

Qualifications policies and the marketisation of education: A critical reading of the Green Paper

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, the NZQA has been heavily criticised by a range of tertiary education groups. The green paper released in mid-1997 makes some significant concessions to critics of the qualifications reform process. This article argues, however, that the proposals in the green paper are consistent with the wider process of marketisation in the education sector. The article provides an overview of new developments and priorities in the qualifications arena, and sketches a potentially chilling educational future. Particular attention is paid to the role new information technologies might play in monitoring and regulating student activities.

Introduction: Responding to pressure from all sides

When historians look back upon the 1990s and assess major developments in educational policy during this period, one chapter in the tale might well be titled 'The rise and fall of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority'. While it is true that the NZQA is at this point (July 1997) still standing, the reforms in qualifications and assessment policies instituted under the Authority's name have been subject to a growing tide of criticism over the past two years. Where once the idea of a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) appeared to have the backing of every major educational group except the universities, in recent times both the Framework itself and the NZQA as a policy organisation have come under attack from secondary teachers, polytechnics, business organisations, and numerous disgruntled individuals. The survival of the NZQA in its current form can no longer be regarded as a certainty (if it ever could), and the future of key elements in the qualifications reform process now seems to be in doubt. Unit standards - described the NZQA as the 'building blocks' of the NQF - have become widely unpopular, and moves to subvert competency-based assessment in (some) secondary schools and other institutions are at an advanced stage.

Nineteen-ninety six was a pivotal year in the life of the NZQA. With an election looming, the Government could ill afford negative publicity of any kind, let alone in the key social policy area of education. With the teacher unions and kindergarten educators pushing hard for better wages and conditions, and university students continuing to express their disquiet about escalating degree costs, further controversy over qualifications policies was clearly something an administration facing an uncertain future under MMP would not want. References to NZQA, the NQF and (especially) unit standards thus faded (somewhat) in the latter half of 1996, as the National Party concentrated its efforts on minimising 'fallout' from teacher concerns and an ever-vocal tertiary student population.

Now, with a National-New Zealand First coalition government in place, the wheels of reform have begun to roll again. Indeed, several reviews are under way, examining teacher education, teacher workloads and (in the case of the 'Tertiary Review') the entire tertiary sector. A revisiting of the qualifications reforms has coincided with the recent arrival of a new Chief Executive of the NZQA, Douglas Blackmur, and follows hot on the heels of revitalised debates over excellence, the role of school examinations, and the relationship between university degrees and other qualifications. Education is, as always, very much in the public eye as a 'hot issue', and questions about assessment and qualifications have been prominent in what have, at times, been heated discussions among MPs and other Government officials, bureaucrats, and representatives from educational institutions at all levels in the system.

Assessments of the qualifications reform process have been mixed at best, and damning at worst. The universities have been critical from the beginning. The New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee (1994) raised concerns about the technocratic nature of unit standards, and argued that they were an unsuitable assessment mechanism in many university courses. The Association of University Staff of New Zealand (AUSNZ, 1995; Chapman, 1995) expressed dismay at the undemocratic processes employed in developing and implementing the new qualifications system, and believed the status of New Zealand degrees would be placed under threat if some elements of the policy reforms (e.g. the redefining of 'research' to embrace almost any form of intellectual inquiry, creative work, professional practice or consultancy) were carried through. These collective responses have been supported by numerous critical commentaries from individual academics in Education and other fields (e.g. Codd, 1995, 1996, 1997; Hall, 1995a, 1995b; Elley, 1995, 1996; Fitzsimons, 1995, 1996; Fitzsimons and Peters, 1994; Haynes and Fitzsimons, 1997; Roberts, 1996a, 1997a; and Tuck, 1994, 1995). As an effective antidote to the all-pervasive discourse of approval in the NZQA's own publications (e.g., NZQA, 1992), a balanced collection of rigorous essays on standards-based assessment appeared in Peddie and Tuck's well-structured volume, *Setting the standards: Issues of assessment for national qualifications* (1995).

To be sure, many in the private sector have consistently expressed support for the general thrust of the qualifications reform process. Private training establishments saw an opportunity in the NQF for the development of new programmes which would receive greater official recognition (and funding benefits flowing from this) than might have been the case in the past. Similarly, many teachers and administrators in polytechnics had fallen in behind the reforms in the initial stages, and were supportive of the breaking down of old distinctions between 'academic' and 'vocational' learning. The collapsing of this distinction has been doggedly pursued by the NZQA, and has been defended with conviction by Allan Barker (1995) in the Peddie and Tuck volume. By 1996, however, the tide had begun to turn. The sea of discontent has continued into 1997, as several items in the *New Zealand Education Review* this year indicate.

