

Anybody want a Dip Bus?: Re-discovering Dip Bus in the debris of the education war.

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ABSTRACT

Imagine an ideological war over education that has been raging for a decade with few signs of peace. Picture the battle pocked education landscape and the assortment of pre-war and more recent structures. Now move beneath the surface, away from the battle noise and grand maneuvers to discover Dip Bus: dazed, bruised, unwary war casualty. Still alive, still functioning, doing good. Is Dip Bus worth rescuing from the no-man's land between the unitisers and the universities? This short biography of Dip Bus, from its conception before the war, discovers a practicable, relevant, reliable, available Dip Bus, integrated by nature, reared in a welcoming and functional extended family. Today life is hard but the family is still together and this living, breathing, adaptable, mid-tertiary identity has the character to continue to be the mainstay of Polytech business education.

Introduction

Imagine an ideological war over education that has been raging for a decade with few signs of peace. It is a modern war, characterised by power groups, civilian casualties and collateral damage. Picture the battle pocked education landscape and the assortment of pre-war and more recent structures: some battered, some derelict, some demolished, some newly painted, some remarkably unscathed in the continuing struggle. Now move beneath the surface, away from the noise and grand manoeuvres to discover people, getting on with educational life, meeting each other's educational needs in ways that work, ways born of need rather than ideological design. It's a difficult but vital existence that triumphs on the strength and universality of its vision.

In many ways that scarred landscape and subsistent life represents New Zealand Education. Ten years ago the conditions for revolution were ripe: apparently bumbling, inflexible education institutions, seemingly insensitive to their population, were ripe for overthrow. Pressures of changing social environments sharpened perceptions of their failings: alienation of important groups of students, capture by educational professionals, perceived inefficiency, costliness, arrogance, remoteness and inaccessibility.

Business and managerial styles of analysis produced a set of obvious solutions: knowledge should be unpacked and made widely available in bite sized pieces for people to pick and choose; chew on and digest as they desired (unitisation, provider competition, competency based qualifications). This would have the double benefit of increasing accessibility to education and removing it from the clutches of the educator establishment. It would be the ultimate consumer

solution for education. People could make their own choices about obtaining and assembling knowledge rather than be dictated to by the education establishment. Market ideologues, alienated public, and liberal educators enthusiastically entered the fray. They decimated whole bodies of knowledge, pilloried resistant education professionals, eliminated some education organisations, installed their own managers, legislated for their own language and terminology, took control of the funding system and fed the media.

Through all this stumbled, dazed and bruised, NZ Dip Bus, unwary casualty of the war. NZ Dip Bus was born before the war out of a relationship between professional educators and industry leaders who wanted educated people to help increase the effectiveness of their industries amidst growing global competition. The nature of NZ Dip Bus was practicable, integrated knowledge.

Today the unitising ideologues and their stakeholders continue to tighten their control on training. Their ideological opponents launch waves of degree style counter attacks. Governments come and go. In no man's land is NZ Dip Bus, battered from all sides. Is it worth saving? Does it have any place in the educational world? Has the conflict focused our attention on the power play; away from the real educational needs?

The history of NZ Dip Bus shows that it is a successful education pathway. It continues to be relevant, reliable and widely available. It is people getting on with educational life, meeting each other's needs in ways that work, born of need rather than ideological design. It is the difficult but vital existence that will triumph, from beneath the apparent destruction and confusion, on the strength and universality of its vision. It is the lifeblood of middle education, the core business of the Polytechnics.

A short history of Dip Bus

Courtship and consummation

Prior to the birth of NZ Diploma in Business (Dip Bus), a number of professional business organisations had their own external examinations. These organisations included the NZ Society of Accountants (now the Institute of Chartered Accountants), the Institute of Chartered Secretaries and Administrators (now the Chartered Institute of Management), and the New Zealand Institute of Management. They met to produce and rear a single programme and qualification. A co-ordinating committee, the National Advisory Committee for Business Studies (NACBS), dominated by industry (eleven of the fourteen members are from industry, only three from polytechnics) was established to:

1. oversee the development of the programme structure and the development of individual subject papers which made up the programme;
2. oversee regular monitoring of standards across providers of the qualification; and,
3. oversee regular reviews and updating of the individual subject prescriptions (Source: NACBS).

The result of this union was the Dip Bus: conceived as a step in rationalising polytechnic business programmes at diploma level.

Birth and rearing of Dip Bus

Dip Bus was born before the war in 1987. It was initially named National Certificate in Business Studies, but was renamed several years later to reflect its academic level relative to other programmes both in New Zealand and overseas.

