Unit Standards: An 'Easy' Pathway for Foundation Learners

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of requirement
for the degree of
Master of Education (Adult)
at Massey University,
Massey Campus.

"To be a good liberating educator you need above all to have faith in human beings. You need to love. You must be convinced that the fundamental effort of education is to help with the liberation of people, never their domestication" (Freire, 1971, p. 62).

Anne Barrer
October 2006

ABSTRACT

Foundation learners come into the tertiary environment at levels one, two and three. They can select from courses of study that include unit standard assessment. These unit standards are credits toward a vast array of national certificates. In recent years, learners have been faced with an ever increasing variety of ways in which they can complete these qualifications from classroom based to online modes of delivery. Many of the programmes and courses on offer are zero fee and promise a self-paced and individualised learning environment. Further investigation reveals that even at this foundation level these programmes play an important role in the political and social agenda to upskill all New Zealanders to better prepare them for the 21st century. The sweeping reforms of the 1990s have turned educational courses at all levels into industry focused curricular (Peters & Marshall, 1996; Olssen &Mathews, 1997; O'Neill et al., 2004) and unit standards are increasingly the chosen pathway of those changes.

Over the last 15 years, polytechnics and private training establishments have incorporated New Zealand Qualifications Authority unit standards into many of their programmes. The intention was that these units would be assessments only and would be able to be 'massaged' into existing courses. This proved to be challenging for educators (Goodwill, 1999) and unit standards now dominate the curriculum (Codd, 1997).

This research focused on how foundation learners were experiencing unit standards. Nineteen foundation learners, studying at an ITP and two PTEs, were invited to talk about their feelings about assessment, what they thought unit standards were, and how they were finding them. These learners took part in an individual interview and a focused group conversation. The results identified that foundation learners are having an 'easy ride' with unit standards. They can learn the material and then pass the unit. If they don't meet the requirements of the unit standard, they get another chance and do a resit. They like learning 'unit' by 'unit' and doing the assessment straight after the learning, while it is still 'fresh.' If possible they prefer to do it at their own pace, working through the material and being assessed when they are ready.

They are now finding assessment less scary than previous experiences and there is opportunity to feel a sense of achievement and not be compared with others. The transparency of the units appeals and the relationship with the tutor is seen as important.

It was also evident that students are studying 'units' and that sometimes they find the language of the assessments difficult to understand.

There has been a shift in learning, from curriculum-driven 'education' focused programmes to student-driven 'industry-influenced' credit acquisition. The National Qualifications Framework has succeeded in its goal of offering units as attractive learning packages. These learners accept the new language of learning; they don't have the knowledge or understanding about assessment to question the units that are offered to them. "They have no insights into the reforms, no understanding of their political rationales, nor any methods of critiquing them"(O'Neill et al., 2004, p. 17).

The biggest challenge for educators is not to teach the unit standard, rather engage learners and encourage them to explore their curriculum in a broader sense. Foundation learners now understand the value of credits; they also need to be encouraged to understand the value of education. 'Learning for life' should be more intrinsic than getting a box ticked. This research highlights the importance of the learning environment, the relationship between learner and tutor, and the relevance of explaining clearly what unit standards are, and how they fit into the bigger picture of the National Qualifications Framework and education itself as a life changing path.

Anne Barrer
21 October 2006

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Linda Leach, my supervisor from Massey University. She allowed me to let loose when I had the drive and enthusiasm, but was there when I needed direction and advice re structure, formalities and asking the hard questions. Her response when I emailed 'help' was always immediate and very positive. Thanks also to Alison Viskovic for her constructive feedback.

A big thank you to the two private training establishments and the institute of technology for their willingness and enthusiasm toward my project. I appreciated the fact that the managers and tutors allowed me to come in during course time to explain my research to their students and to gain their interest in taking part. Without their enthusiasm the students may never have volunteered.

I had to compete with my son Thomas for the computer as his online activities took up much computer time. Eventually I bought a laptop and this eased the queuing for the computer. I am grateful that my partner Rob was encouraging and left me alone to study and make sense of all my readings and findings. Rob was especially helpful when I needed to talk through a concept, theme or proposition. Thanks also to my daughter Hazel for her proof-reading and formatting skills.

Special thanks to Bron Mogridge, a work colleague, who made a point of checking in with me on a regular basis to see how I was going. I also appreciated other family members and colleagues taking an interest and enquiring about the progress of my study. They all helped encourage and keep me on track.

For me the journey became a political awakening unfolding and capturing me in ways I couldn't have imagined prior to its commencement.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

ACCESS	Government funded programme for unemployed
ACE	Adult and Community Education
ATTTO	Avionics Tourism Travel and Training Organisation
EFTS	Equivalent Full Time Student
GTE	Government Training Establishments
IALS	International Adult Literacy Survey
ITO	Industry Training Organisation
ITP	Institutes of Technology & Polytechnics
ITPNZ	Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics New Zealand
NCEA	National Certificate in Educational Achievement
NCES	National Certificate in Employment Skills
NQF	National Qualification Framework
NZQA	New Zealand Qualifications Authority
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation Development
PEP	Project employment programmes
PTE	Private Training Establishment
QMS	Quality Management System
STEPS	School-leavers Training and Employment Preparation Scheme
TEI	Tertiary Education Institutes
TEC	Tertiary Education Commission
TEP	Temporary Employment Programme
TOP	Training Opportunity Programmes
YPTP	Young Persons Training Programme
YT	Youth Training

INTRODUCTION

This project is the culmination of many years of observation, questioning, and reflection. The research process often begins long before the decision to take it to a formal investigative stage. That was how it was for me. I began to get curious as I experienced major changes in the tertiary sector. On the one hand I felt excited by the changes, yet on the other hand I was aware of a deep rift cutting across the sector as teaching staff either embraced or negated the changes. I was torn between convincing arguments for the reforms and equally convincing arguments against. Teachers, including myself, were unwittingly and certainly sometimes unwillingly, "drawn into the massive programme of social, economic and cultural reconstruction undertaken by the National Government (1990-1999) and continued by the current Labour administration" (O'Neill et al., 2004, pp. 17,18). Education underwent major reforms, in particular in the way assessment was carried out. "One of the more dramatic trends in education, over the last decade, has been the shift towards the use of criterion-referenced assessment" (Peddie & Tuck, 1995, p. 9).

My position as a tutor and coordinator of government funded foundation programmes within the polytechnic sector, gave me opportunities to observe first hand the changing face of education. Codd (1997) suggests that the change I was experiencing was between society, knowledge and higher education. He saw the agent behind the change as the New Zealand Qualifications Authority and the mechanism for the change as the National Qualifications Framework and the policies surrounding it. For myself, I began to wonder how it was for teachers, and how it was for learners. The focus of my curiosity was unit standards, in particular unit standards as they were being used on levels one to three foundation programmes in the tertiary learning environment.

At the end of the year 2000, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority celebrated "Ten Years On" (QA News, 2000). This prompted me to pause, reflect, and consider—at what cost, to teaching and learning? In the year 2001, I carried out a research project (Barrer,

2001), which aimed to find out how the teaching and learning environment in foundation programmes at a regional polytechnic had been affected by the introduction of unit standard assessment. I was interested in the impact on everyday teaching and learning in the classroom. How were teaching staff coping with the new changes? Were unit standards being used as an assessment tool or were teachers teaching to the unit? Were teachers and students being shaped by the new qualifications? Was learning being compromised? My research focused on how tutors were finding it. I did not carry out any interviews or discussion with students at that stage.

The project highlighted some of the dissatisfaction that tutors were feeling about unit standards. They were getting used to them, but they were still finding them very rigid and time consuming. Some of the tutors were teaching to the unit even though they were philosophically opposed to the idea of doing that. They were feeling driven by the units and felt that their teaching had been compromised. In many cases, they were rushing through the units to complete the qualification in the prescribed time. They were concerned by the number of assessments and the nit-picky nature of all the boxes that had to be ticked. They felt that the units had shaped their teaching programmes and that some aspects of the curriculum were being dropped to fit the units in.

I concluded there was a need for further research to be carried out in relation to unit standards and classroom practices in the tertiary sector. I began to question, 'how can we promote best practice for assessing unit standards?' Although NZQA had encouraged integrated assessments, there was growing evidence (Codd, 1997; Goodwill, 1999) to suggest that tutors and students were feeling that units were dominating. In 2000 The Association of Polytechnics New Zealand (APNZ, now ITPNZ) initiated a series of workshops around the country aimed at promoting best practice in teaching and assessing unit standards. More recently NZQA published a paper promoting good practice guidelines (NZQA, 2005), which encouraged assessment at an element, rather than criteria level and in an integrated fashion where possible. These guidelines (Appendix J) emphasised using naturally occurring evidence, professional judgement and focusing less on individual performance criteria. The fact that these guidelines were published seemed

to me indicative of a sector that was seeking help when it came to unit standard assessments.

My Experience

I began to consider how learners in foundation programmes in the tertiary sector might be experiencing this method of assessment. How were unit standards being experienced at this level? Were students embracing them? Anecdotal evidence suggested that some students were finding them better than previous experiences of norm-referenced assessment. They understood what they were being asked to do. They liked having a second or third chance to complete an assessment. Other observations highlighted that some learners were feeling rushed through assessments to gain a qualification within a set time frame. In addition, as some students came to understand how the new system worked they demanded to work only on topics that led to the achievement of the credits. They weren't interested in understanding at a deeper level.

The credit-driven learner was emerging as the new 'pacman' seeking credits to gobble up! This was illustrated to me recently when our institute designed a low level hairdressing course for senior secondary students. At the school's request we included only a few unit standards as it was thought that this would suit the less academically able students. In fact the opposite has proven to be true. The students are demanding more credits and are threatening to drop out unless we redesign the course with more unit standards included in it. These and similar experiences caused me to reflect on whether we were contributing to the 'dumbing down' of society. Were unit standards dominating the curriculum to the point that students only wanted to do 'them' and not participate in wider more holistic learning? On the positive side the credit system was 'catching on' and more students were seeking courses that offered qualifications.

My own experience as a polytechnic tutor for the last 22 years has given me opportunity to observe the changing environment, from the early government funded life skills courses for the unemployed (STEPS, YPTP, TEP) in the 1980s (Department of Labour, 1984) through to the vast array of industry-led NZQA national certificates offered today.

During the 1990s I experienced first hand the business of getting 'everyone onboard' with the new Framework. For tutors, this involved attending workshops run by NZQA on how to integrate unit standards into their programme and how to assess them. At an educator level the pros and cons of unit standards were debated vigorously and within the ITP sector today there is still a divide between those staff who teach on unit standard based programmes and those who don't. Some staff endorse them, others dismiss them.

Unit standards tend to dominate lower level national certificates and one of the most popular is the National Certificate in Employment Skills which is made up of 60 credits from fields such as core generic, communication, literacy, computing and employment skills. This qualification is offered in many guises but perhaps most significantly it is offered as a distance learning programme through the Open Polytechnic ('Lifeworks') and through Te Wānanga o Aotearoa ('Mahi Ora'). These programmes have been successful in enrolling thousands of learners from throughout New Zealand.

Finally I had to admit that my whole philosophy of teaching and learning was being challenged. I had always seen learning as essentially an emancipatory process, giving students autonomy to explore new ideas, and I had always felt that the 'journey' was at least as important as the task. The unit standard model was making me focus more on outputs and outcomes. I was noticing that the 'words' being used in our sector were changing. In some areas we were now 'delivering' courses and teaching 'units.'

Focus on assessment

Over the last 15 years, I have observed this shift, this move away from learning, to a more deliberate focus on the unit standards being offered (delivered?) At first, this was driven by the new Framework with its vast array of qualifications. Providers gained accreditation in wide-ranging 'fields' and offered National Certificates and Diplomas that contained many unit standards. Students could learn in an ever-increasing range of flexible ways, from classroom-based to distance learning, from web-based to marae-based. Once students understood how the new qualification system worked, they too began to 'drive' the curriculum.

Student-centred learning had taken on a whole new meaning. Now the learner had taken charge. The final recognition that this change had taken place was when I realised that, learners, on their own initiative, or through an employer, were approaching providers, such as an ITP, to teach them a unit standard. They were also asking whether local provider qualifications were linked to national qualifications. If they weren't, they were choosing to take their business elsewhere. This lure of the national qualification has been used as a strong marketing ploy by some providers who have taken their qualifications nationwide and offered them flexibly. Examples of this were the Open Polytechnics "Life Works" and Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology's "Cool IT" programmes which allowed learners to study at their own pace and in their own time.

Research questions

The main aim of this research was to find out how foundation learners were experiencing unit standard assessment. Were they studying topics or unit standards? Was this new kind of assessment encouraging deeper learning? Were they feeling pressured to get the boxes ticked within a certain time frame? To what extent, if any, had unit standard assessment motivated them to continue with their learning? At another level I was also interested in the reasons behind the wider political platform that launched the Framework and completely changed the face of education. I felt it was time to look back on the thinking behind the reforms and to investigate whether, in today's climate, they were relevant for this group of learners.