Jim Doyle (1997), for example, the Executive Director of the Association of Polytechnics in New Zealand, suggests that the 'overwhelming impression' is that the implementation of the legislation relating to the establishment of the NZQA (in the 1990 Education Amendment Act) has been a 'costly failure' (p.7). The implementation process has, he says, 'polarised the education sector like no other issue before it' (p.8). Other items have drawn attention to protest action from school teachers, some of whom were openly 'discarding' NZQA advice (see Matheson, 1997, p.5). In another recent article, Janet Rivers reports on a review of the Authority by Rob Laking (a Senior Lecturer in Public Policy at Victoria University of Wellington), Nick Kyrke-Smith (Senior Advisor with the State Services Commission) and Angela Foulkes (Secretary of the Council of Trade Unions). She notes that NZQA's 'ability to provide sound policy advice' had been hampered by '[i]nternal conflicts, conflict with the education ministry and a closed attitude to criticism' (Rivers, 1997, p.1).

In June, after months of speculation about the direction qualifications policies might be taking, the Government released a Green Paper entitled 'A Future Qualifications Policy for New Zealand' (Ministry of Education, 1997).¹ This document, around 40 printed pages in length, received a quieter

reception than might have been expected given the controversial nature of the reforms. Part of the explanation for the lack of educational and political 'fireworks' over the Green Paper might lie in the structure, scope and style of the document. To the Government's credit, contentious issues surrounding the NQF and unit standards have been set out in a balanced and fair manner, with many concessions to critics being made.² The discussion of the substance of critics' claims is light, but this is not unusual for a paper of this kind. The prose is lucid and to-the-point, and a reasonable period of time (by New Zealand Government standards) for comments and submissions has been provided. A certain sincerity of purpose seems to pervade much of the document (on the surface at least), as indicated by statements such as this from Wyatt Creech's 'Foreword':

While the Green Paper gives an overview of the Government's current thinking on future qualifications policy, the Government goes into the process with an open mind. It will carefully consider all submissions before a decision is reached (Creech, 1997, p.5).

The Government notes that before finalising its policies on qualifications and other educational issues, it 'intends to consult as widely as possible, to ensure that the proposals for dealing with an issue are the best solution' (p.5).

Such talk can, of course, be regarded in a rather cynical light given the history of 'consultation' in reforms within education and other social policy areas over the past decade. Certainly fodder for cynical thought was provided by the treatment afforded kindergarten workers some weeks ago, when serious decisions affecting their futures were made in a unilateral and very hasty manner. The Association of University Staff has long complained, with good reason, about the lack of negotiation over reforms within the tertiary sector in recent years, and several key Government agencies (e.g. the Education Review Office) have been strongly criticised for what some regard as 'heavy handed', 'out of touch' judgements about schools.

Nonetheless, it is instructive to take the tone of openness and honesty, and the invitation for extensive consultation and debate, seriously (but not at face value). For the Green Paper, in my view, represents an important turning point in the process of qualifications reform. Some moves to please groups who have protested the changes have been made, and several new policy directions are clearly signalled in the document. It will be interesting to see what remains of the Green Paper when firm policies are put in place (this is unlikely to be before December 1997, and will probably not take effect until well into 1998). Legislative change is likely to be necessary if some of the proposals are carried through after the consultation round. Teachers, academics and students appear to have had at least some impact in bringing about a reversal of some trends in the implementation of the NQF, and may have a crucial continuing role to play in softening or strengthening key elements in the Government's proposed qualifications policy.

This article aims to make a modest contribution to the debate by proposing a critical, mildly 'subversive' reading of the Green Paper. The first section identifies a number of important acknowledgements (of past failings) and concessions (to groups who have been critical of the qualifications reforms) in the document. This brief discussion is followed by a more extended analysis of new and revitalised priorities signalled in the proposed changes to qualifications policies. The final section relates these changes to the wider process of marketisation, and offers some speculative suggestions about future directions in educational policy.

Some concessions in the Green Paper

A reading of the Green Paper suggests that the Government has given ground in a number of pivotal areas, and that the future role of the NZQA will change if the proposals are carried through to the policy implementation stage. The proposals are premised on a series of acknowledgements hitherto either withheld or offered in only a fragmented and slightly 'grudging' way. These acknowledgements fall into at least two categories: those made (more-or-less) explicitly, and others that might be drawn by inference from a critical reading of the document as a whole.

In the first category, the Government concedes that the reforms have been too expensive. Constant references are made to 'compliance costs' (see, for example, Ministry of Education, 1997, pp. 2, 14, 20, 25-26, 29-30). These have, it seems, been too high in the past and need to be kept at lower levels in the future. There is also an implicit acknowledgement that elements of the reform process - notably, the implementation of a unit standards approach to assessment in secondary schools - have been, at least at times, rather too cumbersome and time-consuming (see pp. 10, 13, 23). Finally, the Government acknowledges that the reforms have been unpopular (or at least subject to considerable debate) in some circles. References to criticisms from various groups (not always named) are scattered through the Green Paper, and a definite effort to respond, albeit briefly, to allegations about weaknesses in the new system has been made (compare, pp. 4, 12, 13, 19-20, 23-25, 28).