The purpose of Dip Bus was to provide a broad based business grounding for students and a number of its subjects were incorporated into a wide range of other qualifications, such as the NZ

Certificate in Office Systems and several Forestry qualifications. It also provided for recognition of prior study through both direct subject cross-credits and through unspecified credits for study in unrelated subject areas but of an equivalent academic standard to the Diploma.

The advisory committee oversaw a comprehensive quality assurance programme that required subjects to be subject to external moderation by a combination of industry and provider representatives. Providers who fell short of the nominated standards were advised of their shortcomings and, if no improvement was evident at the next review, were faced with immediate improvement or loss of the right to offer the programme. Syllabi were regularly reviewed and updated, again by a combination of industry and educator representatives under the auspices of the NA CBS.

Success

At its peak, in 1990, prior to the introduction of polytechnic degrees, the programme had over 33,000 enrolments annually (Source: NACBS statistics), making it the largest programme in the polytechnic sector by far, and also one of the most profitable for providers. Graduates from the programme wishing to commence higher studies in America have found the programme readily accepted by American Universities as the equivalent to the American Associate Degree programme structure.

Trouble from abroad

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) focused on the programme early in the Framework's development and announced their intention to replace it with a Framework based (and therefore competency based) qualification or series of qualifications. NZQA began a campaign to force Dip Bus to adopt its competency-based philosophy. Chapman (1997:62) describes NZQA's drive to implement the Framework as missionary zeal. The impact on Dip Bus, the largest of leading polytechnic business programmes, was to be especially severe and become the source of major tension between NZQA and providers who had invested heavily in establishing Dip Bus.

The propaganda war and fiscal sanctions

NZQA used a new model of public management to portray 'old world' Dip Bus as a failure. The model measures efficiency by the relationship between inputs and outputs (Boston et al, 1996:13). NZQA cited a number of criticisms of the programme as justification for its replacement, including a less than 50% successful completion rate for the qualification and the failure of the programme to meet the needs of industry (NZQA /Association of Polytechnics in New Zealand (APNZ), 1997). Though apparently commonly accepted, the bases of these claims were clearly flawed.

Problems with the input / output measures used by NZQA were identified in an investigation under the auspices of APNZ (Eagle and McDonald, 1998). The measures had not isolated the substantial number of students including Dip Bus subjects as part of other qualifications (who therefore did not - and never intended to - complete the Dip Bus).

Contrary to NZQA's claim of Dip Bus failure to meet industry needs, a major 1997 study of industry perception by A.C. Nielsen: McNair, under the auspices of APNZ, found that over 80% of respondents who were familiar with the qualification felt that it met their needs. They found that the old world qualification was clearly preferred to a the new world approach.

NZQA added fiscal sanctions to their campaign. They withheld the funding (for three years) for the on-going curriculum updating programme. After three years the climate had shifted, the funds were released and the programme has undergone a substantial revision and review.

A test of character and reputation

Dip Bus had the pedigree and character to survive. She was conceived, pre NZQA, to overcome problems of fragmentation and duplication in the business certificate / diploma sector. These criteria were spelt out in the NZ Government's *Learning for Life* report (1989). Potential rule complexity was overcome by the NACBS establishing and monitoring a central set of regulations and ensuring consistent and coherent information was available. Pressure group influence was minimised through the broad cross section of industry membership that made up the NACBS. This also ensured that sectorial infighting was also minimised. Accountability was ensured through the quality assurance programme overseen by the NACBS.

So solid was Dip Bus reputation that NZQA's actions brought its mandate for the wholesale implementation of CBA philosophy into question. The spotlight shifted to NZQA and the Framework and a number of problems and concerns with how it was evolving in other business areas. At the same time, problems encountered in developing the Framework exposed a break in the link between the objectives of the education reforms and the implementation of policy through NZQA and the National Framework.

Problems at home for NZQA

While NZQA was abroad campaigning against old world programmes and qualifications, it seems that a rather large number of problems were occurring at home in developing units for the Framework. These included the time and resources needed to develop the various units; the fragmented nature of units developed by different groups but intended to form part of a cohesive qualification; and the knowledge, willingness and ability of industry groups to feed into the development process, as illustrated by the following comments from the chief executive of the Retail Industry Training Organisation:

you will see how complex this whole business becomes, especially once we start negotiating with other industries which have developed unit standards that are of interest to our industry ... This whole world of unit standards and national qualifications will collapse unless we can ensure that the work we are doing represents the needs of industry ... You will notice too that our industry is not exactly switched on to what we are trying to do (Norman, 1996:1).

The following review details eight key problem for NZQA.

