

NZQA and the economic rationalisation of education

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the current role of NZQA as one of the major centralising forces in the New Zealand education system. Using Habermas' critique of modernity, it argues that NZQA is the product of a technocratic rationality which has become the modus operandi of reforms to administration in the New Zealand State and economy.

Introduction

For a decade, New Zealand governments have adopted a number of strategies for strengthening the management (or steering capacity) of the state, while simultaneously reducing its size. Thus, in all commercial areas of state activity the major strategy has been corporatisation, followed in some areas by privatisation. Corporatisation entails the transformation of the administrative environment of state activities in order that they acquire similar features to those of private business or commercial enterprises. Privatisation is the further step which involves a transfer of ownership. This is the ultimate objective of what has come to be called *economic rationalism*.

In the areas of health, social welfare and education, the main strategies of economic rationalism have been those of devolution and decentralisation. Although these terms are often conflated or given different meanings in different policy contexts, it is sometimes useful to distinguish between them. Martin defines devolution as "the *transfer* of power, authority, and responsibility from a national to a sub-national level", whereas decentralisation is defined as "the *delegation* of power and authority to lower levels, with ultimate responsibility remaining at the national level" (Martin, 1991: 268). Centralisation, on the other hand, involves an *increase* in the power and authority of central agencies of the state.

On these definitions, the restructuring of education has been a policy of decentralisation, rather than devolution, but with some strong components of centralisation in the state's regulatory and contractual functions. The legitimating rationale for decentralisation is that it produces greater flexibility and responsiveness, but in reality it produces a structure in which political demands and economic costs can be more effectively controlled (Codd, 1990). Thus, the effect of the decentralisation of certain areas of decision-making in education has been greater overall centralisation of control. Decentralisation and centralisation are indeed simultaneous political processes.

In this paper, I want to consider the current role of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority which, along with the Education Review Office, has become one of the major centralising forces within the New Zealand education system. I shall use some of the main ideas of Habermas's critique of modernity to argue that the National Qualifications Framework is the product of a technocratic

mode of rationality which has become the *modus operandi* of most of the administrative structures of the New Zealand state and economy during the past decade of structural reform. During this period, new forms of management and control have emerged as manifestations of the economic rationalism that now informs government policymaking. Key legislative antecedents of these new forms of state centralism are identified as the *State Sector Act (1988)* and the *Public Finance Act (1989)*. It is suggested that an explanation for these societal changes can be found in Habermas' s theory of sociopolitical crises and that new forms of assessment and credentialism are manifestations of what Habermas describes as a *crisis of motivation*.

The New Zealand qualifications authority

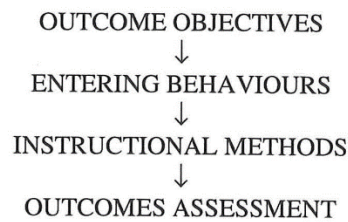
The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) is an independent statutory body established by the Education Amendment Act 1990 with two central purposes defined in legislation: "to establish a Qualifications Framework built on defined standards; and to ensure the quality of delivery of those standards on the Framework" (NZQA, 1993: 11).

In March 1991, within six months of its establishment, the NZQA released a discussion document under the title, *Designing the Framework*, proposing a national qualifications framework that would incorporate, within eight specified levels, "all national and nationally recognised qualifications which are the responsibility of the Qualifications Authority" (NZQA, 1991:36). The document proposed a unified, logically planned and systematic approach to the design and issuing of all educational and vocational awards, qualifications and credentials. The new form of assessment was to be "standards based" and the new credential was to be a National Certificate. From the outset, it was asserted that any distinction between *academic and vocational*/has been "discredited" and that all qualifications should comprise transferable units of learning, designed around clearly specified outcomes. These have become the controversial *unit standards*.

Unit standards have been characterised as "the building blocks" of the Framework. Each unit standard is a statement of the learning outcomes (objectives) which learners are expected to achieve and against which their performance is to be assessed. Initially called *units of learning* (NZQA, 1991) these modules or elements have become the basis upon which the Framework is to ensure comparability of *standards* across the full range of qualifications.