At a less overt level, a desire to 'keep the major players happy' seems to underpin the Green Paper. The push for graded examinations from (some) secondary schools has been very strong indeed. In the Green Paper a clear avenue for keeping this option alive is opened up (see pp.23-25). This reinforces earlier statements by new Chief Executive of the NZQA about the possibility of maintaining measures of excellence as well as competence in the qualifications system (see Burge, 1997). A tacit admission that the professionalism of teachers, academics and others in educational institutions (what the Government would call 'provider' groups) warrants (greater) respect can also be detected in the document. This is indicated by, among other things, the expressed notion that teachers ought to play a greater role than the reforms to date may have assumed in deciding not only the best way to teach - something the NZQA claims to never have interfered with - but also the most suitable means of assessment for students in particular courses (p.18). This represents a significant shift, and is closely related to another admission in the Green Paper, namely that 'unit standards' may not be the most appropriate assessment device for all subjects, or in all educational settings, or for all qualifications (pp.18-20). Additionally, there is a much more explicit acknowledgement (e.g. on p.20) that in matters of educational quality, there is a need to focus on the course of learning as a *whole*, and not just on its constituent parts (and especially not just on discrete units *within* those parts).

There is also, importantly, a concession that certain groups already have the 'international credibility' necessary to make judgements about the quality of qualifications in their institutions. Specifically, the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee is seen as already having established its credentials to make authoritative judgements about the value of degrees and the quality of the work conducted for them (p.29). Equally, the Green Paper makes it clear that other groups do *not* presently have the credentials for making quality assessments of this kind: 'Some groups (including industry training organisations, private training establishments and Maori providers) do not yet have umbrella bodies with the infrastructure, standing and competence required to approve qualifications' (p.29).

Old themes, new emphases and implied priorities

Alongside these acknowledgements, mention must be made of implied priorities, the reinforcement of older themes, and new emphases in the Green Paper. Several features are worthy of note here. First, the document repeatedly focuses on *students* and *employers* as key groups with a stake in qualifications matters (compare, for example, Ministry of Education, 1997, pp.8, 14, 17, 18). These groups, it is constantly noted, need to be able to choose which qualifications best suit their 'needs'. Students and employers become important assessors of quality, even if others ('NQF Approval Agencies' and, in an overseeing role, the NZQA) are also involved in this process. The question of how such choices might meaningfully be made barely warrants a mention. The authors of the Green Paper do admit at one point that 'people are not equally informed' (p.30) in making decisions about educational quality, but this is more a passing comment than a substantial discussion.

This emphasis is, I think, highly significant and reinforces the move toward a fully marketised model of education - a move, I argue later, that underwrites the entire Green Paper. While the marketisation of education is a complex process, involving a multifaceted attack on the notion of education as a public good, the relevant feature of the process in this context is the idea that educational choices (choosing which institution to enrol in, which qualification to pursue, what will be of most value or is of the highest quality, etc.) are becoming increasingly 'consumer-driven'. Students 'consume' courses; employers make consumer-style choices about which employees to take on.³

The sub-text in this process is a critique of 'provider capture': the infamous Treasury phrase describing a situation in which educational institutions, teachers and academics allegedly 'take over' decisions about curricula, qualifications and pedagogy. (Treasury's position is best captured in the second volume of their mammoth brief to the incoming government of 1987: see Treasury, 1987.) The result of this 'capture', it is argued, is a weak relationship between educational qualifications and the 'needs' of industry and employers, and a lack of choice for students wanting to tailor programmes to their own interests, aspirations and ends. The solution, from the Treasury point of view, is to foster competition between educational 'providers' and to shift the conceptual discourse and lived practices of education very much into the private realm. 'Education', in short, becomes a commodity: something to be bought, sold, traded and consumed. The educational domain becomes similar to any other 'market', with buyers and sellers, winners and losers. Education, on this model, is a *private* good, where the only recognised benefits are those that accrue to individuals purchasing 'provider' services. Given that individuals can (on the Treasury view) expect to make a financial gain from their investment, they should, by logical extension of the same argument, also be expected to pay for their education (via student loans or some other 'user pays' scheme).

