

## Standards in music: From process to outcomes

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### ABSTRACT

The development of unit standards in Music brought together many leading personages from the music industry and education in a highly consultative process. However, discrete filtering systems, 'market' nervousness and uncoordinated procedures for introducing the lower levels into secondary schools, have meant that NZQA have restricted the possibility of the unit standards being offered to their full potential now that they are registered. Meanwhile, Ministry pressures and an ideological argument for the restoration of nationally ranked examinations from the schools within the educational elite niche market has meant a stay of execution for the existing examination system and has placed the credibility and future of unit standards into question.

Music as a career rarely comes into discussions in the school music classroom, and when it does a cautionary addendum is often expressed. This despite the fact that music teachers have long lists of possible occupations to which the study of music contributes, these are often used to encourage students to 'take' the subject. Few music teachers consider what they teach to have much relevance to careers in music. Music teachers, perhaps, should take note of the statistical 'industry' -related facts showing that in 1993/94 New Zealanders spent more than \$1 million per week on recordings (amounting to over \$118 million p.a. retail spending) and \$46 million for the year on musical instruments. The current world spending on recordings alone is approximately NZ\$58 billion. Even without reliable figures on musicians, instrument makers, music technologists, music retailers, these figures show that music impacts strongly on the national economy.

The position of music in schools is by and large a peripheral one, the clear purpose of which often eludes not only the students, parents, school administrators and politicians, but also the music teachers themselves. If we were to ask what is the function of music on the school site we would undoubtedly get a pastiche of responses which might include public relations, entertainment, social control, the fulfilment of core requirements, enculturation, the enhancement of aesthetic sensibilities, pathways to further academic study, and so on. The education of feelings is seen in the present economic climate as somewhat obscure and best confined to the privacy of one's own room. Although music presents one possible pathway to the expressed cognition of emotional response, quantifiable 'facts' are what the nation prefers.<sup>1</sup>

Over the years many of my students have gone on to careers in music for which there were no appropriate qualifications or credits on hand for the expertise these persons acquired in their professional working lives. Credentials appear to carry more weight than practical experience and this knowledge added to my commitment to be a part of the process which sought to develop unit standards leading to careers in music or for personal interest.

## Qualifications

Qualifications have become the rhetoric behind educational delivery in the 1990's. Qualifications are now both marketable and extensively marketed. Knowledge for self-realisation and emancipation is no longer a valid reason for the presence of a compulsory schooling system, if it ever was. A highly qualified workforce not only gives a nation-state economic viability and a competitive edge, it also presents the opportunity for an overqualified workforce to compete for employment, lowering wages and salaries in the process. The inherent 'student' debt incurred by this notional learning culture could subsequently condition the populace to the prospect of a lifetime of paying-back and saving-for, so guaranteeing a compliant wage-labour force for the future. Schools and tertiary institutions now compete against each other, education has become a product, and as such, education, like products, is likely to have a use-by-date and the population the prospect of a lifetime of constant upskilling.

Broadfoot (1996:43) refers to the limits of this process as a "Qualification inflation". By this she means that as more and more people get higher qualifications, these qualifications will have less and less value as selection instruments. Qualifications may lead to high-status jobs, without an equivalent expansion in the number of such jobs. The result is a "devaluation of qualifications and a raising of the 'rate for the job' on the classic 'supply and demand' principle, with consequent pressure on the education system as students seek to obtain ever higher level qualifications". If we accept that qualifications are market driven, then should we also perceive assessment as a form of systemic control? Markets rely on advantage, and for Torrance (ibid: 8) (not in refs) assessment feeds the 'division of labour' processes. He claims that education without assessment could lead to the collapse of the system itself.

Torrance further adds that "assessment may be taken to mean the deliberate and overt measurement of educational performance in order to provide information for purposes beyond the immediate interactive learning situation" (ibid: 6). If this is so, then some form of centralised record-keeping agency is necessary but the learner needs to be placed at the centre, responsible for their own pathways to achievement, permanent potential clients to the knowledge industry. To be marketable such a system needs to be flexible. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority has developed a system of flexible accumulation and is the state agency responsible for the collection and storage of learner-records.

## The New Zealand Qualifications Authority

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) is primarily responsible for overseeing the qualifications process within what is called the Qualifications Framework. Secondly it has been charged with developing outcomes, based on criterion-referenced assessment, that are standards-based. From this framework development have grown modules of learning called unit standards. They are designed to be flexible and of use to schooling, tertiary institutions and to industry. However, specific groups are insisting that more than one qualification pathway should be available to students (outlined in the Green Paper - June 1997), these are in addition to the unit standards. Teachers express concerns that choices will contribute to incoherence within assessment systems.<sup>2</sup>

In such a dual or multi-pathway system it seems inevitable that some qualifications will carry more prestige than others. Dale (1994:45) cites Hirsch as claiming that "the most important feature of a credential is that it is a positional good . . . it is a good whose possession enhances a person's position rather than enhancing their wealth or being of direct instrumental value to them". External examinations are ideological with rhetoric about rigour, depth of knowledge, the benefits of competition and such. The anxious classes (upper working/middle) have a disproportionate respect for 'bits of paper', and so add to the equation by providing a willing group of credential consumers. Particular credential capital could potentially contribute to their identify as discerning consumers.