As initially conceived, unit standards were to be prescriptive behavioural statements that would delineate separate components of learning within a qualification and be capable of transfer for credit from one qualification to another. It is not surprising perhaps, that they have been a central focus of the universities' opposition to the Framework (New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 1994). The universities have argued that unit standards are incompatible with the notion of excellence and would have a disruptive effective on the coherence and integrity of university degrees. Not only would this produce a fragmentation of knowledge but it would emphasise measurable behaviours at the expense of creative problem-solving and higher level cognitive capabilities (Codd, 1994).

The unit standards methodology adopted by the NZQA requires a fundamental separation between the setting of educational standards and the development of a curriculum. This implies that learning outcomes can be delineated and specified in one context, while the educational judgements and decisions that are to produce these outcomes can be made in another, completely separate context. Such a separation of means from ends reflects the instrumental reasoning that lies behind this "outcomes model" of teaching and learning. The model can be represented graphically as follows (see Figure 1).

*Figure 1***Outcomes Model of Instruction and Assessment**

Essentially, this is a technocratic model of the educative process founded upon a positivist epistemology that asserts a rigid dichotomy between facts and values, implying that measurement and observation can avoid the problems of value justification. The dominant interest guiding the pursuit of knowledge is a technical one, in which criteria of efficiency and effectiveness are given priority and all other values are treated as unproblematic or simply seen as given. According to this way of thinking, the efficiency or effectiveness of a learning programme, or any other "system", can be assessed in terms of a calculated match between objectives and outcomes. The result is a form of management and public accountability that has an obvious appeal to those who are required to distribute goods and services within a competitive, market-orientated society. It produces a discourse and a form of bureaucratic control consistent with the overall purposes of economic rationalism.

The ascendancy of economic rationalism

The term "economic rationalism" has been used more commonly in Australia to describe the dominance of the economy and economic processes over all areas of state policy-making (Pusey, 1991). It is, perhaps arguably, the most appropriate term to describe the current context and processes of state policy-making in New Zealand. That it is a thoroughly modernist phenomenon is evidenced by its primary purpose of achieving a total rationalisation of the agencies and apparatus of the state to bring them into line with the policy prescriptions of free-market economics and corporate managerialism. Thus, the machinery of the state is removed from the unpredictable and ostensibly inefficient processes of political democracy and relocated partly within the ostensibly rational and efficient administrative processes of state bureaucracy and partly within the context of competitive market forces.

In New Zealand, the rise of economic rationalism coincided with the election of the fourth Labour Government on 14 July 1984. From this time Treasury became the most powerful bureaucratic influence in state policy-making. It was Treasury that produced the blueprint for Labour's programme of monetarist reforms in a volume of briefing papers to the incoming government entitled *Economic Management*. This policy text can now be seen as a comprehensive and clearly articulated statement of neoclassical economic theory combined with neo-liberal theories of state minimalism. It advocated the replacement of the state's redistributive role with the allocative role of the market and promoted the view that market exchanges extend the domain of choice, thereby reducing the amount of government intervention in the lives of its citizens and promoting the sum total of individual liberty. These arguments were extended to the social as well as the economic realm, proclaiming that the disengagement of the state and the application of market-based criteria in these areas is desirable to the extent that it is practicable.

From 1984 on this has become the dominant ideology guiding state policies in New Zealand. The proposition that a marketplace free of government intervention would work to the benefit of all, and the related proposition that excessive government spending was the prime cause of the

economic crisis, came to be held as self-evident facts rather than articles of faith. In their 1987 Brief to the Incoming Government, entitled *Government Management*, New Zealand Treasury officials produced another substantial policy document based almost entirely upon the doctrines of economic rationalism, and extending its core principles into the domains of social policy, including health, housing and education.

In a chapter on The Public Sector, the Treasury document (Treasury, 1987, vol, 1, pp. 55-56) presents a framework for managerial reform comprising the following key elements:

1. Clearly specified objectives which managers are responsible for achieving;
2. Freedom to manage resources for the efficient attainment of those objectives;
3. Accountability for all decisions made;
4. Effective assessment of performance;
5. Sufficient quantity and quality of information to enable performance assessment to be carried out.