My research was carried out with groups of volunteer students from a tertiary institute of technology and two private training establishments. I explored a learner perspective. The selection of both an ITP and private training institutes was in recognition of the current diversity of providers and to give me a wider range of responses.

My questions were:

- What role do tertiary foundation students feel that assessment plays in their learning? How important is it? How do they feel about being assessed?

- What is their understanding of unit standards? How are they finding them?
- How successful are unit standards in motivating them as learners? If they are, in what way?
- Have unit standards impacted on their learning? If yes, in what way?

Contextual issues

These research questions emerged within a context that was influenced by the following considerations:

1. The renewed interest by the government in providing funding for adult literacy programmes. Unit standards are being written, while this research is being undertaken, to assess adult literacy progression. There is still some debate as to whether unit standards are the best form of assessment for adult literacy. There is also a qualification being developed for tutors of foundation learners called the National Certificate of Foundation Teaching.

2. The continued financial support of the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) for Training Opportunity (TO) and Youth Training (YT) programmes.

3. Industry Training Organisations (ITOs), and to a lesser degree prospective students, continue to put pressure on Tertiary Education Institutes (TEIs) to teach units. This can cause an educator to feel torn between meeting the needs of the ITO or student, and yet compromising learning by shortcutting the educative process.

4. The continuing interest in the changing face of teaching and learning at the tertiary level. The Deputy Prime Minister, Michael Cullen, has now taken over the responsibility for Tertiary Education. He is working toward a new tertiary funding model and phasing out the EFTS (equivalent full time student) based system (Marlborough Express, July 13, 2006). The EFTS ("bums on seat") model has resulted in some TEIs enrolling students on 'shonky' programmes to

gain revenue from the government.

5. I was aware also of a wider context which involved the public's interest in the NCEA assessments currently being offered in our secondary schools. Some schools are choosing to offer their students an alternative Cambridge exam which uses norm-referenced assessments. There is huge potential here for New Zealand to end up with two or more layers of students i.e. an elitist group who sit percentage-based exams, and the other group who sit unit standards and achievement standards. To an extent this is currently reflected in the tertiary sector with universities refusing to integrate unit standards in their courses, compared to ITPs and PTEs who offer many lower level courses which include them. The Careers Adviser of a local secondary school recently reported to me that some parents say they don't want their son doing a 'unit standard' school subject. They see it as second class.

The focus of the research was on the students who were studying foundation level programmes being offered at the tertiary level. For the purpose of this research I defined a foundation learner as someone coming into a tertiary environment at levels 1-3, according to the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) level descriptors, needing basic skills in order to pathway to higher learning. These skills can be loosely grouped into essential skills such as language, literacy, numeracy, communication, self management, and computer skills. They may also be completing a specific industry qualification such as tourism, business administration or carpentry. I have further explored the definition of foundation learner in Chapter 1.

Rationale

Foundation learning has hit the spotlight after New Zealand participated in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) in 1996 and the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation Development's (OECD) Survey on International Literacy in 1997. This highlighted that New Zealand had adult literacy issues that could no longer be ignored. Since the publication of the IALS findings, foundation learning has gained significant

attention and many TEIs have been encouraged to provide, through innovative funding pools, a literacy component or service within their institutes. Foundation learning has been included in recent government policies and strategies (Ministry of Education, 2001, 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2006).

In New Zealand many learners are studying at a foundation level (over 100,000 students enrolled in levels 1-3 in 2003 according to a TEC Monitoring Report, cited in NZQA, 2005) and represent a range of literacy and language capability. Therefore, of interest, was the recent foundation learning project (Benseman et al., 2005), funded by the Ministry of Education, which provided a critical evaluation of research evidence about effective practices in adult literacy, numeracy and language provision. The researchers stated that they were not able to "identify any research, (that met the criteria for their study), on assessment and its effect on learning outcomes" (p. 11). This highlighted for me the lack of research in this area.

They did however note that assessment that includes self assessment by learners, and constructive verbal feedback from tutors may enhance learner gain. The fact that unit standards, and in particular the National Certificate in Employment Skills, have been used widely, (in particular in TOP, YT and transition courses), to assess foundation learners may provide some interesting data for other researchers and providers. The concern, for some educators (Codd, 1997), is that the assessments currently being used are industry driven and don't assist the learners to address the broader competencies that may be lacking. Students need to learn how to learn. They also need to be encouraged to think. "Most important, is to provide intelligence on how to improve things" (Bruner, 1966, p. 165). Teachers are teaching to the unit; they are constrained by time to help the learner reach their qualification (Barrer, 2001; Duncan, 1996; Goh, 2005; Singh-Morris, 1997). Some tutors, in tertiary institutes, work part time and come in for only a few contracted hours a week, to teach a unit, and then leave. Their task is to get through the unit (Barrer, 2001).

In addition, some of the teachers working in the foundation area, as in the rest of the tertiary sector, are not qualified teachers (Benseman, 2001). They are therefore encouraged to complete some form of adult teaching qualification for the provider QMS (quality management system) accreditation requirements. In some cases this is limited to the unit standards 4098 and 11520, which are the workplace assessor unit standards. These units focus on gathering evidence rather than facilitating learning. They are not pedagogically focused teaching qualifications. They have an industry focus and are about learning how to assess against unit standards in a workplace context. As a coordinator of the Certificate in Adult Teaching programme I have noticed that some of the tutors who participate in the programme have literacy needs themselves. Many of them are teaching at foundation level on ACE funded or TEC funded programmes.

The foundation area of adult education is highly critical. There are increasingly high numbers of students accessing learning through a wide range of courses. It's important that, as educators, we get it right. It requires well qualified, empathetic teaching staff that can work alongside these learners and challenge them to think creatively and gain the essential knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will help them survive all the challenges that they will face in their lifetime, not just equip them for the workplace. If learners are only seeking to get the boxes ticked they may not be receiving the valuable constructive feedback needed to broaden their thinking skills. The learners themselves are often the least critical. They don't know any different; they have been 'captured' by the New Right (Peters & Marshall, 1996; Snook, 1995). "Needs, interests and choices can themselves be manipulated because the autonomous chooser is highly manipulable and easy to pick off" (Peters & Marshall, cited in O'Neill et al., 2004, p. 122). Learners at a foundation level are the most vulnerable; they have the least power to change things.

Chapter Outline

The first three chapters of this thesis outline the background and theoretical parameters of this study. Recent literature is examined and the relevant historical and political contexts are explored producing an explanation for the dramatic changes experienced in the tertiary education sector in the 1990s.

Chapter 1 gives background information about the National Qualifications Framework and the context within which unit standards have emerged. Where do unit standards fit in the broader political backdrop of what was going on in the 1980s and 1990s? What caused the massive shift to competency-based assessment? What is the 'face' of tertiary education in New Zealand today? Considering the huge arguments for and against unit standards some 15 years ago, what are the pros and cons today? How are unit standards being used by tertiary providers?

This chapter also gives an explanation of what is meant by 'a foundation learner' in a tertiary context. It attempts to describe the kinds of learners we might find in foundation courses within the tertiary sector and what learning environments work best for them. It investigates the impact of unit standards on these learners and examines findings from relevant research especially that commissioned by Skill New Zealand and NZQA.

Chapter 2 examines different approaches to unit standard (competency-based) assessment, in particular, the 'integrated' versus the 'tick box', the 'holistic' versus the 'unit by unit' approach. Competency-based assessment is explored to provide a background to the unit standard model. Unit standard assessment is critiqued and evaluated. The chapter considers what works best for foundation learners. What role do tutors play in helping students achieve/complete units? Are there any differences in the way private training establishments (PTEs) approach assessment compared to institutes of technology (ITPs)?

Chapter 3 analyses student-centred learning. What is it? How has the market-led model been interpreted by TEIs? What has been the impact of the Framework on the autonomous learner and on course design? How has the reductionist process, of breaking learning down into bits, been received by learners? How do learners like that? How are unit standard assessments being carried out with foundation learners? What methods are being used?

Chapter 4 outlines the methodological approach to the research and why it was chosen. It gives an overview of the paradigms of research and where this particular piece of research is located. Justification is given as to why I moved into the chosen methodology and includes how I progressed that decision. Detailed descriptions are given of the process including what went wrong, how I fixed it and how the use of an online diary helped focus the research.

Chapter 5 presents the findings. It investigates first how the interviewees feel about being assessed. Then it focuses on what they thought a 'unit standard' was and how that has impacted on their learning. The positives and negatives of unit standard assessment are explored. Some comparisons are made with previous experiences of other types of assessment. Links are made between unit standard qualifications and pathways to employment. This chapter also explores whether unit standards challenge and motivate learners and in what ways.

Chapter 6 discusses the findings and draws conclusions based on them. Key themes emerge based around the learners' experiences. These are explored and discussed in relation to the literature reviewed. In particular the spotlight is on the influence of the market-led model, the feeling of being able to succeed, the idea that units are easy, the reductionist model and surface learning, the transparency of the units, doing it in their own time and the importance of the tutor.

Chapter 7 identifies the implications of this for providers, educators and learners. Recommendations are made for tertiary providers, tutors, students and NZQA to consider.

CHAPTER 1

The NZQA Environment and Foundation Learners

This chapter explores the advent of the NQF in New Zealand by focusing on the educational, economic and political backdrop within which it emerged. It examines the reforms that led to the controversial changes and the resulting impact on tertiary providers. Foundation learners are profiled and seen as an important component of the current Tertiary Education Strategy.

Political and Economic Background

The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) was formed under the Education Amendment Act of 1990. The Authority was given the job of developing a framework of national qualifications to be used in secondary and post secondary education and training (NZQA, 1991a). The introduction of this framework has been fraught with publicity and controversy, from its earliest inception (modelled on Scotland's National Vocational Education System), through to the most recent National Certificate in Educational Achievement (NCEA), which was introduced into secondary schools in 2002. Educators working within the polytechnic sector were some of the first teachers to trial and use unit standards in their programmes.

In order to understand the phenomena of unit standards and their place in tertiary institutes we need to return to the mid-1980s and look at what was happening in New Zealand society. What was the political and economic context at the time of the inception of the National Framework?

The 1980s were a time of economic decline (Lythe, 1995) and indicative of this was the rise in unemployment rates. "The unemployment rate climbed rapidly after the mid-1980s from some 50,000 to over 200,000 in the early 1990s, hovering around the 10% mark (1993 Yearbook, cited in Peters & Marshall, 1995, p. 13). Throughout New Zealand there was a range of government funded pre-employment courses (STEPS, YPTP, later ACCESS) offered to young people to help them gain skills for employment (Barry, 1984). These courses were offered through polytechnics and later other agencies

and private training establishments. Their main focus was on life skills and some entry level industry skills. "STEPS aims to help young people move confidently into working life" (Department of Labour, 1984, p. 127). Typical courses were usually 3-6 weeks long and the students were 'sent' to do them by the Department of Labour.

The number and variety of these courses for the unemployed grew as the government grappled with the rising unemployment problem. Interestingly these courses did not initially focus on assessment; they emphasised gaining the life skills and work readiness needed to fit into society and find a job. "The main objective of YTPT is to provide training for registered unemployed jobseekers who are assessed as being likely to benefit from work preparation and vocational training before they can be referred to an employer for placement in a job" (Department of Labour, 1984, p. 149). It was up to providers, with monitoring by the Department of Labour, to design and teach appropriate courses that met the learners' needs.

The politicians were concerned at the size of the low-skilled workforce and so the spotlight went on to our qualification system. One of the main findings of the government-led research (Barker, 1995; Lythe, 1995; Lythe, 1998; Waters, 1996) was that New Zealand had an 'incoherent' qualification system. They concluded that there were too many institutes offering their own qualifications and that these qualifications had no national or international currency (Barker, 1995). At the same time unemployment was reaching record highs with 100,000 registered unemployed in 1988 and a total of 200,000 by 1991 (NZ Census, 1991). Global competition (Dale & Robertson, 1997) and rapid advancement in technology were other influencing factors that lead to educational reforms. The government wanted to increase the proportion of students with formal school and tertiary qualifications and enhance New Zealand's competitiveness by increasing the number of skilled workers. In 1994 the Chief Executive Officer of the NZQA said that the biggest challenge was to "change entrenched attitudes and establish an education and training culture" (Hood, 1994, cited in O'Neill et al., 2004, p. 109).

The government began to recommend changes to our education system. It recommended moving to criterion-referenced assessment, and this was further investigated in the Probine-Farghar Report in 1987 (Probine et al., 1987). The government decided to look at overseas trends and in particular the Scottish Vocational System (SCOTVEC System), which provided a model of using criterion-referenced assessment in a vocational setting. The result was the Hawke Report (Hawke, 1988) which recommended establishing NEQA (National Education Qualifications Authority). The role of NEQA was to coordinate all nationally recognised qualifications and help facilitate the credit transfer and recognition of prior learning among the different education sectors (Waters, 1996; Terrill, 2000).