Development and maintenance cost

The investment of time in commenting on consultative drafts and of writing material according to unit based prescriptions has also been extremely high. Norman (1996:1) estimates the cost of developing individual unit standards (not including the development of teaching and assessment materials) as \$500 per unit standard. Initially, some 4,000 units were proposed. That figure has grown substantially and now appears to be forecast at 16,000+. There will be substantial resources required to keep these units up to date.

The investment required to restructure courses and assessment programmes has generated increasing numbers of complaints from providers, who have received no additional funding for this work. A review of the costs involved in the developments to date was commenced under the auspices of the Minister of Education, Wyatt Creech in mid 1996. No results have yet been released. A 'Green Paper' specifically on the Framework was released in June 1997, with submissions to be made by September 1997. This has added to the general uncertainty regarding future policy. It is to be hoped that these reports are both made public as part of ongoing policy debates.

Role of industry

As noted previously, some major employers (e.g. Jones, 1993) do not appear to embrace the concept of portable qualifications, preferring to concentrate on the skills that are of immediate benefit to the employing organisation. In spite of the intention of building a versatile workforce, what may be occurring is that employers are funding or releasing staff to obtain a narrow range of -skills that have immediate application to their current employment.

Many of the Framework units call for on-job training which benefits large employers - who are able to do their own training at public expense (and to tailor the training to their specific needs). Given that "89% of business units in this country employ fewer than ten people" (Willyams, 1993: 1), small companies may find themselves unable to access or to resource training themselves.

Industry Training Organisations (ITOs) have been established "by particular industries or groups of industries. ITOs' responsibilities include setting national skills standards for their industry, arranging for the delivery of on-job and off-job training, and arranging for the assessment of trainees" (NZQA, 1996:7). Most ITOs in existence are in trade related areas, often replacing training boards which were responsible for the administration of apprenticeship schemes. Only two ITOs have (as yet) been established in commerce - in the banking sector and in the aviation, travel and tourism sector. A third, in the retail sector, was established in the second half of 1996 but appears to be having problems in gaining adequate funding from its industry (approximately \$150,000 is sought, to be matched with double that amount from central government - with the ITO expected to become financially self-sufficient by 1998 (Norman, 1996). The ITO representing the Banking industry has assessed the relative benefits of the old versus the new system and elected, in March 1996, to deregister as an ITO on the following grounds "sponsor banks were not confident that the Framework proposals would deliver benefits beyond those derived from current training and education programmes sufficient to warrant the level of resources required to implement the new proposals" (Anderson, 1995:2).

Administration Costs / On-going Funding

Funding for the purchase of training is channelled via the Education & Training Support Agency (ETSA) through ITOs rather than direct to educational providers, with tenders being called for the provision of training (usually on an annual basis). Tenders for the provision of specially targeted courses (e.g. Skills Enhancement which is targeted at Maori and Pacific Island students) are also channelled through ETSA.

The cost of funding administered via the ETSA / ITOs causes concern. Willyams (1995) estimates the cost of distributing funding for each student under the old centralised Ministry funding as \$10 per head, but some \$600 under the ETSA / ITO system, due to the duplication of administration. This results in less money being available for the purchase of actual training. In several instances, the number of training places and indeed the number of training polytechnic providers funded has been severely cut, resulting in loss of training opportunities for potential students and in redundancies for the affected teaching staff. Redundancies are likely to increase as funding is provided to 'alternative' institutions that are able to offer framework based units (including secondary schools). Potentially, there is nothing to stop senior secondary school curricula from including material up to degree level.

ITOs have received substantial Government funding to establish their new structures. This funding is not envisaged by Government as on-going - "following the development phase, there is likely to be a substantial reduction in ITO income and funding, until its new products have been accepted by the market, and ne user-pays funding streams begin to generate income" (NZQA, 1996:3). Trainees are increasingly expected to contribute via ITO imposed levies for registration, assessment etc. Some ITOs (e.g. Building) have signalled that they will be unable to generate sufficient income to continue to operate once central funding ceases.

As already noted, among the aims of the reforms was the reduction in course duplication and the reduction of sectorial infighting (NZ Government, 1989). ITOs regard unit standards as potential revenue streams through the charging of registration and examination fees, and have replaced generic units (accessible by all programmes at no cost) with their own variations for which they can then charge a levy. For example, the Aviation, Travel and Tourism ITO has opted not to use the generic communications units, specifying instead units with titles such as 'Communication in the Travel Industry' (Source: National Framework Register/ ATITO). Duplication has thus become a major problem, hampering also flexible cross crediting between qualifications.