This provided a model for two major related pieces of legislation during the second term of the fourth Labour Government. These twin pieces of legislation were the *State Sector Act (1988)* and the *Public Finance Act (1989)*.

The State Sector Act has changed substantially the role of the Public Service within the New Zealand state, calling into question its apolitical nature and emphasising "the vertical relationship between Minister and chief executive at the expense of lateral links across the government system" (Martin, 1990, p. 126). By changing the conditions of appointment, roles and functions of chief executives, the Act was designed to improve the accountability, responsiveness and efficiency of the Public Service. Thus, in accordance with the basic tenets of economic rationalism, it separated policy from operations and established a sharper distinction between political and managerial accountability.

The Public Finance Act was to take this process of rationalisation even further by shifting the basis of state control away from inputs and placing it on outputs and outcomes. *Inputs* are defined as the resources (capital, labour, materials) used to produce particular goods and services. *Outputs* are defined as the goods and services that are produced by a department or crown agency. *Outcomes* are the impacts on, or consequences for, the community of the outputs or activities of the Government.

The state becomes both an *owner* of its agencies and a *purchaser* of their outputs, with a contractual distinction drawn between these two roles (Pallot, 1991, p. 173). This reflects a general shift from a demand-led to a supply-side approach to the management of government funds. In education, as in all other areas of public expenditure, this means a shift of focus from inputs to outputs. At the policy level, there is a parallel shift away from an emphasis on improving the amount and quality of provision towards an emphasis on controlling the levels of outputs (Codd, 1990).

The Treasury's role in this area of government management is defined by the *Public Finance Act* (Minister of Finance, 1989). The Act requires that Treasury assessments of public expenditure be based on the quantity, quality and cost of outputs. Another requirement of the *Public Finance Act* is the assessment of *outcomes*, which are described by a Treasury official as "Government-determined views on what is to be achieved by the outputs" (Greig, 1990: 55). For schools, "outcomes refer to skills or other aspects of learning" (ibid) and student assessment becomes the mechanism for measuring these outcomes.

The economic rationalisation of education

Marginson (1993) makes the point that under the influence of economic rationalism education is "seen as a branch of economic policy rather than a mix of social, economic and cultural policy" (Marginson, 1993: 56). The economic content, moreover, is neoclassical or market-liberal and is combined with managerialism to produce centrally determined and controlled policies associated with devolved responsibility for operations. The focus of accountability is on the measurement of outputs within input-output models of production and on the introduction of market-style competition to improve performance and efficiency.

Marginson argues that the convergence of general and vocational education, with its accompanying emphasis on learning outcomes and competencies is essentially an *economic* reform. Thus,

... competencies are the form of educational output that is perhaps the most easily adapted to sale as an economic commodity, and the development of competencies is likely to accelerate the development of educational markets and of input-output management and measurement in education (Marginson, 1993: 170).

This instrumentalist view of education is strongly subscribed to by the NZQA and is reflected in the division between "standards setting" and curriculum "delivery" that is enshrined in the National Qualifications Framework. In its 1993 *Briefing Papers for the Incoming Government* the NZQA states:

In practice, the academic, operational and management independence of institutions is also encouraged by:

- separating clearly the setting of standards from the development of curriculum; and
- a systems approach to the assurance of quality (NZQA, 1993: 9)

Such a separation makes sense only within a market model of education in which knowledge is reduced to a commodity and this is indeed the model that the NZQA is promoting. In a recently published paper, a Strategic Manager from the NZQA describes the Framework as merely a tool designed to respond to a set of intersecting pressures" (Barker, 1995: 20). These pressures are defined in political terms and arise within a user-pays environment in which the teacher-student relationship is no longer a pedagogical one but a contractual one. Thus, according to Barker,

1. Most obvious among the pressures are ' purchaser demands' at the tertiary level. There appear to be three:
2. Student demands which derive from their role as purchasing consumers.
3. Government demands where government is an indirect consumer purchasing for society.

The demands of employers who, as end users of qualifications, have either a direct or indirect purchasing interest in the system (Barker, 1995: 20).