The Education Amendment Act in 1990 confirmed the establishment of the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). This authority was given the mandate to develop a framework for national qualifications in secondary schools, post-school education and training. This linking of education and training was a deliberate attempt to bring together two distinct cultures; to break down the barriers between vocational and professional education and between education and the workplace. "In 1990 the new Minister of Education, Lockwood Smith, placed the reform of curriculum at the centre of the construction of what was to be called the 'Enterprise Culture'"(O'Neill et al., 2004, p. 37). The prime reason for this move was economic (Barker, 1995). Internationally there was a trend to assess against standards and criteria (Tuck, 1994, cited in Olssen & Mathews, 1997). Many countries now saw the ranking approach as not providing enough evidence about student strengths (Strachan, 2001).

> "The past approach of assigning marks largely in relation to other students in a statistically controlled exercise to match the normative expectations of society is no longer sufficiently robust. That method suited an élite approach to tertiary education but is open to subjectivity and the influence of gender, race and cultural stereotyping" (Barker, 1995, p. 21)

A 'new language' was needed to bring together the various factions and in the New Zealand context that language was 'unit standards' (Barker, 1995).

The Qualifications Framework

Two documents were released which resulted in over 1600 written responses from throughout New Zealand. These were: 'Towards a National Qualifications Framework' (NZQA, 1990) and 'Designing the Framework' (NZQA, 1991a). Some of the points raised in the submissions covered concern over the place of competitive exams, and achievement-based vs competency-based qualifications. It seemed as though New Zealanders were split between the idea of a more egalitarian method of assessment, which would meet the needs of industry, and those who still wanted exams in a competitive and graded environment. The strongest argument came from those who felt that external written exams were the only reliable assessment instrument. They believed that only a national written test could provide objectivity (Barker, 1995). In contrast it was believed that internal assessments were a soft option. In spite of this opposition there was a clear mandate to continue to explore the standards-based approach. The first phase of consultation revealed that 79% of respondents thought that the prime purpose of assessment should be to measure performance against published standards (Barker, 1995).

In 1993, Lockwood Smith, then Minister of Education for the National Government, introduced the 'seamless' structure, which would transform the tertiary and secondary education sector. This new structure was going to revolutionise education and make it easier for learners to move from one educational institute to another i.e. from secondary school to tertiary and from one tertiary provider to another. It would "create a uniform approach to attaining qualifications based on equivalent systems of assessment" (Olssen & Mathews, 1997, cited in Terrill, 2000, p. 19). In order for this to happen a qualification system needed to be developed that would value learning gained in one context and make it able to be 'transferred' to another environment. Early promotional material from NZQA (1994) described the new system as like gaining 'building blocks' (unit standards) that fitted together and made up a qualification. These unit standards could be gained from school, tertiary institutes, workplaces and life experience.

The National Qualifications Framework had an important role in the Skill New Zealand strategy promoted in the 1992 Industry Training Act (Education and Training Support Agency, 1998). This strategy aimed to "increase the quantity and quality of industry training to national qualifications standards" (Terrill, 2000, p. 20). Funding was made available for industry, rather than the state, to take charge of industry training. It established Industry Training Organisations (ITOs) to administer workplace training leading to national qualifications. This gave industry a key role in setting standards and developing qualifications.

The Evolution of Unit Standards

The development of unit standards (see Appendix L) had begun. These 'units of learning', later called 'unit standards' would be offered at eight levels, from school Year 11 through to post graduate level, and they would be logged on to a national database. They would represent a myriad of national certificates and diplomas and promised to offer the learner consistency and coherence in the form of nationally recognised qualifications that would be transportable, transparent and highly relevant to the workforce (Ministry of Education, 1993). They also aimed to "recognise prior experience, have clear criteria for assessment and be more consistent through an integrated qualification system" (Roberts, 1997, p. 167).

Although the official intention was that unit standards were to be an assessment tool only, in reality this has not eventuated. Unit standards have in many cases become the curriculum. This curriculum has been written with industry in mind. Learners are being taught the key competencies needed to move into the workforce (Codd, 1995).

The Market Model

This link to the workforce resulted in the unit standard reforms being compared to the market model. The assumptions behind this view are that knowledge is a commodity, that teacher/student relationships are contractual rather than pedagogical, and that the learner is the 'customer' purchasing their learning as and when they want it. Codd (1995) described the NQF as a fundamentally economic reform. Singh-Morris (1997) agreed

and stated, "The NZQA reforms are premised on a marketised conception of education"(p. 67). Singh-Morris saw the Green Paper (Creech, 1997) as encouraging the promotion of skills, competition, investment and outcomes. "It emphasised education for employment, rather than education for education's sake" (p. 66).

In more recent times Peters and Marshall (cited in O'Neill et al., 2004, p. 111) have described it as "a skills based perspective containing an in-built bias towards a vocational education." This view has been accelerated by the concept of workplace training and assessment (Ministry of Education, 1993), giving further opportunities for credits to be gained. Education was now moving away from a focus on curriculum and into an environment where the learner could select the part or parts of a qualification that they wanted to learn (Jarvis et al., 1998). They could now be assessed in the classroom or workplace.

This growth in workplace assessment helped many workers, who identified as having no or low qualifications, to gain acceptable, nationally recognised qualifications in their workplace. For some learners this was the first time they had experienced a form of academic success. Several years ago I worked with mussel farmers from the Aquaculture industry and helped them gain communication unit standards toward their National Certificate in Aquaculture level 3. Many of those men had left school early with no more thought of gaining a qualification. The unit standards gave them a chance to come back into a learning environment and to work toward a qualification that was directly related to their work. Tertiary education expos, once the domain of universities and polytechnics, now include training pathways offered by Industry Training Organisations and PTEs.

By the mid 1990s many New Zealand ITPs and PTEs were replacing 'old world' qualifications with national qualifications containing unit standards. Purchasers of training, such as Skill New Zealand (part of the Tertiary Education Commission, since January, 2003) and ITOs, deliberately encouraged institutes to offer unit standards, as this showed that a course was linked to a national qualification and was therefore of better 'value' to the student. Even today I have found it difficult to explain to ITO

representatives that a national qualification does not have to have unit standards in it. Now, in 2006, the Qualifications Framework continues to gain notoriety as revelations of poor scholarship results under the NCEA (in 2004, 2005) give rise to debate surrounding the merits of criterion-based versus norm-referenced assessment (see, for example, Codd et al.,1995; Codd, 1995; Fitzsimons & Peters, 1994; Roberts, 1997; Tuck & Peddie, 1995).

We are now 15 years down the NZQA track and unit standard assessment remains a controversial topic. Most educators accept that there have been some merits in introducing them into vocational areas, but many feel that they are not well-suited to academic subjects (Roberts, 1997).

> "Standards based assessment was first developed in military training and then teacher education in the United States in the 1960s, re-emerging in that country in the 1990s. It appeared in vocational education in the United Kingdom and Scotland in the 1980s. New Zealand was the first country ever to attempt to apply standards-based assessment across the board to both vocational and academic assessment" (Terrill, 2000, p. 21).

Foundation and Life Skills Courses

Foundation and Life Skills courses, which previously had an emphasis on basic core skills and pre-employment skills (Gill, 1989) were revamped to include a myriad of unit standards from fields such as core generics, communication, computing, self-management and employment skills. Provider-specific learning objectives were replaced by nationally written performance criteria. In the foundation area topics such as healthy living, self management, interpersonal communication skills, writing, problem solving and beginner computing skills were all written up as unit standards.

The Qualifications Framework was seen as a way of upgrading the skills of the long term unemployed and the young school leavers who had few or no qualifications. It offered a more 'level playing field' with opportunities for a greater number of people to gain

'industry' and 'nationally recognised' certificates. Along with these reforms came a move away from traditional forms of assessment to a competence-based approach. Standards-based assessment and competency-based assessment were seen by the government to be the same (Department of Education, 1986; NZQA, 1990; Ministry of Education, 1989). Students' work was assessed as either 'Complete,' or 'Incomplete;' students were able to do the task, or not yet able to. These result indicators were a complete change from grades or percentage marks and marked a radical change from previous norm-referenced forms of assessment. If a student could do the task and meet all the performance criteria then they were ticked off; if they did not meet some or all of the criteria, then they would have another opportunity to redo or resit the assessment. This was a big shift away from the 'pass' or 'fail' by percentage marks methodology of the traditional school system.

Since 1993, there has been a steady increase in the number of qualifications developed and registered on the framework. (By the end of August 2006, there were 18,000 registered unit standards and 800 national certificates and diplomas (NZQA, 2006a)). Many of these unit standards were offered at ITPs and PTEs as credits toward national qualifications. ITPs and PTEs that were offering government funded programmes such as TO and YT (prior to that ACCESS) were obliged to incorporate unit standards into their courses in order to get their tenders approved by Skill New Zealand (now incorporated into TEC). Programmes that included unit standards (and therefore the new national qualifications) as they came on to the Framework were rewarded with the necessary funding.

Providers who offered these nationally recognised qualifications had to put in place stringent quality assurance management procedures and gain accreditation from NZQA. They also had to have QA for provider qualifications if they wanted funding. This was an expensive and rigorous process. Those that did not comply, i.e. those that did not gain accreditation fell by the wayside. Student demand for 'new world' qualifications also put pressure on institutes to revise and update programmes. Some of the smaller providers

found they couldn't compete with the compliance and quality assurance costs needed for accreditation requirements. They were forced to close their doors.

Many of the foundation level programmes were reinvented to include unit standards. At level one, the National Certificate in Employment Skills replaced some of the generic life skills and computer assisted adult learning programmes. Some polytechnic foundation level tutors were challenged by the number of credits they were expected to get through and they initially felt the learning was being compromised (Barrer, 2001; Goodwill, 1999). At levels two and three students selected national certificates in areas such as computing, horticulture, business administration, cooking and tourism. The industry driven courses were taking precedence over the basic life skills and foundation programmes. The Education and Training Support Agency (ETSA) and later Skill New Zealand (Skill NZ) were instrumental in funding these programmes throughout New Zealand.

Tertiary Education Strategy

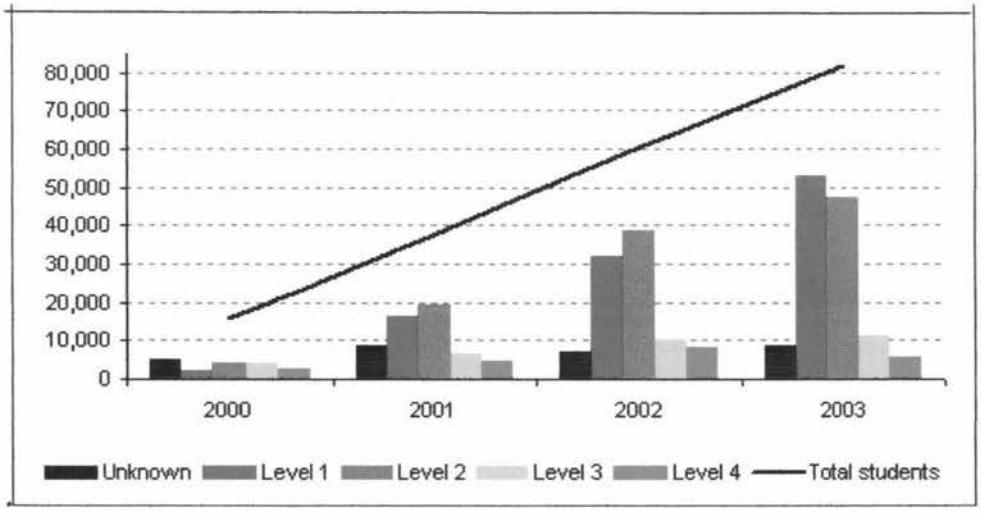
Now in 2006, the Tertiary Education Strategy (Ministry of Education, 2002-2007) has, as one of its key elements, the objective of raising foundation skills so that all people can participate in our 'knowledge society.' The overall goal is to significantly improve adult foundation skill levels by increasing access to foundation education in a range of learning contexts. The government aims to achieve this by raising educators' capability and qualifications and building an infrastructure for supporting teaching and assessment of foundation learning in all tertiary contexts. ITPs have been identified as the ones to lead this charge.