Where a unit is owned by a particular ITO (for example, fork hoist driving is vested with an engineering ITO), but has relevance to other ITOs (e.g. retailing who wish to utilise the fork hoist units for their warehousing qualifications), there has been little success in gaining cooperation from the owning ITO to amend the unit to more fully meet the needs of the second ITO. This has resulted both in sectorial fights and further duplication of units as ITOs seek to introduce parallel units.

Contestable funding

In a Ministry of Education circular regarding 1994 - 1996 objectives, projections and funding (June 18, 1993), warning was given that a significant amount of centrally funded places for Maori Vocational Training would be removed from bulk funding from 1994, and that providers "will need ... to negotiate with ETSA for the continued resourcing of the programmes ... " (Ministry of Education, 1993:7).

This placed some \$1,008,240 (123 EFTS) of Manukau Polytechnic's funding alone, and \$4,828,905 (576 EFTS) across all polytechnics on a contestable basis (Source: Ministry of Education, Charters and Funding Division). A similar situation occurred with Directed Apprentice Training, which resulted in a further \$1,411,731 of Manukau Polytechnic's funding becoming contestable from the start of the 1994 academic year.

While the objective was given as increasing competition and thereby efficiencies in programme delivery, the results may not be what was intended. The uncertainty of funding for providers generates an unwillingness to invest in new plant and equipment. Where courses have not been funded, "the institutions are unlikely to re-tender in the following year and are likely to have sold off or reallocated resources" (Holmberg, interview: 1995). To date, polytechnic experience with competitive tendering for training provision has seen a focus on lowest cost rather than any other factor. It is possible that, in the future, courses will not be run if the amount of funding available is insufficient to cover the costs of providing the courses. This would then restrict rather than extend choice for potential students.

A further warning of the consequences of increased contestability of funding rather than the use of other accountability measures comes from one of the original review documents: "competition among providers is more likely to produce courses that respond to the short term needs of individuals without providing them with the education and training necessary for permanent employment, or providing the overall skills required of the nation's economy" (Probine: Fargher, 1987:32).

Compliance costs

The new framework based curricula is an expensive proposition for providers in terms of time and resources, not only in transitional / establishment costs, but on-going quality control. Accreditation by NZQA of non-universities to offer degrees is expensive, (\$17,000+ for an initial accreditation), with on-going monitoring by NZQA appointed moderators and external moderation of individual courses adding several thousand dollars annually. Accreditations are for a period of 5 years and re-accreditation costs will undoubtedly be substantial. Polytechnics report 'major investment costs',

estimated at \$25 million to date in developing teaching material for Framework based units and on-going administration costs in areas such as record keeping and assessment of prior learning (Laxton, 1995: 1/3). Doyle (1995: 1/7) believes that the Framework implementation has 'run off the rails'. After four years work, "the authority had produced 4,609 unit standards but only 96 registered qualifications, including 44 in printing alone" (Doyle, 1995: 1/7).

Additional costs for students

Students also incur additional fees for the administration of the Framework records - an initial fee of \$25 is followed by \$1 per credit recorded (a full time one year course is equated to 120 credits). As noted previously, ITOs also impose a range of fees on students. Where ITO originated course material and examination fees are included, the cost can be several hundred of dollars in addition to the institution's own fees. In 1998 for example, for the one year Advanced Certificate in Travel programme, the Aviation, Travel and Tourism ITO (ATTTO) imposed \$995 in fees for course materials, examination fees and ITO registration on top of the normal teaching institution fees (Source: Manukau Institute of Technology, 1998 fees).

Unit Standard development

Another criticism has been of the calibre of the unit standards that have been written. Writers are contracted to NZQA to liaise with industry and educators and to develop all units for the framework in a standard format and 'language'. Concerns have been expressed where unit writers have worked on subject areas in which they have limited expertise.

The following extract from a letter from the Chief Executive Officer of Manukau Polytechnic (copied to key industry representatives) illustrates both the type and magnitude of concerns:

"In the business area, it is impossible to recruit unit writers who have an overall knowledge of the subjects being taught and I think this is reflected in their efforts to date in that, in those areas where they have a speciality, they write well but in the many areas where they are not specialised, their project is of a suspect standard and causes considerable concern As a suggestion, would it not be more practical for working groups to ask specialists in each area to do the writing for that subject and then use your unit writers as co-ordinators to ensure there is standardisation" (Willyams, 1993: 1).

This suggestion appears to have been ignored and concerns regarding the standard of the units, and whether in fact some are 'teachable' continue to the present time. The suggested co-ordination would possible have also helped to avoid the problems encountered in trying to combine unit standards from different disciplines to structure a coherent qualification. Problems with consistent definitions of the number of credits assigned to particular units and of the levels at which the units themselves are placed on the framework have caused major problems in the development of new unit based programmes, and in no small part contributed towards moves to retain a number of 'old world' business programmes within the framework structure.

