be assessed to gain credit. This suggests that any attempt to offer a broad-based curriculum package which covers a range of unit standards, and in which assessing for elements of these standards is scattered through the programme will be less attractive to learners. Such a programme would potentially make it more difficult for students to grasp exactly what they had to do to complete a unit standard (each of which comprises several outcomes). Furthermore, the introduction of bridging and other material which was not part of any unit standard in the package could well cause lower motivation, or even resentment on the part of students.

If this argument is correct, and over time most teaching is conducted in terms of individual unit standards, what possible effects will there be on learners in general, and on adult learners in particular?

The answer is clearly speculative. If the Framework as originally conceived becomes the means of gaining all qualifications, then what follows will be either vindicated or shown to be incorrect over the next ten to twenty years. Right now, it appears that in the unit standards approach lies perhaps the greatest threat to a 'learning society' (Boshier, 1980), and to the needs and wants of adult learners: namely, the closing down of the curriculum. This derives from the fact that the unit standards are set in place quite deliberately to ensure that certain closely specified outcomes are achieved, and that certain specific skills are mastered. The danger arising from a teaching approach as described above is that *only* those skills and outcomes will form part of the taught curriculum.

This concern is reinforced by evidence that the closing down of curriculum through the unit standards is a natural outcome of explicit government policy in this general area. At a major curriculum conference hosted by the secondary teacher union in May, 1991, the then Minister of Education spelled out very clearly the government's role:

In today's world, issues of curriculum are no longer just the concern of educators, but a matter of national and governmental interest.

In the past, the curriculum has been essentially shaped by teachers, education administrators, and academic and curriculum specialists. Now, and for the first time in countries such as the USA, UK and Australia, we find governments being increasingly prepared to legislate for the curriculum...

...The change is a result of government's heightened recognition of education as a significant aspect of national development, its central position in the development of a sound economic strategy (Smith, 1991, pp. 2-3).

While the Minister may have been speaking of the school curriculum, the links with vocational and other forms of education are clear. The warning for adult and community education is just as clear.

What then will happen to any attempt to renegotiate the learning contract, or to go off on a promising tangent, or to search for greater depth in one particular area, or any number of other variations that regularly occur with adult learners? All of these 'normal' and educationally very healthy paths are likely to be resisted by the teacher, and possibly also by younger classmates eager to achieve their qualifications in the shortest time and by the most direct route.

By way of summary, the use of unit standards may well be a positive factor for adults studying with vocational or specific (re)training goals, but there are very serious issues to be addressed in terms of adults seeking broader learning outcomes while studying in formal post-compulsory courses which operate through unit standards.

## Competence, merit and excellence

A further important issue may have significant effects on adult learners. One of the fiercest aspects of the debate between the universities and NZQA is over very different perceptions of terms like competence, merit and excellence.<sup>4</sup> In brief, the universities perceive the push towards a standard based on 'competence' as leading to mediocrity; NZQA totally rejects that view, noting for example that sometimes achieving competence will require complete mastery of all tasks. The universities argue that they are in the business of striving for excellence; NZQA points out that excellent learners may achieve a new form of 'excellence' by progressing very quickly through the required unit standards to gain their qualifications. Finally, the universities stress that they are aiming to extend all students but particularly the very best; NZQA argues that the framework is aiming to upskill *all* New Zealanders and to remove the sense of failure which was so common with norm-referenced examinations.

While the whole area of merit and excellence has received extensive coverage elsewhere (Peddie 1993a, 1993b, 1993c; Peddie and Tuck, 1995), the issue of competence, excellence and adult learning has to date not been addressed. This section notes a few of the issues, and relates them to earlier discussion.

The first and major issue relates back to the discussion on standards. It is commonly observed that many adult learners in formal learning strive to do well (McGivney, 1991). It also seems to be the case that many of these adults are content only if a very high grade is awarded to them for their performance. If, then, the only outcome of a unit standard is to 'gain credit', in other words to have reached the standard required and to be perceived as competent, will this affect adult learners?

Once again, empirical research in this area would help, but one point is clear. Given that only one 'passing grade' is available, adult learners may be precluded from any public recognition of 'trying to do better'. Even if the teacher announces the adult learner's achievement, it may still not be perceived as important by other learners when there is no grade or score recorded formally for such an achievement. High achievement may be a personal point of (unrecognised) honour, but will that suffice?