The Foundation Learning Progressions Paper (Ministry of Education, 2006) outlines the background to these initiatives, including the development of learning progressions which will identify the basic knowledge and skills that an adult needs to develop in order to reach foundation level competence (and be prepared for life long learning). The aim of these learning progressions is to bring people up to an equivalent of National Certificate in Educational Achievement NCEA level 2 or New Zealand Qualifications Authority

(NZQA) level 2. Relevant to this research, is that the plan is to develop new qualifications and unit standards for learners that better articulate the components of foundation competencies and that provide employers and learners with more specific information about what learners have achieved. Currently this target group can enter tertiary education at levels one, two or three and enrol in a range of employment or industry-focused programmes. If they are lucky, they receive extra support to help them achieve the unit standards they are completing. This new government concern with increasing the knowledge base of all New Zealanders, and offering a qualification at a basic literacy level, may provide the answer for those learners who are finding that the current levels 1-3 qualifications are not meeting their broader learning needs.

It is interesting to note that the numbers of New Zealanders engaged in formal English language-based foundation education courses has continued to increase with around 22,000 additional students each year since 2000. The majority of students are taking courses at level 1 and 2, with level 1 courses increasing the fastest. The figure below highlights that, in the year 2003, the figure for level one is over 50,000. This is a dramatic increase in enrolments and it is mainly due to the increase in distance and flexible options of the foundation courses offered through the Open Polytechnic and the Te Wānanga o Aotearoa.

Figure 1: Formal domestic students in English language based foundation education courses by course level 2000-2003 (TES Monitoring Report 2004 cited in NZQA 2005).



TO, YT and Foundation Learning

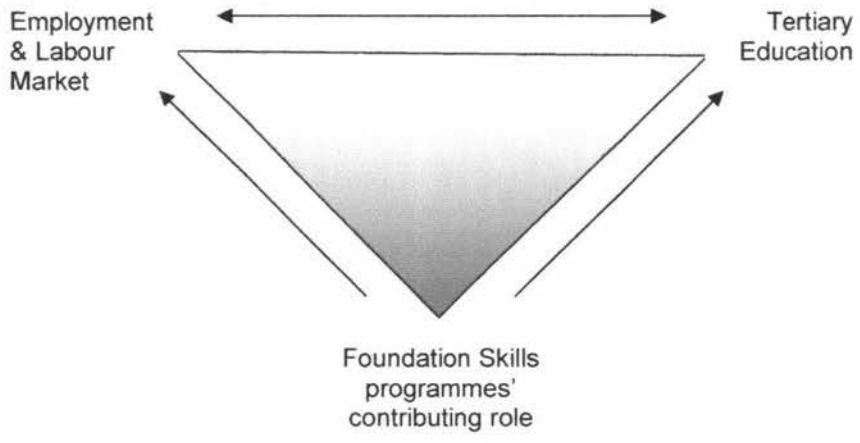
In New Zealand, the Training Opportunities (TO) and Youth Training (YT) programmes funded by Skill New Zealand (later part of the TEC) have specifically targeted foundation learners. Special emphasis has been placed on providing literacy and numeracy assistance and on catering for a wide range of individual needs. In more recent years the vast array of zero fee programmes throughout New Zealand tertiary institutes has also attracted foundation learners back into study.

> "Academic and educational definitions of foundation skills generally consider that 'learning how to learn' is the essential element of foundation skills, and there are a number of skills and attributes that, when combined, equip learners with the tools they need to enter employment or tertiary study" (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 26).

Literacy is seen as a key element along with interpersonal skills.

One of the prime functions of foundation programmes is to plug the gaps and provide foundation skills to those who have not attained them. The final report on the review of the Training Opportunities and Youth Training programmes (Ministry of Education 2002), recommended that learning at level one and two be structured to ensure that the learner acquired the foundation skills needed for particular vocational contexts. The report also emphasised the need for a pathway to further learning. Once foundation learners have gained these basic skills, more employment opportunities are available to them. The following diagram highlights the position of foundation programmes in relation to key government sectors. Clearly the focus is on foundation learners progressing to further tertiary education or entering the labour market.

Figure 2: Position of foundation skills programmes in relation to key government sectors (Ministry of Education 2002, p. 22)



This diagram also demonstrates the significance of the role of tertiary education in helping foundation learners gain the skills and knowledge needed to enter the labour market. At the same time it clearly marks a pathway from the foundation skills programmes straight to the labour market. This has now put the focus on enhancing literacy through workplace literacy schemes.

Defining Foundation Learners

The word 'foundation learner' has been popularised in recent years to describe those adults who are identified as having literacy, language and numeracy needs. They may be studying, or eligible for study, in entry-level tertiary programmes. What exactly do we mean by a foundation learner? There is no definitive answer as yet (still being argued at a recent ITPNZ Foundation, Education and Training Forum, June 2006, which I attended) but in essence, these learners have low or no qualifications and have not succeeded in traditional educational settings. They may come into tertiary institutes as early school

leavers or mature second chance learners. They have enrolled in programmes that may be primarily focused on life skills and literacy and numeracy, but may equally have a focus on an industry skill. The government funded programmes from the early 1980s through to the TO and YT programmes of today have foundation learners within them. The learners within these programmes have diverse needs.

> "Many English speaking learners have much better reading than writing skills; some have better oral/aural skills than others. Some ESOL learners speak English, but have never learned to read or write the language; others have no literacy skills in any language and very beginning spoken English skills" (Benseman et al., 2005, p. 18).

According to Benseman et al. (2005) the confidence of foundation learners varies considerably. Some have come back into learning because of changes in employment; others may have been unsuccessful at school and still feel quite negative toward teachers and school systems. Mature adults coming back into a 'school' setting may still see themselves as 'unsuccessful' and may feel apprehensive of once again being seen as a failure. If there has been a large gap between leaving school and re-entering the education system, the learner may have lost all confidence and therefore, will need a lot of encouragement to stay focused on their learning.

Research by the University of Auckland (Sutton et al., 2003) identified approximately 303,000 learners, who are currently likely to have a foundation learning component in their tertiary education (cited in NZQA, 2005). Of these, approximately 161,000 participated in provision that had literacy, numeracy and language as a main focus.

Foundation learning covers competencies in literacy, numeracy and language. The foundation learning sector is diverse and covers some programmes offered by private training establishments (PTEs), government training establishments (GTEs), wānanga, institutes of technology and polytechnics (ITPs), adult and community education (ACE) providers and some universities (NZQA, 2005).

Some examples of foundation learning programmes include:

- introductory vocational programmes that have some form of literacy and language integrated into the curriculum.
- programmes where literacy and language are the main focus
- specific programmes that target migrant and refugee communities (ESOL)

Many of the above programmes have low level unit standards within them.

Summary:

This chapter outlined the background to the advent of unit standards in the New Zealand education system. It discussed how New Zealand shifted out of the 'old world' qualification system into the new environment of competency-based assessment. It investigated what is meant by a foundation learner in the tertiary context and the types of programmes a foundation learner might be enrolled in.

Chapter 2 explores the standards-based environment; in particular it focuses on how unit standards have been experienced in the secondary and tertiary sector.

CHAPTER 2

The Unit Standard Approach

This chapter defines what a unit standard is and investigates standards-based assessment in comparison to norm-referenced assessment. It explores the advantages and disadvantages of the unit standard system. Literature is examined highlighting the interesting tension between the egalitarian aspects of the unit standard model versus the impact of market driven expectations.

Definition

So what exactly is a unit standard?

> "A unit standard is defined by NZQA as a statement in outcome terms of critical factors and criteria for the assessment and recognition of achievement. It is said to provide a standard against which students may be assessed and identifies what a student is expected to know, do or understand to demonstrate mastery of a Qualifications Framework unit. All unit standards, regardless of subject or level or complexity, conform to a common format including a unique title, level, and credit value, sub-field identification, statement of purpose, entry information, accreditation options, special notes, a set of elements (outcomes) and performance criteria"(Hall & Keown, 1996, p. 128).

There are no grades awarded (unless it is achievement-based assessment) as the credits recognise simply that the standard has been met (Irwin et al., 1995). "The unit standard, originally the 'unit of learning,' has similar features to the modular approach adopted in Scotland for non-advanced vocational qualifications in the 1980s. Just as with unit standards, the Scottish modules could be delivered individually, or combined in different ways into qualifications" (Philips, 2003, p. 292).

The advent of Unit Standards

NZQA was determined to create a 'seamless' system that gave learners a smooth pathway from one provider to another and from one qualification to the next. This was to be achieved by creating a Qualification Framework that had a common language, and an

equivalent system of assessment which also recognised prior learning. A key feature of this new Framework was the concept that learning was to be organised into units made up of clearly defined outcomes (Smithers, 1997). The performance criteria were written in such a way as to state explicitly the standard that the student should meet. The key focus was on the outcome achieved by the learner, not on the curriculum used or the methods of delivery. This was a move away from a focus on the teacher or the teaching methodology. Unit standards were written by specially appointed writers representing the education sector, industry and other key agencies such as the Careers Service.

These unit standards, once written and approved, were placed at an appropriate level from one to eight ranging loosely in equivalence from Year 11 to post graduate level. Qualifications made up of unit standards were logged onto a national database and, once accredited, tertiary providers could offer the qualifications within their own institutes. NZQA (1992) described the Framework as an opportunity for industries and professions to gather units into packages to make qualifications that encompassed the skills and knowledge needed for employment and living in today's fast changing world. "Such renditions of learning are firmly planted in the plot of instrumental/operational knowledge. They enable people to carry out practical and useful work in the global village" (Zepke, 2003, p. 202).

Standards-Based Assessment

Unit standards are a particular form of standards-based (also referred to as criterion-based or competency-based) assessment. As Barker so clearly states, "assessment against standards relies on clearly defining the standards" (Barker, 1995, p. 25). Standards-based assessment is not an assessment that compares one learner against another (as with norm-referenced assessment), although it is possible to note a broad comparison of persons. The key emphasis in standards-based assessment is its attempt to define what the learner is being asked to achieve. This is usually written as learning outcomes, i.e. what the learner can do.

> "Competency-based assessment, in the reformers' view, created a system in which the learner or candidate was central. With direct access to the 'standards' of competence, people could see exactly what was required and put themselves forward for assessment without interference" (Wolf, 1995, p. 8).

Norm-referenced assessment also had its critics and many of them saw it as clearly damaging in its use of comparative techniques to rank learners one against another. National qualifications, such as the old School Certificate exam, divided fifth formers into those who passed (50% and above) and those who failed (below 50%). In contrast the Framework promised the individual learner the opportunity to map their own qualification route by placing 'building blocks' of units attained, along a pathway that led to a particular qualification (Barker, 1995; Zepke, 2003). The process was seen as sequential, with level 1 credits (and qualifications) leading to level 2 qualifications and so on. The performance criteria contained in each of the unit standards increased in difficulty from level 1 through to level 8.

Hood, the first NZQA Chief Executive Officer, was committed to this new qualification system and spoke scathingly of norm-referenced assessment, describing it as producing "factories of failure" (Hood, 1998, p. 98). He advocated criterion-referenced (standards based) as a fairer system that gave a greater range of students a chance to succeed. He saw this assessment method as providing more "certainty about what a student has learned and can do as a result of learning" (Hood, 1998, p 100). This type of assessment was seen as more transparent and transportable, able to be used both academically and vocationally. More importantly it was touted as having a positive impact on learning because it had the potential to be both flexible and valid.

Despite the wide ranging discussions about the impact of standards-based assessment as it was introduced into the New Zealand education system, there is a surprising lack of research on its implementation in polytechnics and PTEs. "NZQA literature admits to weaknesses in standards-based assessment, but continues to justify the model on the basis that there was widespread support for it in the consultation process" (Terrill, 2000, p. 24).

Skill NZ and NZQA published a range of reports focusing on the positive impact of the new standards based programmes (see for example NZQA, 1998b; Skill NZ, 1999).

Wolfe, in her study of competence-based assessment in the UK, also notes a resigned acceptance of a similar model despite the difficulties. According to Wolf competence-based assessment seems highly workable at one level, in particular within the workplace, while "creating myriad implementation problems at others" (Wolf, 1995, p. 32). She argues that it seems "in practice to encourage narrow mechanistic definitions of what 'performance' involves, even though it should also permit of the broadest interpretations" (p. 32). In effect, although the learning process has become more direct and open, the relationship is often contractual. Jarvis et al., (1998) argues that learning contracts provide learners with more opportunities to make decisions about their own learning. However these choices are often constrained by institutional structures and the very language that we use. It is therefore no surprise that standards-based assessment has developed in a 'commercial' environment. The challenge for educators is to make something that is workable in one arena (i.e. the workplace), also meaningful in other environments, such as educational institutes. Increasingly this has meant that courses, even at a foundation level, have an industry focus.

Traditionally assessment was seen as something that came at the end of a learning programme, something apart or separated from the learning itself. "It was an external force that shaped (and often distorted) the content and objectives of programmes and constrained the style of learning" (Beckford, 1995, p. 24). This article extolled the virtues of unit standard assessment, describing it as largely provider-based and done in conjunction with learning. Potentially, the article said, there was opportunity for assessment to be more valid, thorough and better understood, and it could enhance learning rather than disrupt it.