Assessment and record keeping

Education providers who are using Framework based units have reported substantial increases in staff workload in terms of administration. Each unit is broken into a number of elements and students must demonstrate competence on each element before they are credited with the unit. There are an unlimited number of opportunities to re-sit individual elements. The complexity of both the record keeping and the assessment provision presents a major resource issue.

Freedom in sight

With problems like that at home NZQA's potency in battle was rather diminished. It has been preoccupied with achieving the reform objectives through the new structures administration systems that have evolved. The high administration costs must mean that funds are not being spent on education per se, and that, ultimately, increased costs will fall on students - creating a further disincentive to undertake tertiary education and training. The ability of industry to sustain a major role in driving Framework development and in maintenance is questionable. In addition, a number of key questions regarding the appropriateness of competency based assessment as currently defined by NZQA at a range of levels of educational programmes are as yet unanswered. Furthermore, the attempts to force providers to offer standardised programmes based on unit standards runs counter to the philosophy of marketization and appears to be based on a narrow perception of what constitutes human capital or how it can be most effectively and efficiently accrued.

Another threat

This final chapter of the story is partly conjecture, partly anecdote, partly experience; a scenario to suggest a framework for further research, analysis and comment.

NZQA and the unitisers did not have the only grand strategy to win the polytechnics; to assail their administrators; to seduce their educators and draw their attention and energy away from Dip Bus. As the unitisers won training territory, so polytech academics retreated towards degree territory. Degree programmes appealed to their desire for intellectual stimulation and increased academic status.

At the same time the demand for qualifications became heightened, promoted by NZQA. The polytechnics responded by generating new degree qualifications of their own. This was encouraged by NZQA, eager to attack the universities. For the polytechnics, the new degrees provided a strategy to attract and retain staff, withdraw from direct conflict with unitisers, and differentiate themselves from Private Training Establishment (PTEs) who have developed primarily on unitised qualification products.

However the costs of mounting polytech degree programmes, and their low perceived status compared to university equivalents, have rendered most polytech based degree programmes uneconomical. Polytechs have responded by courting the universities. With marketisation and inter-university competition, polytechnics have become attractive to universities and relationships are mutually sought. The polytechnics, especially the academics, enjoy the courtship. The company is salubrious and the vision entrancing: a glorious qualification staircase to heaven. The polytechnics are apparently so bedazzled that they can no longer clearly see their own Dip Bus amidst the rubble at their feet. Many believe that Dip Bus has no future except as a step on the heavenly staircase; that a polytech simply cannot survive unless it is married to a university.

This last conclusion begs closer examination. Logically there must be a need for a middle tertiary education that achieves attitudinal and behavioural change of direct and obvious benefit to industry and the community. Logically, a large section of the population is not suited to high education. Dip Bus has impeccable character for the middle role. It's parentage, breeding, growth and adaptability and performance have seen it survive the war. A measure of its quality and perhaps also its own drift towards higher education, is its increasing cross-credibility at stage one level, into New Zealand and Australian University degree programmes. Thus, if the demand for Dip Bus is falling and its viability faltering, then the problem must be a prevalent misconception of its purpose and value by polytech academics and subsequently by their industry partners and the student market.

Correction of this misconception must begin within the polytechnics. The academics must wake up from their foolish dream, re-discover Dip Bus for themselves in the rubble of the education war. Then, through innovative design, marketing and delivery, they can re-acquaint industry with its ability and ability for practical attitudinal and behavioural change. This task needs skilled, innovative educators attuned to business. It is exciting work: enough to tantalise the best if only they realised what they have found and what its for: Dip Bus.

Epilogue

Lest we forget, although NZQA may have been distracted by problems at home and discredited to some degree by its own actions, it is still there; still a real force. There are people who still hold power in NZQA that held it in earlier days and NZQA has recently received increased funding. The formal rhetoric may indicate a benign force but the unofficial line is quite different. For example: Roger Booth of the Business & Management National Standards Body (NSB) sees national business qualifications (unit based) at levels 4, 5, & 6, developed and planned for development by the NSB as being able to co-exist with Dip Bus. (Minutes of NACBS meeting, 11 November 1999). In contrast a polytechnic manager, returning from a recent (June 2000) Wellington Management unit revision and development workshop, was heard to claim with some apparent satisfaction that Dip Bus will be converted to unit standards soon and those polytechnic academics who don't like the prospect maybe in the wrong business. The very name of the Business & Management National Standards Body rather indicates grand intentions.

That war is not over yet.

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