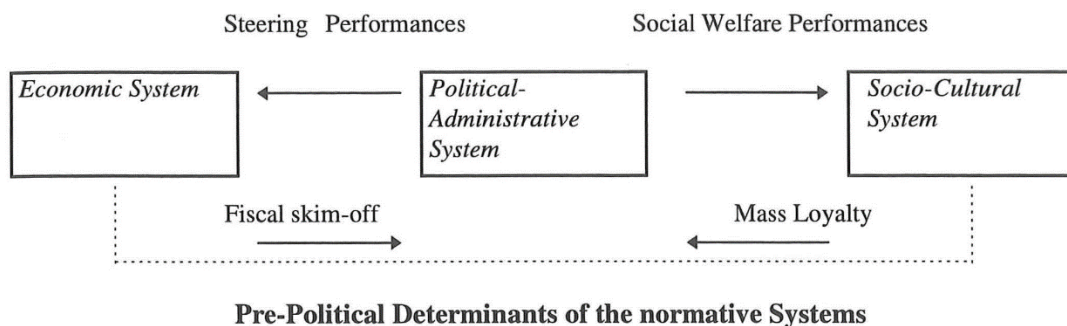
On this model "standards" are to be determined by "purchaser demands". The customer (student, Government, employer) sets the standard and if the provider does not meet it, the customer goes elsewhere. An education market is thus expected to work like any other market, and as with other markets, the role of the state is to regulate in order to protect the property rights (in this case the intellectual property rights) of individual consumers.

Education policy and the crisis of motivation

Why has the NZQA, with its technocratic Qualifications Framework, become such a strong centralising force in New Zealand education at this point in time? In an attempt to answer this question, I shall draw upon Habermas' s theory of how sociopolitical crises produce what he calls "the colonisation of the life-world" by technocratic rationality, which is his term for instrumental reason.

In his classic work, *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas (1975) constructs a model of advanced capitalist societies comprising three sub-systems: the economic sub-system; the political-administrative sub-system; the sociocultural sub-system (see Figure 2).

Figure 2



The maintenance of social order and the reproduction of social relations requires that each of these sub-systems is mutually supportive of the others. Ever present in each of them, however, are crisis tendencies which carry threats of social disorder, disintegration or anomie (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

<i>Point of origin (sub-systems)</i>	<i>System crisis</i>	<i>Identity crisis</i>
Economic	Economic crisis	—
Political	Rationality crisis	Legitimation crisis
Socio-cultural	—	Motivation crisis

Socio-political crises emerge when there is a breakdown of social integration, i.e. when there is a weakening of the consensual foundations of normative structures, or a breakdown of system integration, i.e. when the system "allows fewer possibilities for problem solving than are necessary to the continued existence of the system" (Habermas, 1975: 2). These crises, which can arise at different points, may invoke different sub-system responses. A crisis within the economic sub-system, for example, may be averted by what Habermas calls "the steering capacity" of the administrative subsystem. Such steering may involve either intervention or deregulation at different historical moments.

Of particular importance in modern societies are the sociocultural consequences of crisis tendencies that emerge within the two functional systems of the market economy and the administrative state. Historically, the maintenance of these two sub-systems has destroyed many cultural life forms, but as Habermas states:

The internal dynamic of these two functionally intermeshed subsystems, however, also reacts back upon the rationalised life forms of modern society that made them possible to the extent that the processes of monetarisation and bureaucratisation penetrate the core domains of cultural reproduction, social integration and socialisation (Habermas, 1987: 355).

Thus, we have the phenomenon that Habermas refers to as "the colonisation of the lifeworld". The life-world, as Habermas uses this concept, is the taken-for-granted world of daily practice. It is the world of everyday experience, comprising unstated beliefs and assumptions, pre-interpreted situations, traditional ways of doing things and tacit forms of communicative action and mutual

understanding. In modern society, Habermas argues, the life-world is constantly threatened by the systemic imperatives for crisis management and the forces of technocratic rationality required to maintain the state and the economy. Giddens summarises his position as follows:

Basically, the theme is that the colonisation of the life-world has destroyed traditional bases of communicative action, without replacing them with the forms of postconventional rationality that are required to couple the life-world to the range of activities controlled by expanding economic and political steering mechanisms. The colonisation of the life-world has a double implication. Within the life-world itself, reification has the consequence of loss of meaning or anomie with the range of associated problems which this produces within personality structures. From the perspective of the steering mechanisms, the result is a set of motivational and legitimation deficits (Giddens, 1985: 110).

