

Te Tiro Hou meets the Green Paper: Where to from here in secondary school qualifications?

Shona Hearn

ABSTRACT

This article outlines the central conclusions of Te Tiro Hou, the Qualifications Framework Inquiry commissioned by the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association and considers the likely impact on secondary school qualifications of the government's Green Paper on the National Qualifications Framework. It endorses the continued development of standards-based assessment but recommends changes to the unit standard approach. It does not support the Green Paper's proposal for a deregulated qualifications market but advocates a nationally co-ordinated approach to qualifications, with a single major qualification at each level. Priority should be given to the final two years of schooling, with a modified form of unit standards as the sole Year 12 qualification and a model which co-ordinates Bursary with unit standards in Year 13. Year 11 would be the final year of general education, with no need for most students to seek formal qualifications.

This article outlines the central conclusions of Te Tiro Hou, the Qualifications Framework Inquiry commissioned by the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association and considers the likely impact on secondary school qualifications of the government's Green Paper on the National Qualifications Framework. Throughout the 1980s there was a growing consensus amongst secondary teachers that the old status quo in secondary school qualifications needed to go and be replaced by something better. It is now a matter of record that this accord disappeared as the Qualifications Framework moved towards implementation in schools - hence the call from PPTA members for a 'review and audit' of the framework - the Qualifications Framework Inquiry, Te Tiro Hou.

Members of the Inquiry never assumed that our report would be able to bring about immediate unanimity amongst secondary teachers on all issues associated with the Qualifications Framework. Rather, the goal was to attempt to change the tone of the debate through giving teachers access to findings which were considered and based on the best available research. The terms of reference asked for solutions as well as analysis of the problems and so we put forward proposals which we believe are principled but could also provide some practical answers on the key questions of validity and manageability. The report is not the views of PPTA or its members: the decisions of the 1997 Annual Conference will signal the current degree of collective support or otherwise for our findings. Already there are indications that PPTA is likely to adopt a more conservative position, particularly on School Certificate.

We were asked to look at both the educational validity of the framework style of assessment and the concerns about manageability and on both counts we found evidence to support the concerns about the framework in its present form. But although Te Tiro Hou recommends substantial changes to the unit standard approach to assessment, it does not advocate the wholesale rejection of standards-based assessment or the concept of a national qualifications framework.

The report establishes eight criteria for evaluating qualifications systems. An educationally valid qualifications system must be fair, inclusive, cumulative, clear, motivating, coherent, constructive and manageable. Despite their apparent simplicity, these are well grounded in international research on the validity of assessment systems¹ and are used in the remainder of the report as a yard-stick for a number of future scenarios for New Zealand's qualifications system. Fairness, for instance, incorporates the traditional concepts of validity and reliability/consistency as well as the need for the qualification to be trusted by learners, teachers, parents, employers and the community. The criteria don't simply apply to the students; in many cases it is equally important how they affect the teachers - for instance, teaching programmes are more likely to be stimulating if the teachers feel motivated and empowered by the system. For that to happen they have to believe that it is motivating and working for the benefit of their students.

By comparison the quality criteria in the Green Paper (credibility, portability, durability and structural soundness) appear somewhat mechanistic and ignore vital issues such as motivation and manageability. Although both documents appear to advocate inclusiveness, the difference is instructive, with the Green Paper arguing for the inclusion of all *qualification*² while Te Tiro Hou defines inclusiveness thus: "the range of qualifications available meets the needs and aspirations of learners and of all sections of the community."³ (Qualifications Framework Inquiry, 1997:96)

In practice the deregulated qualifications market advocated by the Green Paper is likely to have the opposite effect of excluding some groups and reinforcing social and ethnic inequities.

The consideration of validity centred on three issues: the concern about fragmentation or 'atomisation', the idea that in breaking the subject down into unit standards you lose the essence of many subjects; the notion that this particular form of standards-based assessment is incapable of doing justice to the higher order skills such as analysis, critical thinking and synthesis; a cluster of questions around the single standard can/can't model currently used for assessing unit standards. Does students' performance fall neatly into just two categories or is the reality a more complex continuum covering every category from excellent to abysmal?