The marketisation of education - including the qualifications arena - is now something the Government feels no need to obscure. If the seeds of this process were planted some time ago (compare, for example, Crocombe, Enright and Porter, 1991), the full flowering of marketisation is now coming into being. The Green Paper, like many other policy documents in recent times, is replete with references to the importance of moving with the new economic times, of being competitive on the international stage, and of satisfying the wants (almost always erroneously called 'needs') of the corporate sector (always somewhat disguised under the heading of 'employers and industry'). At the start of the Green Paper, the Minister of Education observes that we live in a 'rapidly changing world', and asserts:

Skills and knowledge are becoming more and more important in people's lives. Those with expertise and innovative ideas have more opportunities and better prospects, both within New Zealand and internationally. Increasingly, firms are looking to higher levels of knowledge and skills among their employees in order to gain an advantage over their competitors. Nationally, the capability of our people drives New Zealand's overall competitiveness and our economic and social success (Creech, 1997, p.3).

Creech continues:

Investment in developing skills and knowledge - whether by individuals, firms or the Government - is therefore critical. Students and employers need a way of measuring the skills and knowledge that their investment has achieved (p.3).

The link between the educational 'market' and the labour market is now an openly-expressed priority ('Qualifications need to match employers' and labour market requirements as closely as possible': p.4), and the case for keeping qualifications and assessments processes up to date is advanced on the basis of 'recognising that we operate in a global economy and marketplace' (p.4).

The discourse of 'flexibility' also has a strong presence in the Green Paper. Talk about the importance of being flexible in allowing for changes in the marketplace and the world of work, and in accounting for shifts in 'consumer' preferences and possible new policy directions in the future, is writ large over the document. On the other hand, the need for stability and consistency in

qualifications policies is also stressed (see, for example, Ministry of Education, 1997, p. 9). This is only an apparent contradiction, for the 'flexibility' referred to above is *dependent upon* rather than antithetical to a certain form of consistency in matters pertaining to qualifications - a point I discuss in more detail below. In brief, what the Government sees as necessary is a consistent means for *exchanging information* about qualifications: this can be met, the Green Paper suggests, via a system in which a common 'currency' (their word) is established. A common qualifications currency allows students and employers (and effectively *forces* educational 'providers') to adapt to changing employment relations and conditions in the world of work - at both a national and international level. The Government sets out its intentions as follows:

It is ... proposed that all NQF qualifications should have clearly stated *outcomes* (statements about what students know or can do), and be capable of being related to one another through *level* and *credit values*. This information would give students and employers a "common currency" - quality, outcomes, level and credit - with which to compare qualifications across the full range, and would give providers a consistent basis for recognising learning that had already taken place (p.6).

This means that 'any qualification, regardless of how it was designed, taught or assessed, could be registered if it met these criteria. The NQF would therefore be able to accommodate all types of qualifications, from school examinations to degrees, whether or not they use unit standards' (p.6).

A final feature of note is the continuing dominance of 'skills' in talk of educational content and processes. This is nothing new, and has attracted criticism in the past (see, for example, Marshall, 1995). The *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* - the document upon which all other curriculum developments in specific subject areas have been founded in recent years - marked the beginning of a much more aggressive emphasis on skills in the New Zealand education system. All major learning areas, Government officials in the Ministry of Education and elsewhere now believe, can be collapsed into so many skills. Thus, alongside 'physical skills', 'numeracy skills', and the like readers of the *Curriculum Framework* find 'social and cooperative skills' and a new emphasis on 'self-management and competitive skills' (see Ministry of Education, 1993).

The word 'knowledge' also appears at regular points in the Green Paper, almost always coupled with a reference to skills (see, for example, Ministry of Education, 1997, pp. 3, 5, 8). Yet, there is actually very little *about* knowledge in the document. Even if the broadest possible definition of 'knowledge' is granted (one which might, for instance, simply refer to a way of understanding the world), the reasons for repeatedly speaking of both skills *and* knowledge remain unclear. All references to knowledge could probably have been eliminated from the Green Paper without altering the substance of the document in any way. There is no engagement with the argument, advanced by some of the NZQA's critics (see Roberts, 1997), that some qualifications are predominantly 'knowledge-based' while others are 'skills-based'. 'Change' is an important theme in the Green Paper, but there is no discussion of the changing nature of knowledge in post-industrial or postmodern societies (cf. Lyotard, 1984).

The coupling of 'knowledge' with 'skills' in the document seems to be more a rhetorical device than a substantive concern with the relationship between the two concepts. Talk of skills alone is now (following widespread disquiet over it) too blatantly restrictive, too closely tied to the 'vocational' side of the 'vocational/academic' binary (which the NZQA has persistently tried to break down). It is, perhaps, too overtly managerialist, too readily linked with industry training (and the 'Skill New Zealand' policy in particular: Education and Training Support Agency, 1993), and too far removed from the traditions in many fields of study (particularly within the humanities disciplines) where 'knowledge' is the central organising concept. The Green Paper covers a very broad canvas: its subject matter is the entire qualifications and assessment policy domain. To not refer to knowledge would give the appearance of being *too* 'market-driven'; yet, while the term 'knowledge' is used, and often, it remains largely devoid of any content.