It is this dynamic interaction between systemic imperatives for crisis management and the substantive features of the life-world that provides the main focus of Habermas's transformative project. He rejects the radical post-modern critique of reason itself and argues for the restoration of communicative reason which transcends both subject-centred and instrumental reason. It is essentially an argument for the restoration of participatory democracy in all public spheres of social life.

Turning now to education policy, we can employ Habermas's concepts to gain a clearer understanding of the way in which crises that originated within the political or economic spheres have directed the state towards particular kinds of policy responses in education. Thus, some of us have argued that the New Zealand *Tomorrow's Schools* reforms were shaped by crises of political legitimation and economic management. In an attempt to manage these crises, it is argued, the New Zealand state responded with policies for the restructuring of educational administration that were deeply contradictory. In these circumstances, the policies contained fundamental contradictions between a democratic imperative for more community participation in decision-making, and an economic imperative for tighter controls over public expenditure. These conflicting imperatives for devolution and control, although they originated in crises that were external to education, had produced crises that were in themselves educational.

In the context of state policy-making, as Hargreaves argues, educational crises:

... take the form of a succession of critical points where a significant gap is perceived between educational policy and practice on the one hand and society's needs on the other; where existing solutions are seen to be exhausted or to have failed, or where new needs are felt to have emerged. It is under such conditions that support grows for new styles of state management, different patterns of initiatives; for a new overall strategy which promises to produce a closer match between schooling and society's needs (Hargreaves, 1989: 103).

Drawing on the work of Habermas (1976), Hargreaves suggests that educational crises in the areas of administration, curriculum and assessment can be linked to wider social crises of rationality, legitimation and motivation. As defined by Habermas, a crisis of rationality reflects a widespread disillusionment with the administrative arrangements by which the state distributes goods and services. A crisis of legitimation reflects a breakdown of consensus in relation to the prevailing pattern of beliefs and values. A crisis of motivation occurs when there is a loss of confidence in the state's capacity to reward effort and encourage dispositions towards enterprise and achievement amongst its citizens.

This analysis provides a useful framework within which to locate the NZQA policies for new assessment technologies and the Qualifications Framework and to relate them to other major areas of educational reform. Figure 4 presents a diagrammatic summary adapted from Hargreaves (1989: 103).

*Figure 4***Crises in Education**

<i>Type of Socio-Political Crisis</i>	<i>Type of Educational Crisis</i>	<i>Locus of Change</i>	<i>Example of Policy Response</i>
Rationality	Administration and reorganisation	Educational provision (access and opportunity)	Self-managing schools Dezoning; New employment conditions
Legitimation	Curriculum	Educational content (knowledge and values)	National curriculum aims and levels; Modularisation of curricula
Motivation	Assessment and accountability	Educational outcomes (selection and allocation)	New assessment technologies; New credentials; National monitoring of standards

That the New Zealand state has been responding to a perceived crisis of motivation became clear early in 1991 with the publication of what is known as "The Porter Project". This project began in 1990 when Professor Michael Porter of the Harvard Business School, in collaboration with a team of economists and business consultants, carried out a detailed analysis of the New Zealand economy. The aim was to diagnose the causes of New Zealand's economic decline and prescribe remedies for recovery.

The Porter Project was funded mainly by the Trade Development Board and was supported by key government ministries and agencies, including Treasury and the Reserve Bank. Its report, entitled *Upgrading New Zealand's Competitive Advantage*, concludes that New Zealand's economic recovery would require "sustained and systematic change in our education system, attitudes towards competition, and prevailing management philosophies, to name but a few" (Crocombe et al, 1991: 156). New Zealanders, according to Porter are poorly motivated, inappropriately skilled and insufficiently competitive. The total absence of evidence to support such assertions does not deter the authors of this report from their graphic portrayal of a crisis of motivation, the responsibility for which is unequivocally laid at the door of the education system. Thus, in Porter's words:

There is a glaring mismatch between the skills needed to upgrade the New Zealand economy and those provided by our education system (Crocombe et al, 1991: 161).