These questions merged into a larger one about the nature of standards-based assessment and its suitability for supposedly 'academic' subjects.

Concerns about 'atomisation' are central to the debate about two forms of standards-based assessment I investigated in the UK - the General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) and its predecessor, the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ). However, the English situation differs in a number of important respects.

One of the most obvious differences between the New Zealand framework and the English qualifications is that neither GNVQ nor NVQ has a National Curriculum Statement as a basis for course planning and assessment - the assessment specifications are literally all the teacher has as a basis for planning the course. So if the specifications are atomised, it's likely that the course will follow suit.

But the New Zealand context for general education subjects is different. These subjects do have broadly based curriculum documents, and the Inquiry concluded that providing unit standards are designed to reflect these, there is no reason why teachers shouldn't develop courses which reflect the curriculum in all its richness and diversity. My own experience within the current trial of English unit standards is relevant. English teachers at the NZATE Annual Conference had an opportunity to view examples of work from sixth form students at Birkenhead College, and I think it is fair to say

that they agreed with my conclusions that we have been able to offer students an experience of English that was integrated, holistic and quite the opposite of fragmented. Experience as well as theory therefore suggests that atomisation is not an *inevitable* consequence of the unit standard approach. However, a perusal of the matrix of unit standards for different subjects revealed huge variety between subjects. A sixth form maths course is likely to comprise 11 unit standards worth about 2 or 3 credits each, whereas English covers 5 or six unit standards worth 4 to 6 credits each. They vary not only in size but also in the degree of specificity - with Computing broken down into extremely small chunks, with titles like *Exchange messages using electronic mail*, while History offers much broader topics such as *Define and plan a historical investigation under supervision*. Not only is there a range of different experiences amongst the general education subjects, but unit standards designed by Industry Training Organisations with a primarily industrial focus are not underpinned by a curriculum statement and have another set of difficulties again. For subjects which are widely taught in schools, the answer may lie in developing a new curriculum document and set of unit standards which are more appropriate for the school situation. Our conclusion was that excessive atomisation has implications for both validity and work-load. Motivation is likely to be undermined where there is little room left for teachers to exercise any professional autonomy in choosing the material that best suits their students or for students to make choices~ And the impact on work-load is exponential. More unit standards demand a greater number of assessment tasks and schedules, more need for re-assessment, moderation and so on. The Inquiry therefore recommended that most subjects would be better broken down into only 5 or 6 unit standards in any one year. At that level it should be possible to plan an integrated programme and contain the number of assessment tasks, thus keeping the work-load to a manageable level.

A further important issue is the question as to whether this model of assessment can do justice to higher order skills, knowledge and understandings. There are really two issues here: is it possible under the unit standards approach to elicit sophisticated reading, writing, thinking, speaking and performing skills and knowledge? Does the current 'single standard' assessment model, enable assessors to recognise and reward these qualities?

The Inquiry's answer was 'Yes' to the first and 'No' to the second. We concluded that there is nothing inherent in standards-based assessment which inhibits the development of higher order skills and understandings, although certain provisos have to be met. Once again the experience of the English unit standard trial is instructive. The work of Birkenhead College sixth form students this year indicates a wide base of independent reading as well as the ability to make connections between texts and draw thoughtful conclusions from that reading. The unit standard approach did not thwart our intention to demand and get high level performance from students.

There is a growing consensus among commentators on assessment that it is possible to assess complex learning goals in an 'outcomes-based' model, but only if it is accepted that the standards will be expressed in more open-ended, less explicit forms.⁴ Te Tiro Hou noted that some of the most important goals defy all efforts to pin them down very tightly in outcomes statements and pointed out that this has consequences such as the need for training, exemplars and appropriate moderation processes. Clearly, there is no escape from the exercising of professional judgement, and resources need to be directed towards achieving a shared understanding of the goals amongst assessors. The Inquiry concluded that there is no reason to give up on trying to assess higher order learning, and that even a loose and fuzzy description of the standards is probably more helpful than none at all. The second question is whether the single standard can/can't approach to unit standard assessment allows for the recognition of higher order skills and understanding. This issue has been well canvassed, and there is now widespread agreement, from the Green Paper to the QFI membership consultation, that to distinguish only two levels of achievement does not reflect the reality of student - performance, which is in fact a continuum spanning many different degrees of competence. If the standard is set very high, then many students who have only just missed the standard get no recognition for their achievement; if it is set at a more reasonable level for most students, it is unfair to the very able. In either case it may undermine the motivation of a significant

group of students. It is worth noting that NZQA failed to consult teachers about the decision taken in 1992 to abandon achievement-based assessment and move to the can/can't model. If they had the framework might have taken a very different form.