Other adult learners will also, if an earlier argument is accepted, be less likely to strive at all if they consider the standard to be set too high or too low. This is because, unlike those noted above, a number of adult learners have a tendency to focus more on the learning than on the outcome or award received (Knowles, 1980).

It is quite possible, then, that the overall effect of a single standard required to achieve credit will be to lower the motivation to succeed well for most adult learners in formal courses on the Framework. This will be the result of the combination of factors discussed above. This is also likely to be true even if there is in some unit standards a 'merit' level above the level of credit/competence, as many adults will not be content unless they achieve 'excellence'.

Secondly, will adult learners take up the NZQA challenge and strive for a new form of excellence by accumulating more credit/unit standards faster than other students? While this is possible, adult

learners are far more likely to want to be involved in deep learning (Ramsden, 1992), and to explore areas in which they have a special interest, than in rushing to complete the course. Given many adults' family and work commitments, it is also less likely that such an approach will be possible than it is for younger learners.

It is also very unclear as to whether adult learners will perceive the rapid gaining of more credit as the same thing as gaining an excellent grade or mark in each unit they study. It might be added that this is also an untested assumption in the case of the younger learners.

Finally here, while it is clear that the issue of merit and excellence is significant in the areas of adult formal learning, it is unlikely to have any significant effect on adult non-formal learning. In non-formal programmes, where formal assessment seldom plays a part, adult learners seek their own forms of satisfaction.

### The national qualifications framework

The previous sections leave open a significant question. Why would adults who do *not* want the formal qualifications, or the formal and restricted education offered for such qualifications, be involved in learning aimed at unit standards registered on the Framework? Would not such people be taking non-formal (non-qualification) courses with leisure pursuits or travel in mind, out of curiosity and/or for the pure enjoyment of learning - just as they are now? To provide at least a partial answer to these questions, it is necessary to examine briefly the concept of a qualifications framework and see what implications there are for adult learning and the provision of that learning.

The New Zealand National Qualifications Framework comprises eight different levels, arranged in a hierarchical sequence. This means that learning tasks at Level Four are presumably more advanced and more difficult to achieve than those at lower levels (see Peddie, 1996). Each unit standard is unique, in the sense that it does not overlap with any other unit, and each is allocated a certain amount of credit at a single level on the Framework. Thus, even though a unit standard might be regarded as an easier learning task for people in one qualification than in another, it always offers the same amount of credit and at the same level. A Level Three introductory unit standard on spreadsheets, for example, would probably be more challenging for learners taking it as part of a sales programme than for those doing a qualification in computing, but the credit awarded for satisfactory completion would be the same.

These features of uniqueness of content, level and credit are seen as significant aspects of the Framework by NZQA. These features are not always found in Frameworks developed overseas. In Australia, for example, two units with a good deal of common content may be developed independently for two different qualifications. Furthermore, they may then be placed at different levels on the Australian Standards Framework. This occurred with units for office skills, where both public service and industry-based qualifications were developed in 1992-93.

The Framework and its unit standards are becoming more important. High levels of early publicity, both on television and through widely distributed printed materials, appear to have raised the consciousness of New Zealanders with regard to the existence and purpose of the Framework. Secondary schools are now also coming to terms with the Framework, particularly as more and more have become involved in widespread trials of unit standards in general subjects. Both Mathematics and Geography were trialed in a number of schools throughout 1995, and other subject trials have followed. A broadly based National Certificate for the senior secondary school is now being developed. Associated government moves, and in particular the widely publicised 'Skill New Zealand' policy, have added to public awareness of change.

Case evidence of the direct effects of this new consciousness arose at a meeting of university Directors of Continuing Education early in 1994. The University of Canterbury had been contacted with regard to one of its large professional training courses. The professional organisation involved

had suggested that the training course should be on the Framework, and hinted that it might otherwise have to consider approaching a polytechnic. Victoria University of Wellington had had a similar comment from the organisation for which they ran one of their regularly-held professional courses. The University of Auckland not only noted a small increase in professional course attendees enquiring about 'certificates', but had had several similar queries from enrollees in General Studies (mainly liberal arts) courses. Of this latter group, one or two specifically mentioned credit and the Framework.