A critical reading of the document

This part of the article addresses two questions: (i) *Why* might the Government be prepared to make (seemingly significant) concessions in some areas of qualifications policy?; and (ii) What does the Government want to hold on to, and why? A critical reading of the Green Paper is provided. From this, some speculative comments about a potentially chilling educational future follow.

Why has the Government given ground on a number of key issues relating to the National Qualifications Framework? First, as acknowledged in the Green Paper, the bureaucratic weight of the NQF apparatus - particularly under a model in which all learning was to be assessed in terms of unit standards - was becoming too great. Second, for an administration supposedly committed to fiscal responsibility, the costs associated with the reforms - and the anticipated demands on funds in the future - were reaching unacceptable levels. Third, the political consequences of pushing ahead with the full NZQA programme could have been dire, particularly as the reform process might have gained full momentum just in time to (further) dampen enthusiasm for the Government's educational agenda in the lead-up to the next general election in 1999. Indeed, as noted at the beginning of the article, the NZQA was already in deep public-relations trouble prior to the *last* election. It was not that qualifications policy in itself was an 'election breaker', or even a matter of considerable (perceived) importance for many. But *education* was, and the growing unpopularity of the NZQA reforms was one element, and not an insubstantial one, in the broader mood of dissatisfaction with educational arrangements. Fourth, there were certain divisions (obliquely hinted at in the Green Paper) *within* the Government over the nature of the reforms and the management of them by NZQA officials. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, strong pressure was being exerted not just from what the Government might call 'militant unions' (e.g. the PPTA) but from very powerful wings in the business community.

The response of the New Zealand Business Roundtable (NZBRT) provides a fascinating case study of tensions, within a single organisation, between moral and academic conservatism on the one hand and economic liberalism on the other. The opposition to key elements of the NZQA reforms, and particularly unit standards, came both from individuals (e.g. Michael Irwin) and groups (principally the Education Forum) associated with the NZBRT. As might have been expected, the NZBRT supported the closer link between qualifications and the worlds of industry and commerce, but raised concerns about unit standards and the undermining of academic or general education. Michael Irwin, in an address to the Principals' Forum in 1995, saw the NQF as ushering in a potentially rigid system which would lower educational standards and damage the reputation of New Zealand qualifications. He favoured a focus on core subjects in primary schools and the junior secondary school, and the creation of three potential pathways for students at the F5 level: academic, technical and vocational (Irwin, 1995, pp.5-6).

The Green Paper can, to a significant extent, be seen as a pragmatic (but perhaps also reflective) response to these criticisms. It succeeds, as a preliminary policy document, in maintaining a very clear commitment to strengthening links with the business community: this was essential if the support of groups such as the NZBRT and the Employers Federation was not to be lost. At the same time, there is now scope for reintroducing external examinations and scales of excellence, the universities have been granted authority to (largely) manage their own affairs on matters of educational quality, unit standards will no longer be the only means of assessing students, and the NZQA (ostensibly at least) retreats somewhat into the background. Private educational establishments can continue to develop as before, and ongoing support for industry training has been confirmed.

This might be expected to please many, and, on the face of it, should be viewed as an admirable exercise in reflexive policy reformulation. While acknowledging that those in Government and the Ministry of Education responsible for putting the Green Paper in place may have been motivated by a sincere desire to work democratically with affected groups in addressing their concerns, I want to suggest that there is the *potential* for a more sinister scenario to unfold. My comments here will be

speculative and necessarily brief (given space constraints), but further work extending some of these ideas is in progress.⁴ Acknowledgement must also be made of an excellent paper addressing similar themes by Patrick Fitzsimons (1996), who examines the possible educational implications of new forms of knowledge in what Lyotard (1984) terms 'the postmodern condition' under the managerialist practices of the NZQA in an electronic environment.

First, let me make some comments on the position the universities find themselves in. Given the battles university representatives (from both the AUSNZ and the NZVCC) have engaged in with the NZQA over the past six years, the Green Paper can be regarded as something of a breakthrough. Real gains appear to have been made. In a discussion of quality in qualifications, it is suggested that degrees 'are a special case'. 'It is vital', the Green Paper continues, 'that New Zealand's degrees are of the highest quality if they are to continue to be highly regarded internationally, and the term 'degree' is not to be eroded' (p.9). The authority of the NZVCC in making decisions about educational quality in degrees in New Zealand universities is confirmed in the document (p.29). (This is despite the proposed policy that those granted this delegated authority - 'NQF Approval Agencies' - should not themselves be providers or developers of qualifications: p.28. The Vice-Chancellors are, at law, employers of all staff in their respective institutions. In this sense they are at least indirectly involved in the development and provision of qualifications. There thus seems to be something of a contradiction between two elements of the proposed new qualifications policy.) The new space for promoting excellence as well as competence (which reinforces the universities' right to award grades), and the abandonment of a 'unit standards or not at all' approach to qualifications policy, can be seen as significant victories for the universities.