The Inquiry recommended the introduction of a range of grades which would enable assessors to distinguish between excellent and meritorious performance and performance which is adequate but no more than that. If a workable merit system is combined with other proposals such as having fewer, larger unit standards, the model should be capable of validly assessing subjects right across the curriculum, and the apparent problem with assessing so-called 'academic' subjects should not apply.

However, the English experience is a warning against assuming that any old merit system will be a panacea. The GNVQ model for instance would be disastrous. Even after several reviews, it remains inordinately complex, requiring teachers to consider a piece of work several times under a number of different headings and themes, and then to aggregate all this information into a final result according to complex numerical rules.⁵ Manageability problems abound, and the validity of the final result is also open to question. The main lessons to be learned from that system are to look elsewhere and to keep it very simple. The Inquiry did not advocate a particular merit model but noted a more encouraging approach in the Scottish Higher National Diploma. Since a political decision has now been made to develop a model for merit in general education subjects, it is clear that NZQA's work in developing a model to recognise excellence and merit under a standards-based system will require close scrutiny. It is to be hoped that this time teachers will be consulted to ensure that the model is both valid and workable. It is important at this point to explain the stance of the Inquiry over standards-based assessment. This does not mean merely the particular version of standards-based assessment that has been developed in unit standards. It means a whole broad approach to assessment which has a different emphasis from norm-based assessment. The Inquiry noted that most international thinking about assessment in the last 30 years has been in the direction of standards - that it is more useful for most purposes to attempt to spell out the standards expected, and to assess students' performance against these standards, rather than simply to say that they did better or worse than someone else. The Inquiry did not rule out norm-based assessment where the intention really is to select the best performers for a particular purpose - for instance to ration entry to restricted tertiary courses. However in our view this should not be the dominant approach for most school qualifications.

The key difference between norm-based and standards-based assessment, is in the underlying assumption of norm-referencing that only a certain number of students will be able to achieve at a high level. Standards-based assessment does not place a limit on the number who can achieve that standard. It would be unrealistic to imagine that every student will reach the higher levels, but it is likely that many more are capable of this than a norm referenced system can recognise. The goal of standards-based assessment - to get as many students as possible to the highest standard they are capable of - is worth pursuing.

Given this conclusion, the Inquiry set out to identify which aspects of the unit standards version of standards-based assessment needed to change if the quality criteria were to be met. In addition to those already discussed, these included the following issues:

- The need for moderated exemplars of assessment tasks and schedules, assessed and moderated students work and templates for record-keeping and reporting. This will require updating of the existing Assessment Guides in the light of classroom experience.
- The use of experienced teachers as full-time moderators cum advisors rather than expecting teachers to act as moderators on top of a full-time teaching job
- The provision of time for teachers to meet together, be trained, write the new tasks and assessment schedules and talk to each other to develop their understanding of the standard they are assessing to.

- The removal of redundant low level elements and performance criteria and the reduction of unnecessarily detailed demands in range statements. These have been the source of a raft of work-load problems as well as accusations of 'dumbing down' the curriculum and removing teachers' professional autonomy.
- The removal of the largely unrealistic expectation that teachers could manage to offer unit standards at two different levels within the same class. This was NZQA's recommended approach for dealing with more able students, but it failed to take account of the size of many senior classes or to acknowledge that in many cases the unit standard at the next level deals with completely different content which requires a significant amount of input from the teacher. The introduction of a merit system seems a far more practical way of dealing with the fact that there will always be a range of ability in any class.