Dual pathways might also ultimately mean a reversal back to the systems of the 1950's, in which differentiation was made between the vocational and the so-called academic schools.

### State education agencies

The tensions between the various state education agencies are, in some cases 'hidden', and in others clearly defined. In the early 1990's it was made clear to the staff at both the Ministry and NZQA that they were to avoid communication with staff from the other agency.<sup>3</sup> This was apparently to prevent a restoration of the 'old order' that prevailed prior to 1990. This seems to have resulted in the present perception that it is essential that each agency jealously guard its territory. NZQA, in developing unit standards in areas that still had an undeveloped curriculum, has committed an infringement across its border with the Ministry.

The Ministry is responsible for developing the curriculum and NZQA develops the processes for effective assessment to take place. Where the curriculum of a particular area has not been developed, NZQA are obliged to structure some form of assessment process. The creation of unit standards in music, for example, means that the NZQA has developed a curriculum by default. In some cases the curriculum has been developed, the unit standards written in support, but the curriculum has not been officially gazetted (such as Physics). The result of this educational voyeurism is teacher frustration and confusion.

Devolution in education has meant that schools and their Boards of Trustees are responsible for the quality of their programme delivery and assessment. But where devolution implies a distancing by the state, NZQA has committed itself to moving in close to the education workplace. NZQA consult, they train facilitators, they meet the teachers and administrators on a regular basis, they present a human face. This assistance comes with a price tag, but nevertheless personalities are involved and so potentially taint the contact with counter-devolutionary activity. ERO operates in schools, but because of their regulatory capacity, their mandate does not allow for specific assistance to be offered. The Green Paper proposals have the potential to reduce NZQA's personal contact with schools, except as the administrators of assessment processes. However, this neutralising of NZQA's role in framework development will not hamper its potential to make financial gain from assessment processes and regulation, it merely formalises relations with schools.

### The process to outcomes

The Music Advisory Group (MAG) for the development of unit standards in music first came together in September 1995, although a previous attempt by NZQA to form such a group had proven unsuccessful. Music lacks a National Curriculum and so what is taught in schools depends largely upon the teacher's preferences and the cultural context of the school site. A 16-page booklet entitled *Music Education in Schools - Early Childhood to Form Seven* (1989) is the only guideline available. The Minister of Education, Wyatt Creech, claims this is sufficient in the meantime (July 1997) until a curriculum can be developed.

The recently revised<sup>4</sup> School Certificate (1993) and Bursary (1995) music prescriptions now offer music performance and composition. These qualifications use standards-based-assessment. For too long music has been assessed through the silence of the written examination, the standards-based systems now mean that music is created, performed, and heard in the assessment process. In consultation, music teachers insisted that these prescriptions were to be used as essential guidelines in developing the unit standards that related to the equivalent levels of schooling.

At the same time as the MAG were first meeting the Ministry was also meeting with a small group to decide on the procedures for a National Curriculum in the Arts (Nga Toi). The two music representatives on the Ministry panel were not allowed to divulge the contents of their discussions. The Ministry 'secret societies' were subsequently shown to be in stark contrast to the wide

consultation processes of unit standard development. So possessive were the Ministry of their curriculum developments, that when a representative from NZQA suggested that the two groups share the development process, the Ministry declined. When NZQA enquired what would happen then if the unit standards conflicted with the Ministry's music curriculum, they met with the response that NZQA would then have to "rewrite the unit standards"!<sup>5</sup>

The MAG appointed a paid writer for the music unit standards, in this case an ex-Ministry employee who was freelancing as an education consultant. Prior to his working for the Department of Education this person had been an HOD of music in a large Auckland secondary school in the early 1980's. Soon after his appointment the writer travelled the country scoping opinions and ideas, these sources would then form the basis of a matrix from which the unit standards would be developed. This was followed by a series of 'expert' panel meetings which identified key areas that the participants felt to be essential to a developing musician. These meetings were interspersed with validation meetings of the MAG.

The NZQA process openly consults: there are however, innate filtering systems which shut out or ignore specific persons and ideas. The key actors in the framework development process are a major part of these systems. The writer, in particular, has an inordinate amount of power for someone contracted to document the assessment requirements. Human nature naturally gravitates us towards like-minded persons when seeking information. Whose opinions are valued?, and, Whose opinions are ignored? are two very important critical questions which need to be constantly raised during the consultancy processes.