Yet these developments simply take the universities back to where they started before the whole reform process began in 1990. In the meantime, the marketisation agenda has been pushed steadily forward within the educational sector. In the tertiary environment the move toward a marketised system - which is inclusive of the closely related (sometimes overlapping) processes of privatisation and corporatisation - has been evident for several years and has attracted a growing critical literature both here and overseas (compare, Barnett, 1994; Butterworth and Tarling, 1994; Easton, 1995; Fitzsimons, 1995, 1997; Fitzsimons and Peters, 1994; Gordon, 1995; Peters, 1994a, 1994b, 1997; Peters, Marshall and Parr, 1993; Shumar, 1997; Soley, 1995; Symes and Hopkins, 1994). An indication of how far New Zealand has gone down the road toward full privatisation is the notion, recently floated as a serious proposition among selected bureaucrats and government officials, that university governance and ownership should be based on a not-for-profit trust model. (For an excellent critique of this suggestion, see Peters, 1996.)

Student loans have now become an entrenched part of the tertiary education landscape, and students (along with many academics) appear to have been well and truly beaten in the war against various 'user pays' philosophies. Tertiary institutions now compete, in a much more overt and vigorous way, for student dollars. Television advertisements selling a supposedly more interactive approach to teaching in polytechnics as opposed to universities provide one memorable manifestation of this trend in 1997. Mention could also be made of the ongoing efforts of almost all institutions to recruit full-fee paying students from overseas, and the heated competition for teacher trainee enrolments among a host of competing 'providers' in the Auckland region. On a different front (but as part of the same agenda) the funding of research has been reorganised along market lines, with fewer and fewer avenues being open for recognising and supporting investigative work that does not have a direct economic or measurable (quantifiable) 'payoff'. A perusal of the categories in the Public Good Science Fund gives salutary evidence of how far the Humanities have been pushed into the background. The Marsden Fund represents one of the few remaining potential sources of funds for what the Government (somewhat derisively) calls 'blue sky' research.

The Green Paper offers nothing to stem the flow of marketisation policies in the tertiary sector. Indeed, when viewed in relation to other policy changes, the document can be seen as an important step in *accelerating* and deepening the process. Two closely related key features of the Green Paper

become especially pertinent here: first, the persistent and renewed emphasis on '*portability*'; and, second, the emerging talk of a '*common currency*' in the qualifications system. References to the latter have already been made earlier in this article. On the issue of '*portability*', the Green Paper has this to say:

NQF registration should help to make learning achievements more *portable* - that is, to facilitate the transfer of credit from one qualification or provider to another, so that credits towards a desired qualification may be accumulated easily. Portability is guaranteed across qualifications which have unit standards in common because they represent identical 'blocks' of learning. In qualifications which do not use unit standards, the NQF can improve portability by making clearer the goals of each component (course or paper) of the qualification, the level at which it is pitched and the amount of learning it involves (Ministry of Education, 1997, p.9).

Marketisation demands some kind of common currency - or, rather, several forms of standardised currency for different transactions within the educational sphere - if the efficient trading or information, skills, products and services is to occur. This process of exchange must be based on a system in which prospective students are encouraged to make (what parade, falsely, as) 'free' consumer-style choices among competing 'providers'. Clearly understood, or at least routinely practised, patterns of exchange need to be developed if the system is to work. 'Vouchers' provide one type of common currency: they provide 'buying power' for educational 'consumers' (not just students, but their parents and perhaps some employers as well) to choose which goods and services to purchase in the educational marketplace. The implementation of a vouchers scheme has clearly never left the Government's agenda, as indicated, somewhat notoriously, by comments from Lockwood Smith near the end of his tenure as Minister of Education.

But vouchers for 'purchasing' education need to be coupled with some form of currency for '*measuring*' it, and this is where talk of a common currency in the qualifications arena becomes significant. Students, as (self-interested, utility-maximising) 'consumers' in a marketised system of education, need not just the option of choosing - presumably from a uniform starting position - which 'providers' among those competing for their dollars best suit their 'needs' (i.e. wants, or 'consumer preferences'). They also require a form of currency which will allow them to compete amongst *themselves* as they jockey for positions of advantage within the wider marketplace. The student, through a qualifications system that explicitly frames learning ('skills and knowledge') in currency terms, becomes - in a much more overt way than was hitherto the case - an *entrepreneur*. Students of the future will be informed, via constant implicit and explicit messages from politicians, bureaucrats, the media, and perhaps their parents, that the world 'out there' is ruthlessly competitive. The notion of seeking to gain superiority of all kinds (but particularly financial superiority) over others will become instilled in young minds almost from birth, and educational experiences - whether through schools (if they continue to exist) or other means - will play an important part in reinforcing this point.