This type of thinking illustrates the point of view of the advocates of competency-based assessment. Unit standards were not intended to compromise the content or dictate the style of a learning programme. They were to simply provide the mechanism for

assessing and demonstrating what had been learnt. In fact the unit standard approach to qualifications promised to give institutions more programme flexibility than before. Institutions could develop courses that offered within them partial or complete national qualifications. They could reflect the needs, goals and aspirations of the student market or community of learners.

In reality this vision has been expropriated by the economic and political context of the early 21st century. Unemployment is at an all time low and tertiary institutes (and ITOs) have been competing for a reduced number of students. ITPs have been under pressure from industry groups to speed up their approval processes (Nixon, April 2006). This changing environment has meant that learners (or 'customers') have more 'freedom' to negotiate or demand the type of 'delivery' that they want. Tertiary providers have heeded the call and responded with increasingly 'flexible' offerings. This contractual environment produces organisations (industry and providers) that can decide what 'programmes' are on offer. The contractual environment is found at many levels; between learner and tutor, between providers (such as Memorandums of Understanding); between industry and TEIs (to provide training) and between TEIs and TEC (such as the TO and YT contracts for the programmes that are offered each year). Learners are free to choose but only within the constraints of that which is on offer.

> "The notion of contract has been imported into the practice of many educational institutions. Its importance is apparent. Contracts are the fulcrum of the market relationship, and learning is increasingly market-driven. Individuals choose freely to make choices. Such is the ideology. But while there is a sense....in which contracts must be entered into voluntarily, the choice is always made within a certain set of parameters" (Jarvis et al., 1998, p. 99).

Criticism of unit standards

The arrival of unit standards did not happen without its critics. One of those was Duncan who wrote; "Under the unit standard system subject matter and its delivery will be straight-jacketed by the rigid conformity of accredited and approved unit standards. Much time, effort, and money will be spent on writing and modifying unit standards, thus

compromising and limiting the amount of time available for teaching" (1996, p. 11). This was the view of many academics in universities (Hall, 2000) who were completely opposed to unit standards being introduced as they felt that such a system of assessment would encourage students to do just enough to pass, rather than strive for higher standards of excellence. Some certificates and diplomas at levels 4 and 5 (in the ITP where I work) which were originally designed as standards based, have since been modified to an achievement based model. This recognises 'merit' and 'excellence.' These changes have in part reflected the students' desire to have excellence recognised.

Fifteen years ago, 'competence-based' assessment was virtually unheard of. Today it occupies a prominent place in the New Zealand education system both at secondary and tertiary level. This dramatic change can be traced to world wide economic and labour market change and also assessment trends elsewhere e.g. UK and Australia at vocational levels (Dale & Robertson, 1997). In New Zealand it revolutionised how we viewed assessment and generated wide discussion both for and against the reforms. "Unit standards have attracted both champions and detractors" (Zepke, 2003, p. 202).

Reductionist View

One of the criticisms of this focus on the 'standard' was that assessors might be assessing only on what was "crudely measurable" (Barker, 1995, p. 26). There would be a tendency to use check lists and atomise or reduce knowledge, skills and attitudes into measurable tasks. According to Barker this focus on objectives is both the strength and weakness of the model. On the one hand it gives learners a very transparent view of what is going to be assessed; yet on the other hand it can appear very prescriptive and might preclude spontaneity.

"The unit standards approach to student assessment collapses all learning into the language of 'inputs,' 'outputs' and 'outcomes,' where, in effect, all that counts is that which can be measured" (Roberts, 1997, p. 170). Much of the criticism of unit standards has been based around the changes in the curriculum to viewing knowledge as a series of discrete bits of information (reductionist view) that must be learnt; and assessment as a

method of measuring pre-specified and stated learning outcomes. The main concern was that "fragmentation of a curriculum into a lot of specific learning outcomes was likely to lead to a narrowing of content and assessment requirements" (Codd et al., 1995, p. 47). These pedagogical and educational concerns lie at the heart of the criticism of unit standards. In assessing units all learners need to do to attain a 'Complete' is to perform a set of tasks to the prescribed standard. This method fails to recognise the reality that students might not know or understand what they are doing. They may simply do it by rote, having previously learnt the requirements (Goh, 2005).

Codd et al. (1995) were concerned that this may lead to learners only being good at answering questions based on the learning outcomes. Learning could become fragmented and superficial. "The outcomes based unit standards approach may also cause teachers to develop their teaching to the tests" (Singh-Morris, 1997, p. 68). This was expressed as a concern by the tutors in the ITP where Barrer (2001) carried out her research project.

The Chief Executive Officer of the Manufacturers Federation, Simon Arnold (NZ Education Review, May, 1997), perceived some difficulties with the unit standard method of assessment. According to Arnold qualifications "broken down" into individual unit standards and performance based assessment on each unit of work may work for skill based training, but perhaps do not work so well for wider conception of knowledge. He also expressed concern that the coordinated approach to unit standards makes them look like a 'straight jacket.' He stressed that what New Zealand needs is a dynamic economy and an equally dynamic education system. The 'one size fits all' approach will not provide us with such an education system.

Teaching to the Unit

One of the concerns raised was that the use of unit standards to assess student learning might promote "an atomistic approach toward teaching and learning" (Philips, 2003, p. 292). This was more likely to occur where tutors were teaching the unit as a topic, rather than using it as the assessment after the full breadth of the topic had been taught and where tutors had little educational background or tutor training. This concern from the

mid nineties has now become a reality with students able to enrol and complete unit standards either individually or collectively under the 'umbrella' of a 'course.' At a recent ITPNZ Foundation Education and Training Forum (June, 2006) one of the guest speakers, Warren Shepherd, a maths Learning for Living Numeracy project leader from NZQA, stated that he had noticed (and was appalled) that providers he visited were using unit standards as teaching tools whilst studying on a course in a self-paced environment. Students could pick and choose from an assortment of boxes which unit they wanted to work on. He questioned what had happened to 'teaching a topic?'

Now in 2006 some of those early concerns have been realised. Some providers are choosing to offer unit standards as stand alone courses. This is all in the guise of meeting the needs of the learner. Those providers that choose not to compromise their courses can lose out on business as learners elect to go elsewhere. The market driven model has changed the face of education and now students can pick and choose what and where they wish to learn. Within the classroom students have learnt to ask whether what they are studying is part of the unit. If it isn't, the tutor has a harder job to keep them motivated. Some teachers have got around that by telling students that everything they do goes toward the assessment (Barrer, 2001).

The danger, in breaking knowledge and skills up into 'units,' is that teachers and learners lose sight of the big picture. Teaching 'unit' by 'unit' is based on a simplistic model of learning and teaching and assumes that learners learn only what they have explicitly been taught. In reality of course learning is not exclusive to rigidly defined outcomes (Roberts, 1997).

Units as an Alternative

Unit standards were being seen as an alternative for some students who might not otherwise achieve at a national level. An example of this was the National Certificate in Employment Skills (NCES) introduced into secondary schools for those students with little interest in sitting the National Certificate in Educational Achievement (NCEA).

An article in the NZ Herald in 1998 featured 20 students at Pukekohe High school trialling the NCES as a means of preparing them for the workforce. "Unit standards are different from exams in that they are internally assessed. They offer greater flexibility than many traditional qualifications because students are not bound to complete a specific course" (Basket, 1998, p. 13). This allowed, for example, learners to come back the following year to complete a qualification.

According to Zepke (2003) those with "little traditional power tend to support the educational changes promised by the Framework. Private Training Providers, especially among Maori, see unit standards as transparent, practical, useful and democratic measures of performance" (p. 202).

Units as 'standards'

NZQA clearly distinguished unit standards from unit delivery, stating that unit standards were meant to "spell out agreed standards of required performance" and not be the teaching curriculum or training manual (NZQA, 1996b, p. 2). Each training provider could select the way the unit standards were taught. This was meant to give providers flexibility and a point of difference in the way the learning material was delivered. "Unit standards-based qualifications were advocated enthusiastically by government sources, who, in line with their international counterparts, saw them as a significant contribution to economic development capable of enabling the country to better utilise its human resources" (Terrill, 2000, p. 31). Terrill goes on to say that unit standards were, therefore, industry-driven. They were written by standards setting bodies, such as ITOs, made up of representatives of interested parties such as industry, professional associations, and education and training providers. Once written and approved it was then up to the providers to develop the teaching material, design the courses and assessments to meet the requirements of the units. It was also possible in some cases to purchase already developed assessment material available at a cost for any provider to use.

Unit Standards and Motivation

In general learners have found units motivating because there is opportunity to succeed, even if it is after a resit (Skill NZ, 1999). They have liked learning small units of work and then being assessed; others have enjoyed the lack of competition with other students, thereby reducing the fear of failure (Basket, 1998).

Some research has also been done on the impact of unit standards in secondary schools. Priestley's 1997 study of unit standards and assessment of academic subjects in Christchurch schools suggested that unit standard-type assessment was highly suitable for assessing skills but much less suitable for assessing knowledge. More importantly for this research was that disadvantaged students in particular (those, who for a variety of reasons, were not succeeding academically) welcomed unit standards as having made qualifications more accessible.

Results of an independent study carried out by NZQA on the 2005 NCEA assessment results also revealed that the majority of students liked being assessed internally because it was less stressful and because the topic was still fresh on their minds. The survey questioned 279 students in Years 11, 12 and 13 at 65 randomly selected schools (NZQA, 2006). In July 2006 a further study carried out by Victoria University for the Ministry of Education revealed that NCEA students liked being internally assessed but did not feel particularly motivated by the assessments. They did enough to pass rather than excel (Ministry of Education, 2006). This has prompted the Ministry to consider introducing merit and excellence grades in vocationally oriented courses (Nixon, 2006). It highlighted that some aspects of the NCEA demotivated both low and high achieving students and could have a negative impact on student persistence and the "endeavour factors"(p. 7) necessary for success. Many students said that they wanted more detailed feedback.

In support of the value of specific feedback, Bushnell (1992), Eng (1992) and Francisco (1999, cited in Zepke et al., 2005) also stressed that detailed feedback assists students to understand why they got a particular mark. The feedback provided a transparent

procedure of how to achieve the standard and at the same time contributed to an increased understanding of the assessment process.

A United Kingdom study (Torrance, 2004) on the effect of summative assessment on motivation in post 16 year old learners found that the relationship with teachers was a significant factor. Torrance's study of the literature found that there was very little research on how learners were experiencing assessment procedures. Most research had focused on policy implementation, rather than the student experience. He also questioned what was meant by 'motivation' in respect to learners; could it be measured and what sorts of evidence would be relevant? His study highlighted the evidence that learners across all sectors prefer practical competence-oriented assessment over end of course exams. He also noticed that many learners in the vocational sector fear tests and there is evidence that tests can precipitate drop-out and deter progression. Most significantly the literature out of the United Kingdom stressed the importance of support and feedback on progress in improving retention and achievement. Some learners also benefit from explicit learning objectives, especially less confident learners. The learners themselves said that it provides a framework and makes teachers talk to them more. Being clear about the criteria engages the learner's interest and therefore is intrinsically motivating. On the other hand it can also be seen as a series of hoops to go through and therefore is extrinsic in that it leads to a qualification only.

Skill New Zealand research (Skill NZ, July, 1999) into the longer term outcomes of TO students also stressed the importance of the tutor role. The same study revealed that most students had completed unit standards but there were differing levels of understanding about their value. The younger trainees seemed to understand better how units would help them get a job or go on to further education. However there were others interviewed who did not understand this. The latter group usually had obtained a few disparate units and were less career focused. Some of the older respondents understood what units were about but chose not to be assessed against them.

The respondents in the Skill NZ study said that the positive learning environment and gaining new skills and qualifications led to an increase in self-esteem, confidence and motivation. At the conclusion of their training these TO students were highly motivated and confident that they would find employment or continue learning. The same study checked up on the sample 12 months after completing their training and found that out of the 52 of the 64 original respondents 19 were employed, 11 were involved in further education, three were doing further training and 19 were unemployed. This study showed that more than half were motivated to go on to further study or employment. Other motivating factors for learners include shorter units of work with linked assessment, and taking the assessment only when ready to pass. The latter is clearly motivating in that it aims to prevent failure. This assessment mode, of assessing when the learner is ready, has been adapted by many tertiary providers, particularly in the PTE sector.

A recent study by Zepke et al. (2005) into standards-based assessment in the secondary school found that standards-based assessment can affect positively both how teachers teach and the achievement of their students. Brush (1997, cited in Zepke et al., 2005) reported that underachieving learners improved with standards-based assessment after becoming familiar with it. He found that the formative nature of it was motivating.