Re-assessment is another issue which has to be dealt with in terms of work-load. Teachers who have worked with unit standards give re-assessment top billing as a factor which increases work-load. On the other hand, it is also clear that for many students the possibility of having another go at something is a genuine educational advance and does help to make assessment a more constructive experience for the learners. So it is necessary to find a more reasonable balance in the ways that re-assessment is managed, so that students do get at least one chance to make a mistake and try again, without driving teachers into the wall designing new tests and assessment tasks and feeling that they have to give up lunch-times to run extra assessments.

Schools need to set realistic policies on re-assessment and accept that it will be built into programmes so that it isn't being done out of class time. NZQA could assist by producing common re-assessment tasks, so that teachers could exercise their creativity in designing the original task without having to invent a new one for re-assessment. The experience of the trials means that most of the answers on how to manage re-assessment so that it is beneficial to students and manageable for teachers exist within the teaching community: NZQA needs to gather and circulate these ideas to save time wasted on wheel reinvention.

The final part of Te Tiro Hou deals with the relationship between an improved form of unit standards and external examinations. One of the most significant changes from previous thinking about the framework is the recommendation that the prime focus for implementation of the changes should be on Years 12 and 13, with Year 11 remaining as the final year of general education. This was done for a number of reasons. It was evident that for most teachers the burden of implementing such a significant culture shift across three entire years of schooling would be insurmountable: under these circumstances it made sense to place the emphasis on getting the changes right in the final two years of schooling, where qualifications matter because they will determine access to further education and training and to future employment. The QFI consultation of PPT A members gave no clear direction over School Certificate, with 873 responses (from a mixture of branches, groups and individuals) supporting SC in its current form, but a total of 1173 supporting various options which included the framework.

The Inquiry envisaged a Year 12 where many students would enter for Level 2 unit standards but others would concentrate on Level 1. Once this system was established Sixth Form Certificate could disappear, and this would remove the dual assessment which is a major source of stress and work-load in the system as it is now. With SFC gone, School Certificate would have outlived its only remaining purpose as a very strange moderating device for SFC results. At that point it could be retired so that Year 11 could be seen as the final year of a broad general education, with the emphasis on meeting the requirements of the NZ Curriculum framework. Ultimately, the Inquiry could not escape the conclusion that School Certificate has no rational purpose in next century's qualification system. The AIMHI project report has since slated it for reinforcing the spiral of failure for students in decile 1 schools in the middle of their secondary schooling:

There is a consistent body of New Zealand and overseas research demonstrating the link between socio-economic status and achievement as measured by norm-referenced, standardised testing.

For most students in these schools, School Certificate interrupts, at a critical time, what could otherwise be an effective developmental learning programme and significantly exacerbates their spiral of failure in a very public way. It is also a major source of parental pressure on students as well as one of the main ways in which the lower-decile schools, in particular the decile 1 schools, are publicly judged to be failing and undesirable. As long as School Certificate exists in the secondary programme, these problems will remain for the students and their schools.⁶

Interestingly, the Chief Executive of the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority in England has recently mooted the scrapping of GCSE's in order to stop young people from dropping out of school⁷ and the McGaw Report in New South Wales recommended the abolition of the Year 10 School Certificate, as "low stakes and irrelevant to most students."⁸ At this stage, however, it appears that PPT A will recommend instead the development of School Certificate as a standards-based award, earning credit on a modified qualifications framework.⁹ But this will not resolve concerns about the destructive impact of SC for some students and its irrelevance for most, let alone solve workload problems: it is likely that dissatisfaction with SC will resurface.

The most important part of the report's recommendations, however, is the proposals for year 13, which is one of the central differences between Te Tiro Hou and the Green Paper. The Inquiry acknowledged that the final year of schooling is the level where there is a legitimate demand for some kind of national external form of assessment and recommended the retention of the Bursary exam. However, we did not agree that it should be set up in the way suggested by the government's green paper as a separate qualification to compete with unit standards. A system which forces schools and students to choose between multiple competing systems of unequal status would be neither valid nor manageable.