This is not to say that such a system or pattern of thinking has been uppermost in the minds of the writers of the Green Paper, or that tendencies along these lines are part of a deliberate strategy. It *can* be said, however, that such a scenario becomes possible - indeed more feasible as the '*portability*' thrust is advanced - if the policy changes signalled in the Green Paper are carried through to their logical conclusion. A 'thinning' of the centre - in this case, the NZQA - is consistent with the (supposed) 'withering' of the state in recent New Zealand history (cf. Boston, 1995; Boston *et al.*, 1995; Kelsey, 1993, 1995; Peters and Marshall, 1996; Sharp, 1994). The NZQA was clearly becoming something of an anomaly in the implementation of New Right social policies. Reducing bureaucratic structures at Government and government agency levels has long been a Treasury goal (even though Treasury appears to have been reluctant to turn such thinking back upon itself). 'Getting the state out of people's lives' has been a catch-cry for many in Government circles (e.g. Simon Upton, Jenny Shipley, Ruth Richardson, Richard Prebble) under both National and Labour administrations. Some of the apparently generous concessions in the Green Paper (ostensibly advanced on ethical, epistemological or educational grounds, after listening carefully to criticisms)

can thus be seen as supportive of a new phase in the marketisation/privatisation process. The Government *wants* to let 'providers' do their own administrative work in managing qualifications - to a far greater extent than the NZQA reforms to date have allowed - because such a stance not only saves money (a point that finds ready admission in the document), but also falls much more squarely in line with other enacted or proposed policy planks in the marketisation process.

With the arrival of the new information technologies, the dovetailing of qualifications reforms with other steps in the marketisation process becomes not only possible but, in a certain sense, inevitable. The technologising of education is already well under way. This process has been made explicit since at least the sudden appearance of 'Technology' as a new core subject in the school curriculum, and has continued to gain momentum in succeeding years. The process has been helped along, to a not inconsiderable degree, by the open enthusiasm of key Ministers in the National and National-New Zealand First Coalition cabinets. Maurice Williamson has been among the most prominent advocates of computerisation, and his interest in the information superhighway has had a significant bearing on a number of new policy developments.

If current trends in the global politics of computerisation continue, and if the new reforms in the qualifications system signalled in the Green Paper become cemented as official policy, we might begin to detect a shift in the balance of power, or at least the rules of the game (with a designation of major roles to new players), in the educational sector. The encroachment of corporates (including computer companies) into schools - via, for example, the scheme to exchange supermarket dockets for Macintosh desktops some years ago - has attracted relatively little debate in the popular press. Academics have also been rather quiet on this issue, if the absence of any sustained discussion in the major Education journals (and journals in related areas) is anything to go by. Certainly the widely-held view among members of the public appears to be that such developments are either harmless or highly desirable. The fact that such rampant commercialism has been greeted with a minimum of fuss (or with clear approval) may simply reflect the tiredness levels of those who have repeatedly raised concerns - usually to no avail - about similar processes in the past. Alternatively, what we could be witnessing is one more step in the extension of corporatist hegemony over all spheres of social life. The educational domain is crucial in this corporatisation process, for it provides a huge 'captive market' of people whose minds might (as Plato noted centuries ago in the *Republic*) be regarded as especially malleable. The promotion of neoliberal thought as a precondition for the acceptance of New Right economic and social policies will ultimately have to begin in childhood, and 'computers for the kids' programmes might (but not under all circumstances) provide one means toward this end.

It is not that the new information technologies are inherently dangerous, or that (all) programmes to put computers on classroom desks must be seen as undesirable. As has been argued elsewhere (e.g. Roberts, 1996b, 1997b), we must, as educationists (whether in school or tertiary settings), 'move with the times', and grasp the new possibilities for changing modes of reading, writing, publishing, and learning in the information age. The danger lies in seeing computerisation as a *necessarily* positive process with benefits for all. It is vital that we maintain a critical posture when examining the new information technologies and their implications for education. Computing developments across the globe need to be *politicised* if the risk of lapsing into either a technocratic approach or a position of passive acceptance is to be avoided.

In this respect, the work of people such as Tim Luke is very helpful. In a provocative essay entitled 'Going to cyberschool in the virtual university', Luke (1996) argues that the major players in the computer market (e.g. Microsoft) are, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, beginning to dictate the future of education. Such corporate giants tell those eager to listen (and many of us in the educational world are) that almost every aspect of social life is becoming digitised, that we must move quickly (in both our adoption of new technologies and our thinking) to keep up with such changes, and *then*, in one and same marketing movement, provide - at considerable cost to

consumers, and with considerable gains for people such as Bill Gates - the hardware and software ('absolutely') necessary for this transition.