Other Positive Features

So what are some of the other features of competency based assessment that made it so appealing to the reformists? Crooks (1988) emphasised the significance of criterion referenced assessment as giving all learners the chance to meet specified criteria or standards and if they don't meet them first time there is a chance of repeated opportunities to meet these standards. This is evident in many of the level one to three programmes where students have an opportunity to resit their assessments if they don't meet all the criteria the first time. In another article Crooks states that the very best situation of all is where the learning is individualised and the emphasis in assessment is placed on each student's progress and learning. "In such situations competitiveness is minimized, pupils are more inclined to help each other, and success and failure on a task

are more likely to be attributed to effort rather than ability. This generates conditions that support intrinsic motivation" (Crooks, 1995, p. 42).

Curriculum Design

Much of the debate surrounding unit standards is concerned with whether providers assess crude task based behaviour only or whether they emphasise the transferable aspects of attitudes, knowledge and skills and in an appropriate context. Providers have been left to their own devices in deciding how they 'deliver' the standards. Some have developed an integrated approach as a way of learners demonstrating their competency. This method combined several unit standards into one overall assessment therefore reducing the trend to over assess. Although this seemed like a good idea in theory, in practice it then became problematic if a learner wanted to be assessed against only an individual unit (and only wanted to pay for one.) This is still a problem in some TEIs where learners may want to enrol in only one or two unit standards, not the whole programme. The trend is to compartmentalise programmes into 'courses' whereby the learner can either do the full programme or enrol in individual courses which are delivered in blocks. This change in programme design is to allow learners to enrol in parts of a course. It can be pedagogically challenging for a tutor who may have to teach a topic over a two week period when previously it had been integrated into the programme over a six month period.

Lockwood Smith (Minister of Education at the inception of the framework), predicted that unit standards would be able to be 'massaged' into the curriculum. In fact they have largely replaced institute specific assessments as the new transferable nationally accepted assessment method. This is particularly evident in lower level programmes such as the popular Mahi Ora programme offered by Te Wānanga and the Open Polytechnic's Lifeworks programme. Both of these programmes are made up of unit standards. Providers can still offer their own certificates but the national certificates are generally integrated into the provider specific programmes either as worth the same or fewer credits.

PTEs have developed as important providers of unit standard credits. They have established themselves as an alternative to ITPs awarding 39% of all NQF qualifications between January 1993 and March 2000 (NZQA, 2000b). The PTE sector grew rapidly after the establishment of the NZQA and NQF and responded quickly to the demands of industry and Skill New Zealand for relevant industry focused training (Terrill, 2000). They have often been seen as more responsive to industry needs as they don't have the major quality assurance compliance procedures adapted by the ITP sector.

Summary

The unit standard approach has seen a radical change in the way students are assessed in the classroom. Assessment is now predominant in the curriculum and there is a stronger industry focus. Learners are assessed internally as they progress through a programme, course or in some cases, a unit standard.

Unit standards are a form of competency-based assessment. They are a predominant form of assessment used in lower level national qualifications in New Zealand. On the one hand they are seen as revolutionising education by taking away the elitist nature of assessment and replacing it with a greater opportunity for more New Zealanders to achieve and gain credits in a wide range of subject areas. On the other hand they are seen as reductionist, breaking learning up into little bits and thereby restricting learning to a surface skills only experience where assessment against the prescriptive performance criteria is emphasised. Some research (Codd, 1997; O'Neill et al., 2004) suggests that unit standards have produced learners who no longer think for themselves whose focus has been on completing credits and gaining qualifications only.

Chapter 3 discusses the impact of the philosophical shift, in the last 20 years, from teacher-directed learning to student-centred learning. Literature is reviewed to investigate how that shift has impacted on foundation learners and the unit standard courses they are studying.

CHAPTER 3

Student-Centred Learning

Introduction

"Autonomous choosers are continually being shaped or 'made' through ideologies and multi-media forms of presentations that emphasize the demand for skills, the continual need during a working life time to be reskilled, and the economic motives of both getting educated and purchasing quality education" (Peters & Marshall, 2004, p. 122). This chapter discusses the implications of the shift in focus over the last twenty years or so to a view of education as something that has a market value and links that with the philosophical shift in education from traditional modes of 'teaching' to a greater focus on 'learning.' The significance of self-directed learning opportunities and their impact on the foundation learner is explored.

Focus on the Learner

Why investigate student-centred learning? Foundation learners, like all other tertiary students, have been affected by the increase in self-directed time and the movement away from teacher-led classes to student-centred ones. Student-centred learning implies that the focus is on the learner and that learners will learn best when they are 'in charge' of their learning (Jarvis et al., 1998). In a student-centred environment the teacher acts more as a facilitator of learning in a coaching or mentoring role. There is less of a didactic and more of a collaborative approach. "Teachers become facilitators of learning, rather than transmitters of information" (Leach, 2003, p. 107). Student-centred teaching can include such methods as learning contracts, research, self-directed learning, group learning and problem solving (Jarvis et al., 1998).

Adult learning

This swing away from 'teacher in control' to a more learner-led classroom was promoted by Malcolm Knowles who "developed the concept of andragogy as a general theory of adult learning" (Jarvis et al., 1998, p. 85). Knowles (1972) redefined what it meant to be an adult learner and was especially focused on self-directed learning as the single most

important component of adult learning. This emphasis on adults setting their own goals and being in charge of their own learning has continued to influence adult education through to today (Leach, 2003). It is also part of constructivism, a theory that describes all knowledge as constructed and "the knower as an intimate part of the known" (Belenky et al., 1986, cited in Jarvis et al., 1998). Constructivists realise that an individual's frame of reference (lens) is coloured by their background and life experiences.

The focus for educators has been on how we can make the learning more effective for the individual. At the same time that andragogy popularised the belief that adult learners are autonomous and self-directed, there was also a massive swing toward the educational reforms of the 1990s which looked at rationalizing and cost cutting measures across the tertiary education sector. This was convenient for financially struggling TEIs. They could appear to be learner focused, by introducing self-directed learning, when in fact the impetus was often about reducing teachers' class contact hours and saving money. At the ITP where I work almost all full time programmes have an equivalent of one full time self-directed day per week.

Individualised Learning Programmes

This spotlight on individualised learning programmes has impacted on foundation learners with the advent of computer assisted learning, self-paced packages, flexible entry, exit and flexible (online, tapes, videos, CDROMs) delivery. Providers have invented a plethora of ways that students can learn without necessarily having to leave home. This array of attractive learning opportunities has gained some unfortunate negative publicity as the media has exposed rather dubious pedagogical offerings e.g. Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology's "Cool IT" programme, where many thousands of students were enrolled and given a CD to teach them computer skills. CPIT spent $311,619 on incentives and curriculum development for its online computer course for which it received more than $15 million in government funding (English, 2006). Subsequently it was discovered that there was little follow through and many students did not complete the study. The polytechnic received large sums of money from the government in EFTS funding to manage the programme. Similar schemes for adult

community education (ACE), such as 'Twilight Golf' and 'Waiata on the Airwaves' were offered by other tertiary providers throughout New Zealand as cash strapped TEIs looked at innovative ways to increase their funding.

In New Zealand the current EFTS funding system has seen a proliferation of foundation programmes designed and delivered with the message that you can enrol and do it at your own pace and in your own time. Unfortunately the real driver behind many of these courses was to get 'bums on seats' and make money. For every full time enrolled student (an EFTS) a provider could get around $5000 (or more) from the government. This has prompted many providers, in recent years, to offer foundation and other programmes 'zero fee' to the student i.e. relying only on the government funding to meet costs.

The new Qualifications Framework was also in favour of student-centred learning. NZQA's first Chief Executive officer, Hood (1992, p. 496), quoted from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that in the 21st century:

> "People will need to be creative, rather than passive: capable of self-initiated action rather than dependent; they will need to know how to learn rather than expect to be taught; they will need to be enterprising in their outlook, and not think and act like an 'employee' or a 'client.'"

Skill New Zealand publications (2000, 2001) were encouraging providers to look at ways to be more 'responsive' to learners, in particular to Maori and Pasifika learners. Providers interpreted this in many inventive ways, from offering individualised programmes through to self-paced packages. In the early 21st century tertiary institutes have changed dramatically and now offer courses and programmes in a whole variety of ways, including flexible online options. These programmes are not necessarily student-centred. Rather than meet the needs of the learners, they have been designed also to meet the needs of the provider, all in the name of being student-centred.

Learner Friendly Environment

Traditionally, the trend was for knowledge to travel from higher education out into society. "Currently the reverse trend seems to be occurring. Society is forming its own definitions of knowledge and these are changing the nature of tertiary education" (Codd, 1997, p. 131). Codd saw this shift in knowledge as part of a world wide movement that coincided with the rise of economic rationalism, the drive to increase productive capacity and generate economic growth. The changing role of tertiary institutes has opened the doors to a large increase in the number of people accessing post secondary education. One of the biggest growth areas has been foundation learning. Te Wānanga o Aotearoa and the Open Polytechnic have been instrumental in offering life skills courses to unprecedented numbers of foundation learners (NZQA, 2005).

Foundation learners can learn from home, can use computer assisted learning programmes, or can attend classes at their local high school, ITP, or PTE. They may in fact end up doing a mix of the above. The majority of these low level foundation programmes are made up of unit standards at levels one to three. The Report on the Review of Training Opportunities and Youth Training (Ministry of Education, 2002) described how delivery of the programme should have a learner focus. The learning context needed to be relevant to the learner. "The extent to which individual providers can adapt to individual learner needs, within the constraints of available resources, is crucial to the success of the programme"(p. 10).

This move toward a relevant (Lee & Hill, 2006) and learner friendly context has also given rise to an acceptance of the many different ways that students like to learn. It has forced providers to relax the rules and create less structured learning environments. According to Lee and Hill, "a relevance agenda continues to dominate much of the discourse that masquerades as education, and it appears largely to have captured the imagination of its intended audience" (2006, p.6). This is part of the frustration for educators who feel driven by the new agenda and see it dominating classroom practice (Barrer, 2001). Lee and Hill see the emphasis on relevancy as a reductionist activity reducing learning to "skill acquisition and performance, to a designated activity or

response; in short the reduction of education to training and to a commodity" (p.6). They see the acceptance of 'relevance' as possibly explained by the uncritical advocacy of providing for individual differences across the education sectors. So long as we expound that learners are unique individuals with individual needs then it's only a short step toward arguing for more relevant curriculum.

> "With an (over) emphasis on uniqueness, it is especially difficult to argue a case in favour of offering common experiences, activities and subject matter to people. The high cost associated with the over-promotion of personal relevance is that collective concerns may be neglected or minimised on account of the supreme sovereignty of the individual 'education consumer'" (Lee & Hill, 2006, p. 6).

Interestingly, a local PTE, that has long promoted individuals learning at their own pace, has recently reintroduced group class sessions at the end of the week, as a way of bringing everyone together and having a shared experience.

Zepke (1997) challenged the view that the NQF offers meaningful student-centred learning. He argued that the Framework had a narrow and mechanistic idea of student-centred learning with the learner actually left out of the equation. He substantiated this view by stating that learners were not involved in any of the processes by which unit standards were produced. The development and review process involved industry and various teaching groups and professionals. The conditions for learning were set by Industry Training Organisations (ITO) and Standard Setting Bodies (SSB), not students. In this context students were left out of the process and introduced only to the product i.e. the programmes defined by the units contained within them.

Although they have been left out of the process they have quickly understood its 'language'. The simplicity of the Framework model, i.e. the acquisition of credits leading to a National Qualification, has been embraced and easily understood by learners. They see the pathway and seek providers who can help them achieve it.

> "In this model, 'standards' are to be determined by 'purchaser demands.' The customer (student, government, employer) sets the standards and if the provider does not meet it, the customer goes elsewhere. Thus knowledge is no longer viewed as a social and cultural achievement but is reduced to a set of exchangeable 'credits' or a 'currency' of skills"
> (Codd, 1997, p.135).

This model is already a reality. The ITP where I work has experienced many situations whereby a stakeholder (ITO or potential student) will phone wanting to know if the institute teaches/assesses unit standard '222.' If not, or if the provider tries to explain that they teach 'courses', not units, the caller loses interest and elects to go elsewhere.

Within ITPs, Academic Boards have huge pressure from certain faculties, (particularly departments with strong ITO connections such as the Building and Construction ITO) of their institutes to reduce academic qualifications to unit standards rather than courses or modules. It is difficult not to succumb to the pressure when new contracts from ITOs are at stake.

Along with the new qualifications came the new language. Words such as 'delivery', 'credits', 'purchase', 'outputs', 'competence', 'technique' and 'flexibility' have replaced 'understanding', 'reflection' and 'insight' (Barnett, 1994, cited in Olssen et al., 1997). According to Barnett the language of higher education is "appropriating the language of society, in this case a society that gives priority to economic productivity over personal development, social well being, or cultural renewal" (p. 137). The unit standard qualifications, driven in many cases by industry, have resulted in the development of learner workbooks and learning material based around the unit standard being studied. So for example, in the tourism area, students are given workbooks developed by the Hospitality, Tourism and Travel Industry Training Organisation which guide the learner through exercises and case studies, followed by an assessment booklet related to those same topics. These learning packages are industry focused and have scenarios from typical industry situations. They are used as teaching and learning resources for providers offering these qualifications. Some tutors base their courses around these

workbooks. For inexperienced educators these materials and resources are invaluable. The result can be a programme made up entirely of industry-led curriculum.