The notion that students would have a free choice between qualifications is simply laughable. The practical reality is that schools would have to decide which qualification to offer. Only a few schools are large enough to offer different qualifications for different classes. Most would be in the invidious position of either choosing to offer only one of the qualifications or trying to manage both within the one class. The first option is bound to disadvantage some students; the second to create massive problems of work-load and philosophical contradictions between the demands of the different qualifications. Even on the Green Paper's own 'quality' criteria, the proposition fails. What happens to portability when a student changes schools if one school has opted for the Baccaalaureat and another for the combined schools examination? How durable will qualifications be in the first few years of a deregulated market - and what of the students who have opted for a qualification which disappears after a year or two? And as for structural soundness, what of the gaping black hole that will remain after NZQA is stripped of the role of support and development for standards-based assessment which it picked up because no-one else was doing it?

The Inquiry identified significant problems in a deregulated qualifications system. By contrast, Te Tiro Hou's co-ordinated model for Year 13 is designed to retain Bursary but enable it to be sensibly credited onto the Framework. While the Green Paper announces that examination results will afford credit on the framework, it is silent on the mechanism by which a norm-referenced Bursary result might be credited onto a standards-based framework. Clearly, any attempt to do so will be a compromise, but the Inquiry has proposed an approach which could afford it credibility.

First, Bursary prescriptions would be aligned with unit standards. Bursary already includes a mix of internal and external assessment in varying proportions depending on the subjects - because there are aspects of most subjects not validly assessed by an external exam. In Te Tiro Hou's proposal, the internally assessed part of a subject would be assessed as unit standards, and the externally examined system would also equate to 2 or 3 unit standards which could also be internally assessed if the school decided to offer this option. Some students might achieve the standard in all of them before the exams, but the exam would remain as an option and would also act as a safeguard for students who weren't satisfied with their internally assessed results.

The exam would be marked as usual, but each year, a decision would be made based on the performance of students in that year's examination about what was the appropriate level to be credited with the unit standard, and what marks would equate to merit and excellence. This would be the intermediate step that would enable exams to be credited onto the framework and make some kind of sense. The Inquiry concluded that a country of New Zealand's size would be best served by a nationally co-ordinated and coherent approach to qualifications, with a single major qualification at each level. Our preference would be that the Green Paper is so overwhelmingly rejected in submissions that sense prevails, but history suggests this is an unlikely outcome. However, even in a deregulated environment some kind of de facto mainstream qualifications package has to emerge. It may be that Te Tiro Hou can provide an informed and principled lead to teachers and schools on what that mainstream should be.

Notes

1. For instance, Crooks, T.J. et al (1996) 'Threats to the Valid Use of Assessments', *Assessment in Education* 3, 265-285; Gipps, C. (1994) *Beyond testing: Towards a Theory of Educational Assessment*, Falmer Press.
2. " - to include all major NZ qualifications which are valued by students and employers, at all levels, and which meet the required 'threshold' to accommodate quality qualifications across a wide range of subject areas and levels, regardless of how their outcomes or standards are expressed, and of their approach to teaching or assessment." Ministry of Education (1997) *A Future Qualifications Policy For New Zealand: A Plan for the National Qualifications Framework*, 16. Report prepared for the Ministry of Education by the Educational Research and Development Centre; Massey University: Albany Campus, 349.
3. *Qualifications Framework Inquiry (1997) Te Tiro Hou: report of the Qualifications Framework Inquiry*, commissioned by NZ Post Primary Teachers Association, 96.
4. For instance, Coogan, P. (1996) 'Assessing Higher Order Learning in a Standards-Based System'; Revised version of Chapter 5 of the 9 chapters which comprise *Standards-based Assessment: Lessons for New Zealand from the United Kingdom*. London: Associateship of the Institute of Education, University of London.
5. Hearn, S. (1996) 'Standards-Based Assessment in New Zealand and the United Kingdom; the New Zealand Qualifications Framework and GNVQ', London: Associateship of the Institute of Education, University of London.
6. Hawk, K. and Hill, J. (1996) *Towards Making Achieving Cool - Achievement in Multi- Cultural Schools* AIMHI;
7. *Times Educational Supplement*, 4 July 1997.
8. *Qualifications Framework Inquiry (1997) Te Tiro Hou: report of the Qualifications Framework Inquiry*, commissioned by NZ Post Primary Teachers Association, 34.
9. NZPPTA, (1997) 'Worth The Work? The National Qualifications framework Under The Microscope', Annual Conference Paper.