Although it avoids the extreme political rhetoric associated with the New Right, there can be little doubt that the report of the Porter Project is couched in the discourse of economic rationalism. It is no coincidence that the central message is the same as that used by the NZQA to promote the National Qualifications Framework.

The recent Green Paper on a qualifications policy for New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 1997) states that the National Qualifications Framework "was established as one of a set of qualification policy reforms designed to address weaknesses in the prevailing education system" (p. 12). The Framework is described as "a vital part of an education system which will serve employers' and students' needs into the 21st century" (ibid, p. 10). These needs are defined narrowly in terms of economic rather than more liberal educational criteria. Thus, according to the Green Paper:

If New Zealand is to prosper, we must be internationally competitive ... With limited economic power and physical resources, we must look to the skills and knowledge of our people to feed innovation and improvements in productivity. (Ministry of Education, 1997: 10).

The inclusion of academic and vocational courses within a single Qualifications Framework reduces domains of knowledge and fields of enquiry to sets of assessable competencies. The emphasis on vocational effectiveness is a manifestation of the technocratic rationality that informs current qualifications policy in New Zealand.

Conclusion

One of the main conclusions to draw from this analysis is that technocratic rationality is not and cannot be morally neutral. Alasdair MacIntyre makes this point persuasively in his book, *After Virtue*, where he argues that:

... the whole concept of effectiveness is ... inseparable from a mode of human existence in which the contrivance of means is in central part the manipulation of human beings into compliant patterns of behaviour; and it is by appeal to his own effectiveness in this respect that the manager claims authority within the manipulative mode. (MacIntyre, 1981: 74).

The message for educators is a powerful one. Any uncritical pursuit of effectiveness is not education but indoctrination. As MacIntyre continues:

Thus effectiveness is a defining and definitive element of a way of life which competes for our allegiance with other alternative contemporary ways of life; and if we are to evaluate the claims of the bureaucratic, managerial mode to a place of authority in *our* lives, an assessment of the bureaucratic managerial claim to effectiveness will be an essential task (ibid).

This article has attempted to show that the emergence of technocratic discourses of assessment and credentialism are a consequence of more pervasive transformations that have occurred within the New Zealand state and economy over the past decade. It is argued that economic and managerial rationalisations have legitimated a form of instrumental reason which is now threatening to colonise the life-worlds of educational practitioners. The National Qualifications Framework is a symptom of that wider malaise.

Michael Pusey observes, with considerable insight, that:

At the level of public policy, the rationalisations may have brought needed gains in efficiency in many areas of state action and this may indeed continue - there can be no quarrel with the notion of efficiency as such. The inherent problem lies instead at another level " with the criteria that define what count as costs and benefits; with the loss of social intelligence; and with the number and range of potentially constructive discourses that have been suppressed (Pusey, 1991: 22).

As society has become more technocratic, that is, more governed by the technical knowledge of experts rather than the practical wisdom of its organic leaders, the more accustomed we have become, in all spheres of social life, to regard economic solutions as the only acceptable solutions to various human problems. In education, this leads to an exaggerated faith in the measurement of performance and the so-called "objectivity" and "independence" of the external setters and monitors of "standards".

In this narrow, technocratic conception of educational "outcomes" there is very little recognition given to the fundamental question that should guide the whole educational enterprise: what kind of human beings do we want our students to become?

One of the most enduring metaphors of modernity is Weber's image of the "iron cage" of bureaucratic rationality. It is an image that captures with chilling precision the oppressive potential of a society that is increasingly governed by the logic of instrumental reason. Weber predicted that the modern bureaucratic state would require the extension of means-end reasoning into more and

more areas of social life. His prediction, I would argue, is no less relevant in the last decade of the twentieth century than it was at the turn of the century when he was writing.

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