This contradicts the views of adult learning theorists who see student-centred learning/ self-directed learning as involving the learner, requiring critical reflection and healthy scepticism. The glaring anomaly with unit standards is that on the one hand they offer the learner an opportunity to be involved in their own learning through clear and specific performance criteria, yet on the other hand they are so prescriptive that they offer little opportunity for innovative construction of knowledge by the learner. Learners who step outside the square are not rewarded; in fact they may be assessed as 'incomplete.' This can be very demotivating for a learner who may be quite lateral in the way they approach an assessment, rather than sticking to the required standard.

Concern with Self

Some adult learning researchers have refuted the view that adult learners like to be self directed. Candy (1987, cited in Leach, 2000) describes adult students as often seeking cues from teachers, being very attached to their syllabus and sometimes having a very fragile self concept. Other writers (Leach, 2000; Alfred, 1987) refer to all the years of schooling that adults have had that socialises them into dependent forms of learning The other, and perhaps more important feature of self directed learning, is that it is a reflection largely of middle class white male North Americans (and in New Zealand, middle class pakeha New Zealanders).

The concern with the 'self' and the desire to have personal freedom, choice, and 'learn if and when you feel like it', is indicative of an individualist culture (such as American and European cultures). Learners from collectivist cultures (such as Maori and Pasifika) (Hofstede, 2001) might prefer to learn in a group and be assessed that way e.g. the New Zealand study by Joan Metge (1984) of Maori learning and teaching emphasised the idea of a community of learners.

This focus on the individual human being "constitutes a moral axiom which places the individual at the centre of a value system which relegate(s) the group to second place" (Tennant, 1986, cited in Leach, 2000, p.23). Flannery (1994, cited in Leach, 2000) reinforces that view and states that learning theories that are based on individualism and autonomy reflect values and attributes that are primarily Western, middle class and male. Joblin (1998, cited in Leach, 2000) supports this stance by arguing that we are more likely to become self-directed if we are born into cultures or groups that nurture it.

The practice of dividing a course into segments or 'units' does not take into account the holistic needs of the learner. As educators focus more on knowledge and skills acquisition the 'spiritual' side of the learner can be left out of the equation. Within Maoridom, for example, knowledge belongs to the group, and is to be used in the service of the group rather than individual ambition. Those who hold the knowledge are seen as 'trustees', not owners (Metge, 1984). This is totally alien to the western view of individualistic aspirations. "More and more adult learners here are Maori and people from Pacific nations and Asia. Expecting, even requiring them to be autonomous learners may be inappropriate" (Leach, 2003, p. 109).

Directed Self-direction

Collins (1991, cited in Leach, 2000) points out, that, in some approaches to self-directed learning, the emphasis is on the teacher rather than the autonomous learner and that the learning contract, a popular technique for self-directed learning, is a formula for what amounts to 'directed' self-directed learning. The learning contract, he argues, is a form of reductionism that allows the learner to be subjected to the needs of the organisation. Brookfield (1988, cited in Leach, 2000) agrees and adds that learners cannot be fully self-directed if they are applying techniques of independent study within a context of goal and criteria determined by an external authority. The very nature of the NQF unit standard environment is one of set criteria fully prescribed by a national external body. This culture imposes the dominant ideas on the students. It does not encourage individuals to question and critique the system they live in and the knowledge being offered to them (Freire, cited in Shor, 1993).

Exponents of critical and emancipatory theory (Merriam & Caffarella 1999; Kilgore, 2001; Freire, 1970) argue that we should find ways to bring about social justice for the marginalised and underprivileged. These theorists are interested in where the learning is taking place, and where the power base is situated. They challenge us to consider who makes the decisions about what kind of learning takes place and whose interests are being served. More importantly they urge us to consider what counts as knowledge, where it is located and how it is acquired. They also ask us to consider who is funding the provision and what the interests of the funders (or stakeholders) are.

This raises an interesting discussion when we consider the foundation learner studying in a unit standard environment. Students are enrolling in foundation programmes and being assessed against unit standards. In many instances they are being encouraged to work individually and at their own pace, through the learning material which prepares them for the unit standard assessment. What understanding do they have of the educative process? Zepke (1997) argues that "NZQA's access driven view of student-centred learning denies learners the opportunity to contest for power in learning situations" (p. 93). He goes on to say that "learners are not capable of taking part in this struggle for power knowledge on their diet of instrumental, operational knowledge. Not only can they not challenge dominant ideas, they can't know what alternatives exist" (p. 94). In some contexts learning is being reduced to working through a box of exercises related to a unit standard. When the exercises have been completed the learner is ready to sit the assessment. Knowledge is reduced to specific learning outcomes. Those learning outcomes are totally owned and driven by the stakeholders who shaped the qualification.

Summary

Foundation learners, like all tertiary students are being subjected to the same changes that are impacting on many programmes and courses. Students are being required to learn in a more self-directed fashion. This necessitates that programmes be developed into more individualised packages so that students can work at their own pace and in their own time. The tertiary environment has changed dramatically in the last ten years with a

proliferation of modes of delivery including online, flexible, and distance learning modules.

A new language has emerged with a focus on delivery and outcomes. The floodgates have opened and now industry groups, with their own agendas, are helping change the face of classrooms. Learners and tutors are caught up in this revolution and are not always aware of the dominant ideas being offered up as learning programmes. Courses made up of unit standards are pervading the classrooms. Broader educational interests have been replaced by market driven, 'relevant' courses. Questions need to be asked around who decides what is 'relevant'? Do foundation learners now have fewer opportunities to explore topic areas that may interest them? What are some of the consequences of embracing the Framework and all its proliferation of courses?

Chapter 4 introduces the methodology used in this research. It considers the reason for the choice and how various paradigms influence the outcome. It also outlines the research process including the fieldwork.

CHAPTER 4

Methodology

Introduction

Research is not undertaken lightly. It involves a deliberate commitment to finding a new way of looking at something. It can cast new light on a subject, create new discourse or challenge the reader to change. It asks us to explore something that may have been puzzling us. Research can be described as an art, a skill, and a talent. It involves power. It invites us to ponder on questions such as: who asked for the research to be done? Who designed the questions? Who has control of the data? Where and when will it be published? Who will the research help? Who owns it? Have I gained the trust of participants only to negate their trust through publishing my findings? Am I carrying out research on people or with people?

Paradigms of Research

There has been a great deal written about the broad frameworks that make up the different possible research approaches or paradigms. It encourages the researcher to consider what lies at the heart of the research process, what assumptions lay hidden beneath the surface and how they might impact on the method chosen and the ensuing result. In particular I want to focus on the frameworks that encompass educational research. Through discussion and interpretation of paradigms I can better understand my own decision to select and carry out the research that I did. What made me decide that there was a problem with unit standard assessment that needed investigating? What led me to narrow that down to looking at foundation learners within the tertiary environment? Why did I select that above other issues of equal if not higher significance? Who am I doing this research for? This discussion will also help clarify the meaning of some of the competing research paradigms and how they influence inquiry. By stepping back from the research process and examining the broader philosophical underpinnings I may glean some insight into the values that give meaning to my role as a professional working in the New Zealand tertiary education sector.

Emergence of Qualitative Research in Education

Anthropology research contributed to the development of qualitative research in education (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Boas (1940, cited in Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) was particularly significant in that he believed each culture had to be approached inductively. The study of native cultures by anthropologists saw the beginning of fieldwork techniques. The field research of the anthropologists was an important source of the model called the 'Chicago model'. The Chicago sociologists focused on participant observation and contributed substantively to the development of qualitative research methods.

"The simple question of the 'best research approach' has been the prime mover of the enormous upheaval in our thinking about the 'human sciences' since the 1960s" (McIntyre, 1996, p. 4). Qualitative researchers gained popularity from the 1960s on, partly because of the social upheaval of the times and partly because of "their recognition of the views of the powerless and the excluded" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 21). The positivists of that time were replaced in the 1970s and 1980s with a rise in the number of interpretive and humanist approaches (Reason & Rowan 1981, cited in McIntyre, 1996). Around this same time there was a deliberate "rejection of orthodox educational research dominated by narrow schools of thought such as behaviourism that largely ignored the social interactive nature of classrooms and treated the knowledge at the heart of the curriculum as a 'black box', which indeed, those disciplines were ill-equipped to explore" (McIntyre, 1996, p. 4).

There was a trend toward researchers using more natural methods, such as the humanistic and interpretive approaches. For example, Lincoln and Guba (1985, cited in McIntyre, 1996) advocated an alternative to the positivist paradigm by introducing the 'naturalistic' approach to research. This view argued that research can be carried out only holistically and that there are multiple realities at play so that it is difficult to predict and control the outcome. In other words the researcher and the participant interact and influence one another which can make it difficult to differentiate between cause and effect.

This interpretive critique was soon followed by a wave of critical research (Bredo and Feinburg, 1982; Carr and Kemmis, 1986). They argued that only if teachers are empowered to research and act upon problems in their practice that research can hope to significantly change educational structures----that is be emancipatory in effect. This thinking has influenced the acceptance and popularity of action research. Feminist theory and practice have also shaped qualitative research by focusing on gender as a central topic. "Feminists have been important in developing emotion and feeling as topics for research" (Hochschild, 1989, cited in Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 27). More recently post-modernism debates would have us question even the need for a framework for research (Lather, 1991; Kemmis, 1992). Postmodernists also argue that you can only know something from a certain position. They question what conventions and attitudes are at play when we carry out an investigation.

Paradigm

So what is meant by paradigm? Paradigm should not be confused with research approach or perspective. Paradigm is more 'big picture' than that and refers to things outside our conscious choice, things we may not yet have examined. "Whether stated or not, all research is guided by some theoretical orientation" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 33). Much of the original debate about paradigm arose from the writings of the philosopher of science Thomas Khun. Masterman (1970, cited in McIntyre, 1996) identified three main meanings of paradigm in Kuhn's work. He called them the metaphysical paradigm, the sociological paradigm and the construct paradigm.

Metaphysical Paradigm (Metaparadigm)

Metaparadigm is at the very deepest level and represents our world view and core assumptions about knowledge and reality. As Westerners our usual model of research is that of real research as 'hard', quantitative and esoteric (McIntyre, 1996). Often these beliefs are unquestioned and accepted as 'real.' "Our deepest assumptions about research embody (often unquestionly) our philosophical beliefs about the nature of reality (the essence of things, ontology) and knowledge (epistemology)" (McIntyre, 1996, p. 6).

Sociological Paradigm

Sociological paradigm explains the institutionalised grammatical construction of doing research (accepted ways). In the New Zealand education sector, universities have been the traditional bastion of research culture, although recently ITPs and some PTEs have begun to develop and encourage research. Research is being talked about and encouraged, yet there are still constraints as to what is acceptable. ITPs, with their practical industry focus are being influenced into providing research that is seen as relevant and useful, rather than academic. Another institutional influence is the ever increasing push for teaching staff to complete higher levels of study. As a researcher I need to consider whether I am completing this thesis because I have a genuine interest in foundation learners and their experience of assessment or have I chosen this area because it is 'topical' at the moment? Has one influenced the other? How much has the institutional shift into research influenced me to even think of carrying out research?

Construct paradigm

The Construct paradigm, is the level of conscious choice about a research problem and the ways to approach it. According to McIntyre (1996) this level of paradigm is crucial. He describes it as choosing a problem and a method together. One influences the other. I chose the problem of unit standard assessment because I observed an issue of concern around units and students' learning. I wanted to see if my hunches were correct. My assumption (based on an experience teaching communication unit standards on level one and three programmes) was that learners at a foundation level were finding that they had to work under some pressure through a large number of unit standards within a timeframe to complete a qualification. The trend was for tutors to be teaching to the unit specifications to help the learner pass or complete the credits. To me, this seemed to be compromising the learning process. I also had a strong desire to follow up an earlier research project that I had completed whereby I investigated how tutors were finding unit standards.

Thus paradigm is not a methodology. It is a 'window onto the world', a set of assumptions, a looking glass that leads a researcher to go down a certain path of chosen

methodology. The choice of methodology is heavily influenced by who we are, where we live in the world, what our background is, and what institute, if any, we work in. According to Masterman (1970, cited in McIntyre, 1996), paradigm constructs the research. It gives a way of seeing the research process and activities, and provides shortcuts to otherwise difficult questions such as validity. "It allows people to communicate easily about the meaning of their activity in brief, to pursue an institutionalised way of exploring a common problem through sharing assumptions about research practice" (McIntyre, 1996, p. 12). As a researcher I bring into my research an idealised philosophical position. I may also become aware of my own resistance to doing certain kinds of research, perhaps because it goes against my own beliefs, agendas and idea of what is useful.