This last example is perhaps the most interesting, but the others are also important. They illustrate the ways in which institutional and professional expectations are being changed by the growing credentialism prevalent in New Zealand society, now firmly linked to NZQA and the Framework. Note that there was no request to change, update or upgrade the courses involved; there was simply a wish to place them on the Framework so that, presumably, they could be 'officially' recognised and credit could be assigned. Interestingly enough, the requests were made even where no qualification was offered, or was likely to be offered.

In the last example, adult students enrolling in what were mainly general interest courses and other forms of non-vocational education had been affected by the same credentialism. The point here is not why such people were seeking a form of certification, but simply that they were. Yet they were enrolled in courses which had never had (and still do not have) any form of summative assessment.<sup>5</sup> A few of the enquiries, it should be added, were in courses which clearly were skills-based, even though they were not part of any certificate programme or clearly defined curriculum package.

The issue which arises from this phenomenon is whether these requests had, or will have, any effect on adult non-formal learning. There are a range of answers to this question. First, the initial reaction internally in the Centre for Continuing Education was to examine the possibility of packaging some of the General Studies courses into University Certificates. While the introduction of such Certificates remains a possibility on other (and more appropriately educational) grounds, that scenario was rejected. This was because such a move would clearly result in more formal and formally assessed courses. This, in turn, could either sharply limit enrolment by adults not interested in qualifications, or create a very awkward teaching-learning situation where different sections of the class required quite different treatment.

Secondly, the Centre looked at the usefulness of creating a Certificate of Completion (or something similar). Such a document is already supplied to participants in selected professional (upskilling) courses. That too was rejected as an answer which could not be justified educationally in non-formal courses; and because it was seen as an unsatisfactorily general answer to what appeared at that stage to be a limited problem.

A further possible result of the introduction of the Framework is one which needs some quite extensive research to verify. University Centres for Continuing Education are currently not permitted to place any of their courses on the Framework, following a ruling in each case by the Vice-Chancellor of the University. There has been in several University Centres, moreover, a distinct fall-off in enrolments in General Studies programmes. Is there a link here?

While competition from other institutions has always been present, one recent change is in the widescale advertising of polytechnic certificates and diplomas, and a similar increase in advertising from what have become known as private training establishments (PTEs). These latter are private training schools and organisations in a wide range of subject areas, including tourism, business studies, English as a foreign language, and early childhood teacher education. The PTEs in question are registered on the Framework and accredited to teach courses based on unit standards, in a few cases up to and including degree level. It is quite possible that some adult learners who would previously have enrolled in general interest courses at a university are now taking some of the qualification courses registered on the Framework, taught by non-university providers. This may



well be linked to the economy showing strong signs of recovery, and the growing awareness of the need for credentials discussed earlier.

Another obvious possibility is that those previously attending university courses are moving to non-formal learning in secondary school night classes, community centres and informal learning networks. There is, however, no clear evidence to show that such programmes have suddenly taken a substantial jump in numbers of participants. Contact with one large Auckland school-based community programme showed that, while numbers were steadily rising, it was more in the area of what might be defined as skills-based courses (including languages). The co-ordinator of the same programme volunteered the point that students were increasingly asking for 'certificates'. This she attributed to an increase in employers being interested in evidence of skills, which in turn led to learners wanting something formal on paper (J. Barbour, personal communication, 1996).

To summarise to this point; the Framework clearly has direct and reasonably predictable effects on adult learners entering formal education and training programmes. But it also seems to be having an effect - to date relatively minor - on both the demand for and the 'certification' of non-formal courses and programmes when these are provided by a recognised educational institution. Learner numbers in non-formal courses also appear to be affected. It does seem possible from local case data that adult learners, like their younger counterparts, are tending to enrol in courses which can offer some form of skills-based learning.

Even more speculative at this stage is any analysis of the effects of the Framework on the provision of (especially non-formal) adult and community education. There are nevertheless some warning signs emerging from what has already been discussed, and some developments overseas which should be taken into account.

What has already been shown in this section is that the Framework appears to be having an effect on the ways in which some adult learners view their learning. As credentialism continues to grow in importance, and as more adult learners seek Framework-based qualifications courses as a result, this will place pressure on providers of non-formal education. This in turn raises the risk that funding for non-formal learning will become even more problematic than it always has been in the past. The most serious risk is that government will withdraw all funding for non-formal adult and community education in an attempt to ensure that the programmes of more providers are registered on the Framework. While this raises questions which are much broader than can be discussed in this brief paper, the link is clear between the Framework as an all-encompassing system of credentials and qualifications and possible future restrictions in the field of non-formal education.