The writing of the music unit standards at levels 1-4 (which mainly equate with senior secondary school) was completed in late 1996. Then followed external critiques and quality appraisal processes. These were mainly concerned with wording, but often became semantically overt - for example the writer's use of the word 'acceptable' was made to change to the word 'suitable'. NZQA has a particular form of codification which has the potential to restrict the main intent of a particular unit standard from being adequately described. Full registration of these unit standards is expected by the beginning of August, 1997.

The MAG has now begun working on the tertiary unit standards<sup>6</sup>. These are not intended to challenge the university examinations, for universities offer international credentials, whereas the unit standards are a New Zealand qualification.

Many private training establishments (PTE's) and polytechnics are anxious to take delivery of the standards. The tertiary developments are informed largely by staff from the universities, polytechnics, colleges of education, PTE's, as well as practicing musicians. These people are the industry as defined in this process. They are not representatives of multinational recording companies, etc. The panel processes involved interactions between members of the NZSO and rock musicians, contract lawyers and composers, Maori educators working with 'street kids' and university professors, each prepared to seek a common ground for the sake of music.

The PTE' s, however, do represent a flexibility which hints of postfordism. These are small providers whose conditions of labour for their staff need not match those of the larger institutions, but whose potential to infiltrate and affect the schooling system is very real. It is not unrealistic to expect that schools will be prepared to enter into contractual relationships with PTE's where, for instance in technology, the external provider has both the expertise and equipment to adequately teach a particular component. The sustainability and capability of some PTE's however, are problematic.

## The capacity of NZQA to deliver

Many critics are concerned that NZQA has embarked on too ambitious a qualifications model in seeking to unite under one qualification a range of previously discrete awards. While it is acknowledged that most developed countries are reforming or seeking to reform their qualifications systems, there is concern that none have gone as far as the NZQA. This has been recently challenged by the so-called elite schools who see their advantage been diminished with the possible removal of external examinations. Many teachers, throughout the country, are also concerned that the level and reliability of moderation and assessment relies, perhaps naively, on the 'professionalism' of accredited providers.<sup>7</sup>

Educators are also concerned at the ability of NZQA to deliver adequate support services. Certainly the NZQA record is not a glowing one within the systems of standards-based-assessment. Inadequate and/or late information has been a feature of this system, with regulation changes typically happening into the school year. Too often NZQA staff rely on convenient or favoured persons to support their assessment systems nationally. The unpaid regional performance moderators in school certificate music were invited by letter to undertake the role in 1994, but have heard nothing since - neither acknowledgment nor affirmation. Such negligence places an unnecessary stress on the system.

The organisation of NZQA itself is an odd one. Inter-departmental communication appears to be practically nil. For instance when the MAG were about to seek the use of the NZQA Moderation Services division it was revealed that the Framework Development Officer had never previously met them at all. Therefore prior discussion had not taken place, and we naively entered the process together. The lack of internal communication has become an obvious feature of NZQA processes and crises arise that could be averted. For example, the position of National Moderator was advertised without the MAG being informed, this subsequently meant extensive 'damage-control' by NZQA.

My position as Chairperson took on many unexpected turns, many which could have been less sudden had my role been more clearly defined. On the second day of the new 1996/97 financial year I was informed that the MAG money for the current financial year had run out, with 363 days left to go! Suddenly it became my responsibility to seek further funding - from within NZQA. Several letters seeking additional funding have proven necessary throughout the process, and it seems as though NZQA has little in the way of established systems of costing the framework development process. Writers can merely guess at what their workload might be, and set a charge accordingly. In fact the writers themselves are not paid at the same rate, some successfully bidding for higher remuneration.<sup>8</sup>

The later than anticipated registration of the music unit standards now means that the questions raised in the Green Paper have overtaken the process. To add to this confusion, the National Standards Body (NSB) for the promotion of the performance arts standards has only recently been fanned (early July 1997), and already there is a question of who will oversee this group if the Green paper recommendations are accepted. In other areas the private sector has formed Industry Training Organisations (ITO's) which operate under a separate body, the Education and Training Support Agency (ETSA). There are already existing tensions between NZQA and ETSA, partly because of this joint role of funding and monitoring different groups of similar purpose but separate intent. Now NZQA is attempting to entice ETSA to take the NSB 's on-board as a part of ETSA responsibility. This is still to be resolved, but both agencies are fairly conservative in vision.

To some extent the limitations placed on NZQA's capacity to deliver effectively must be placed at the Government's door. The annual allocation of funding impacts predictably on NZQA's effectiveness. For the 1997/98 financial year framework development funding has dropped from \$3 million to \$700,000. This uncertainty over funding and the absence of funding criteria have, as I earlier intimated, the potential to undermine the confidence of those involved in the process.