In this context, it is not difficult to imagine the NZQA becoming a relatively minor player in the educational market (if the corporates take over completely, in a fully privatised system). Alternatively, if 'arrangements' between government bodies and corporate providers of digital services become more explicit and widespread, the NZQA could become a significant regulatory force in the social system - one which nonetheless (of necessity in a marketised world) must not be seen as too intrusive by 'consumers' in the educational marketplace. The notion of maintaining some distance from the day-to-day workings of assessment processes and judgements about educational quality is clearly envisaged in the Green Paper, where it is proposed that the NZQA will play a role as 'overall guardian' in the qualifications system. The NZQA would have 'an overview role; it would not focus on the detail of courses and teaching' (Ministry of Education, 1997, p.7).

A particularly distressing scenario would involve the increasing employment of new technologies for surveillance purposes, where ultimately every movement of every citizen might be monitored. 'Information sharing' is already an established practice among government departments. Moreover, a clear link between government agencies and major corporate entities (e.g. Inland Revenue the banking industry) has been made. The amount of data on each New Zealand citizen stored in the infamous and mysterious 'Wanganui computer' - or others like it - is a matter for continuing speculation. Cameras keep a watchful eye on people as they shop, drive and walk the streets. An idea for running a surveillance camera continuously in a pre-school classroom was recently hailed by some as an important innovation (in making sure teachers do not abuse children), and some employers now regard the digital recording of employee actions as an inalienable right.

'Information sharing' of a different kind is signalled in the Green Paper. References to building up databases of credit information can be found at selected points in the document. Such references have a close relationship to the emphasis on portability and the need for a common currency. The following passage effectively conveys the Government's plans:

A common "currency" for parts of qualifications (outcomes, level and credit) would be expected to facilitate providers' decisions on credit transfer, leading to improved portability, but would not be a *guarantee* of portability. It is further proposed that the NZQA should maintain a database of education providers' agreements for credit transfer, and this information should be publicly available through *KiwiCareers*. This would mean that students could know in advance if providers already had arrangements which recognised each other's programmes and their components. This could assist students' choices of programmes and providers in many cases (pp.22-23).

Such proposals seem harmless enough, and the desire to make the database available to the public is laudable. But if this move toward gathering large amounts of data about qualifications is coupled with a move to collate - through increasingly sophisticated electronic means - more and more information about *individuals* (or groups, organisations, institutions, etc.), the process begins to take on a slightly different face. While such a scenario may seem far-fetched, it needs to be considered alongside other mechanisms for maintaining detailed records (both visual and written) on individuals and groups in New Zealand society - and elsewhere in the world - already in place. Once a 'common currency' for exchanging information about qualifications and assessment has been established, as mooted by the Green Paper, it is conceivable that the entire educational history of each New Zealand citizen - including not just the certificates, degrees or diplomas they have gained, but a host of other details as well - could be recorded in a huge NZQA-administered database. How *much* detail might be regarded as necessary by officials in the NZQA, the Ministry of Education or other wings of Government would be a matter for considerable debate, and would depend on other developments in social policy over the next decade. This is a speculative, and perhaps rather unduly pessimistic, portrait of educational policy in the future. Still, the possibility of appearing to 'set the educational subject free' (to wander the marketplace, making continuous consumer-style choices about 'providers' and qualifications) while at the same time watching over

her every move is not an entirely unrealistic scenario. A critical reading of the Green Paper need not presuppose that such developments are part of a carefully crafted plan; rather, the point is that while we may want to grant policy makers the benefit of the doubt, there is nevertheless some merit in contemplating alternative educational futures - some of which are horrific indeed.

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Notes

1. All citations and page numbers in this article are drawn from a print-out of the Internet version of the Green Paper (the site address is listed in the bibliography).
2. I shall refer to 'the Government' as the author (or implied author) of the Green Paper, even though the document is published under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. This is consistent with the document itself, where references to policy intentions are spoken of as 'Government' plans. The cover page of the Green Paper makes it clear that the document is published '*on behalf of*' the Government of New Zealand.
3. I want to continue placing terms such as 'consumers', 'providers' and the like in quotation marks throughout this article to signal my unease with applying them to educational contexts. Allowing such terms to become part of the usual flow of the text (i.e. removing the quotation marks) plays a part, I believe, in normalising and legitimating them as part of our educational discourse.
4. Peters, M. and Roberts, P. (1998/forthcoming) *The future of New Zealand universities*. Palmerston North: Dunmore Press; Roberts, P. (unpublished) Assessment policies, higher education and cyberspace. Draft paper: University of Auckland.

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