Evidence for this analysis can be seen overseas, especially in the United Kingdom. In England, especially, university providers of liberal adult education are being pressurised through a combination of government policy and funding restrictions to re-package their programmes into credit-bearing courses and certificates (B. Findsen, personal communication, 1996). Similarly, in Australia, only a tiny number of universities still offer liberal adult programmes through centres for continuing education, with some being reduced to offering money-making professional courses, and others simply being disestablished altogether. While in neither country can it be argued that this is simply the effect of a 'framework', the policies which lie behind such developments are essentially the same as those which are developing in New Zealand.

## Discussion and conclusions

It seems clear from all of the points made in this paper that the introduction of New Zealand's National Qualifications Framework is highly likely to have significant effects on adult learning in this country. These effects will be experienced in formal learning, especially in courses offering unit standards registered on the Framework. There will almost certainly be somewhat more indirect effects on non-formal adult learning, effects which may pose particular problems for institutions,

organisations and volunteer networks seeking to provide education for leisure, to satisfy adult curiosity, or for the pure enjoyment of learning.

It must be recognised that the new approaches may well have some very positive effects on adult learning in formal education. The provision of clearly defined goals may arguably be at times restrictive and sometimes even anti-educational. Nevertheless, in a vocational or skills-based programme this provision of clear goals will be just as helpful to adult learners as it will for those coming straight from compulsory education. The potentially clearer focus of the teaching, the use of valid and reliable performance-based assessments, the downplaying of a pass/fail approach, and the provision of further opportunities to demonstrate competence; these are developments which should appeal to adult and younger learners alike.

On the other hand, it has been proposed in this paper that the negative effects on non-formal learning could be of three main kinds: a decreasing number of enrolments in non-formal programmes; an increasing focus on narrowed outcomes (both by course designers and on the part of the learners themselves); and the putting at risk of the wide provision of nonformal study. On balance, the potential trend towards more closed options and tightly focused programmes, which is inherent in a unit standard approach, is the most dangerous of the concerns discussed here.

The word 'dangerous' is used deliberately. It would be naïve to argue conspiracy theories. Yet given frequent government statements about the importance of learning for the economic good of New Zealand, there is the very real danger that all learning based in institutions of any kind will in time be seen as a public good only when it relates to 'useful' subjects and skills. As noted earlier, this could lead to the decision that all courses funded by government would have to meet criteria of economic relevance. Along with but independent of that possibility, it may be that all learners will gradually be so accustomed to credentialism, pre-specified goals and set standards that much of the joy and excitement of adult learning will be lost.

This presents an absolutely vital challenge to adult educators. It is critically important to make sure these negative effects do not eventuate. Faced with continued pressure from government for economically driven education, meeting this challenge will be difficult. Furthermore, the introduction of standards-based assessment, the promotion of learning through carefully constructed outcomes-based units, and the provision of a national qualifications framework do have the potential for significant and positive effects on adult learning in formal programmes. Despite these positives, the arguments presented in this paper suggest that the system which is currently developing may ultimately have a negative effect on all adult and community education in New Zealand.

## Notes

1. The Act gives authority to the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors Committee to approve university degrees and other university qualifications. NZQA has consistently worked to alter this so that *all* degrees can be placed on the Framework.
2. Of course, if it is believed that standards *can* be objective, then this line of argument may not be perceived as convincing, or even relevant.
3. This may seem unlikely, but current curricula are in fact only conventionally packaged into years. A unit standard may fall equally into the last part of one year's course, and the start of the next.
4. In this paper, the distinction between 'merit' and 'excellence' will not be examined in detail. In brief, merit can be equated to a higher level than competence which can potentially be achieved by all learners. Excellence refers to a high level attainable by only the small numbers who are normally referred to as 'the best'; in other words, it is tied to an assessment system based on ranking (see Peddie 1993a, 1993b, 1993c).

5. Some courses, such as languages, do have informal and formative assessments to enable students to measure their own progress. There is, however, no grade or other recognition of a level of achievement.

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