Framework developments are not a priority, groups get involved and then have to fight to gain some modicum of priority. For an agency that supposedly promotes quality, its quality outcomes are compromised by inadequate resourcing: NZQA needs to develop a long term strategic plan.

## Conclusion

This article has suggested that in some areas standards-based assessment is the most effective way forward within the present choices available. That tensions exist in education, not only between assessment systems, but between the various state agencies, should perhaps surprise no one. Further research needs to be done into these tensions.

The spill-over into the post-school sector has presented NZQA with an enhanced potential, and the proposed withdrawal of its services as a developmental agency will leave the NZQA in a more powerful position as a regulatory body. The voluntary labour of the advisory groups and expert panels has established the foundations upon which the 'authority' can build its power-base. The repackaging and codifying of the accumulated knowledge into a specific format means that the 'experts' who assisted in the 'process to outcomes' will have no choice but to purchase the criteria in order to become participants in the process that to some extent is their own intellectual property. The NZQA is now positioned to distance itself from the developmental process, secure in its regulatory bookkeeping role.

Meanwhile the critics of the unit standards often wrongly overemphasise the skill-based nature of the assessment. There is, however, a traditional belief among teachers of western art music that students must serve an apprenticeship (e.g., Associated Board Examinations), progressing through fixed grades before they are 'qualified' (Frith, 1996:36) These are essentially representations of competence. While practical demonstration is often favoured, portfolios of written work, oral definitions, and audio and video representations are possible. I prefer to think of the standards as applied knowledge rather than as mere behavioural response. The MAG is conscious that a depth of knowledge and understanding needs to be demonstrated in some more effective way than 'time served'. The group is presently researching ways of defining the 'novice to expert' model (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986), particularly for level seven.

Claims that the unit standards are fragmentary usually come from those who have either never used or have under-used the standards-based system. That the standards are reduced to an assessable proportion is not in question, but teachers may use them in conjunction with other standards to teach more holistically. Critics should also bear in mind the fragmentary nature of the average school day or the average university degree.

The 'elite' schools, in conjunction with the Education Forum, have moved to promote external examinations and competition, while denigrating the unit standards as not testing a depth knowledge and understanding. A challenge to these proposals is not within the scope of this essay, although I would comment that these groups espouse the ideals of an educational fundamentalism which ideologises 'tradition in its traditional sense' (Giddens, 1996:56). External examinations have an integrity conferred upon them which reflects an idealised past and attempts to render them untouchable in the present. They exist in a privileged space.

The proposed reshaping of the NQF adds one more change to an education system in a state of constant flux. The education system is increasingly promoted as a private commodity, and the unit standards contribute to this growing commodification of knowledge. The market laws of supply and demand will ensure that the public will accumulate a flexible store of qualifications, the bulk of these being unit standards. While I firmly believe in the quality of the music unit standards, and in the expertise of those involved, I have a concern that we have contributed to the potential development of musicians who are solely concerned with ends and that the new fast and flexible systems will encourage minor skirmishes, rather than major encounters, with a truly satisfying art form. Whatever the outcome, the potential for schools and their students for increased involvement

and timetabling in music, and the clarifying of music pathways for post-school learners through unit standards, should mean a wealth of new opportunities in music education.

## Notes

1. For example, NZQA are most uncomfortable with the inclusion of performance and composition in School Certificate and Bursary. The implied subjectivity of these subjects is often drawn to the attention of music teachers by the Authority, which constantly threatens a return to a purely written form of examination. The inclusion of composition and performance has, in fact, contributed to the trebling of the numbers of students undertaking the qualifications.
2. PPTA News, July 1997, Vol 18, No 7.
3. Personal comments from staff involved in both agencies at that time.
4. This new prescription was initiated by Wellington music teachers, tired of the inappropriate ways that music was being examined, and of the lack of government moves to do something about it.
5. This was the experience of Roger Booth, the Framework Development Officer of the music and other performance arts unit standards. The Ministry group disbanded shortly thereafter - a generic arts curriculum seemingly put in the too hard basket.
6. The key areas developed to date at various levels are: Perform; Compose; Arrange; Conduct; Improvise; Group Perform; Understand; Appreciate; Technology (various); Business Management; Music Education; Music Therapy; Research Skills; NZ Music; Music Leadership; Music Retail; Performing Artist (generic performance arts - preparing for performance and self-management)
7. Only 25% of a provider's course is subject to external moderation in any one year, this after an initial full external moderation as courses are established.
8. This happened within the performance arts, where the dance writer earned considerably more for writing fewer units than the writer for music.

## References

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