Understanding paradigms of research helps to explain why certain methodologies become popular at certain times. For example three dominant construct paradigms have emerged in the adult education research domain. They are the methodologies of (1) participation study (why adult learners take courses), (2) adult learning theory through examining 'experience' and (3) participatory research. They are now seen as accepted ways to research adult education (McIntyre, 1996).

Understanding the researcher's paradigm

To identify my own particular paradigm I needed to analyse my motives and priorities for doing this research.

First, why am I really doing this research? What will its main outcomes be? My motives included:

1. Completion of my Master of Education (Adult Education) degree.
2. Experience of working within research parameters as opposed to doing post graduate 'papers.'
3. Getting some answers to some questions that have been niggling away at me in my practice as a tertiary educator.

Secondly, I also needed to examine my values. Who am I? I am in my 50s, pakeha, and have taught in a polytechnic environment for 22 years beginning with many years teaching in the life skills, ACCESS, TOPs (foundation skills) area. I have feelings and attitudes about the subject I have chosen. My values, based on my life experience so far, are influential and I cannot easily remove them. My teaching life has focused mainly on working with foundation learners. I have met and taught many students who have come back into learning for many different reasons, not just to gain qualifications. I have been humbled by the joy, enthusiasm and positive outcomes that they have experienced and shared with me. I have been studying adult education for the past six years and have read many of the theories that are underpinning current research in this area.

Thirdly what assumptions am I making about knowledge? Can I measure it? Can I observe it? How will I interpret it? I have a constructivist view of learning. I cannot be completely objective as I have already got an opinion on unit standards. I have a view from a teaching perspective, but will that hold true when I begin asking learners how they are finding their experiences? I have to put aside my subjective views and try to be open to any new knowledge that may emerge.

Fourth, what have I taken as the focus? What did I see as the problem and why? My thoughts on this were influenced by my experience as a tutor. Within the ITP sector I have observed that the programmes we offer mean that sometimes students are rushed through units to achieve the qualification. In particular I have been concerned that this has been to the detriment of foundation learners who are grappling with new concepts and new ideas and who seem to me to need further time to practise and consolidate what they have learnt. I have also been influenced by Critical Theory and the way 'power' is defined in education. How is knowledge defined and who 'owns' it?

In order to understand the way qualitative research has influenced educational research it's important to acknowledge some of the differences between **qualitative** and **quantitative** research methods.

Quantitative Research

In essence, quantitative research is all about collecting and analysing data. Often described as more scientific or objective, the researcher usually emphasises large-scale representative sets of data in numerical form (Blaxter et al., 1998). Quantitative research uses phrases such as 'hard data', 'empirical', 'statistical' and 'positivist'. The approach often includes a hypothesis, and offers concepts such as validity, reliability and prediction (Bogdan & Bidlan, 1992). The samples are usually large and include control groups and the methods used are experiments, surveys, structured observations and use of data sets. It's a very useful method when the researcher wants to collate or compare statistics.

Qualitative Research

In contrast, qualitative research describes events, persons and behaviours in as many different ways as possible, often in a non-numeric way. Qualitative research is usually more open and responsive to its subject. "It tends to focus on exploring, in as much detail as possible, smaller numbers of instances or examples which are seen as being interesting or illuminating, and aims to achieve 'depth' rather than 'breadth' (Blaxter et al., 1998, p. 60). Terms associated with qualitative can include fieldwork, ethnographic, soft data, naturalistic, descriptive, life history, case study, documentary and participant observation. Key concepts associated with the approach, according to Bogdan & Biklen (1992), involve meaning, understanding, bracketing, everyday life, process, social construction and grounded theory. The design of the research is often flexible and the data may use participants' own words.

A Qualitative Approach

For this research project I chose a qualitative approach. This best matched my aim of finding out how students were experiencing unit standard assessment and a need to hear the 'voices' of the participants. Qualitative research falls within the interpretivist sociological tradition and offers the researcher a wide variety of ways to conduct their research. According to Mason (1996, p. 4) qualitative research is characterised by a grounding in a philosophical position that concerns itself with how "the social world is interpreted, understood and experienced." Secondly it is based on "methods of data

generation which are flexible and sensitive to the social context in which data are produced" and lastly it uses methods of "analysis and explanation building which involve understandings of complexity, detail and context." I wanted the students to share with me how it was for them, not how I thought it was going. The theoretical underpinning of this approach can be described as phenomenological. The phenomenology perspective attempts to understand the meaning of events to ordinary people in particular contexts or settings. Phenomenologists attempt to gain entry into the world of their research subjects (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). This approach emphasises process rather than outcomes; data is collected, a bit like many pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, and then sense is made of them. "Abstractions are built as the particulars that have been gathered are grouped together" (Bogden & Biklen, 1992, p. 31).

Qualitative Research as Choreography

Qualitative research is also a vehicle for capturing the essence and complexity of the learners' experience. I was influenced by Janesick's insightful work (in Denzin & Lincoln, 2003) which compares qualitative research with choreography. She invites us to embrace this metaphor of choreography, to stretch our imagination and imagine the qualitative researcher as like a choreographer at various stages in the design process. She suggests we "situate and recontextualise the research project within the shared experience of the researcher and the participants in the study" (Janesick, cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 48).

Just as a good choreographer refuses to be limited by a singular approach, so too the good qualitative researcher refuses to be limited by just one method. Various techniques, rigorous and tested procedures are used to capture the subtleties and complexities of the social setting under study. As I moved forward with my project I could feel the dance, the spin of initial success, the slow rhythm as the movement takes on a life of its own; the glance this way and that, the deliberate long and lingering gaze, the crowded dance floor, and the band playing. The many distractions of life itself (life outside the dance hall) impinge on the process.

Triangulation

Historically good qualitative research has always involved triangulation as an important component of the design process. Denzin (1978) identified four basic types of triangulation: data triangulation (use of a variety of data sources), investigator triangulation (use of several different researchers or evaluators), theory triangulation (multiple perspectives), and methodological triangulation (use of multiple methods). According to Silverman (2000), we may be able to triangulate the 'true' state of affairs by examining where the data intersect. This could improve the reliability of a single method. However the downside to viewing things from different angles is that we may lose the sense of context in which the data was gathered.

Crystallisation

Now in the 21st century there is discussion of a new sort. The key word is crystallisation (Silverman, 2000). This is being seen as a better way (lens) to view qualitative research design. It recognises the many different facets of any given approach to the social world and fits more easily into post-modern thought. A crystal catches the light and reflects many different colours, just as my research may catch the many different hues of the learner and the learners' story.

There is no one correct answer or interpretation, rather a range of explanations. This metaphor of crystallisation clarifies the questions going on in my head such as how long should the interviews be? How many focus group conversations? What route should I guide the conversation? Qualitative research allows me to relax into the 'dance', to feel my way and trust that the answers will be there, both simple and complex in their nature. By stretching the artistic side of my brain I can find ways to approach the research questions in a more creative way. "Qualitative researchers do not claim that there is only one way of interpreting an event. There is no one 'correct' way" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 69).

Validity and Reliability

Validity is an important aspect of qualitative research as it examines whether the methods, approaches and techniques accurately relate to the problems and/or issues that have been explored (Blaxer et al., 1998). The concept of reliability is concerned with how well a research project has been carried out. For example if another researcher was to carry out the same project using the same methodology would they come up with similar results? If they did, it would seem that the research is reliable. "Qualitative researchers tend to view reliability as a fit between what they record as data and what actually occurs in the setting under study, rather than the literal consistency across different observations (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 48). Qualitative researchers acknowledge that different researchers will experience the collecting of the data differently depending on what actually occurs in context.

Fieldwork/ Choosing a Method

The next part of the research process is to decide on the 'how to?' Some of the possible methods include case studies, interviews, focus group conversations, and surveys.

1. *Case Studies*

This is a useful technique if the research is focused on a particular organisation, or some aspect of an organisation. The major data gathering technique is participant observation. Usually it is a part or parts of an organisation that are studied, i.e. a classroom, a staffroom, a particular group of people or a specific activity within the institute. "A good physical setting to study is one that the same people use in a recurring way" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p.62).

2. *Interviews*

The interview is a "useful technique for gathering data which would be unlikely to be accessible using techniques such as observation or questionnaires" (Blaxter et al., 1998, p. 153). Interviews can be carried out face to face, or over the phone. They may be structured with very set questions or open-ended allowing discussion to take place. An unstructured interview gives participants more control. The interviewee may have prior

knowledge of the topic to be discussed and may be allowed to gather together information that could be relevant and bring it to the interview. Interviews can be recorded on a tape recorder and later transcribed or notes taken at the interview stage by the interviewee or an observer. Using a tape recorder means that the interviewer can go away and listen to the tapes over and over.

The interview gives the researcher an opportunity to 'connect' with the participant and hear how it is for them.

3. *Focused Group Conversations*

According to Morgan (1997, p. 8) focus groups are:

> (a) limited to verbal behaviour,
> (b) consist only of interaction in discussion groups and
> (c) are created and managed by the researcher.

Despite this emphasis on the role of the researcher focused group conversations have some advantages in that participants are brought together for a specific period of time with the sole purpose of focusing on the topic in hand. This means that there is potential to observe quite a lot of interaction which would not be possible under naturally occurring situations.

The role of the researcher is key as they can direct and facilitate the way the conversation goes. Although this has some degree of manipulation there is still the opportunity for a focused group conversation to be less structured than the interview which is more tightly controlled by the interviewer.

A major weakness of focused group conversations is that they can be overly influenced by the researcher's own agenda and interests. There may also be strong individuals within the chosen group who sway the way the discussion is going. This would affect the data that is produced.

Morgan (1997, p. 34) outlines some key guidelines that have emerged about the use of focus groups. He states that they most often:

(a) Use homogeneous strangers as participants
(b) Rely on a relatively structured interview with high moderator involvement
(c) Have 6 to 10 participants
(d) Have a total of three to five groups per project

4. *Surveys*

According to Blaxter et al., survey research in education "involves the collection of information from members of a group of students, teachers, or other persons associated with the educational process, and the analysis of this information to illuminate important educational issues" (1998, p. 70). The idea behind a survey is to ask a group of people questions about a particular issue in order to understand their viewpoint.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines ensure that the researcher acts ethically. The most important issues concerning research with human subjects include informed consent and the protection of participants from harm. Usually these guidelines are implemented through the use of consent forms that highlight the purpose of the study and the participant's role in it and what will happen to the findings (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). In qualitative research the subjects' relationship with the researcher can evolve over time. There is opportunity to continue to make decisions about their involvement. Most importantly the subjects' identities should remain anonymous, so that they are not exposed or embarrassed. Researchers need therefore to be careful about sharing information with others who may use it for political or personal gain. Participants should be treated with respect, and be told what the terms of the agreement are.

Finally the researcher should interpret what their data has revealed, even if it is not the conclusion that was expected.

Data Collection Procedure

In order to carry out the field work the researcher needs to gain access to conduct the study. This involves approaching the organisation or institution, explaining the purpose of the research and the intended approach. Often this is done through a letter of approach followed by a face to face meeting. Once you have gained entry it's important to clearly explain the process, how long it will take, what it will mean in terms of disruption and what will happen with the findings. Silverman (2000) writes about the five ways of gaining access to organisations: "impression management", obtaining "bottom up" access, being "non-judgemental", offering "feedback" and "establishing a contract" (pp. 199, 200).

Other processes that need to be considered are the selection of the sample group and when, where and how often you will meet with them. With interviews, you need to briefly inform the subjects of your purpose and reassure them that what they say will be treated confidentially

The Research Process for this Project

Background

I chose to carry out my fieldwork within an ITP and two PTEs. I wanted to interview and facilitate focused group conversations with around 18 foundation learners. Before I could venture into the 'field' I developed all appropriate forms to gain approval of access, personal data of interviewees, and their written agreement to using the transcribed interview notes in my report. I designed a letter to go the provider manager (refer Appendix A) another less formal information sheet for the students to read (refer Appendix D) and understand what my research was about, and a data sheet (refer Appendix B) for those students who wished to take part in my research to fill in. I took some time to work out how I was actually going to select the participants. How would I choose? In the end I decided to seek access to a wide range of foundation learners and

invite them to participate. If I ended up with too many names I could select based on getting a range of age, gender and ethnic representation.

I chose to approach the institutions, gaining interest and approval from management first (Silvermans "impression management"), then involving teaching staff and students. I tried to create curiosity and interest and also came from a historic angle that unit standards had been around for 15 years. How were students finding them? The management and teaching staff became quite interested in the process and informally passed on to me some of their views.

The fact that I knew the managers of the two PTEs and the research coordinator of the ITP helped the initial approach to be successful. I needed to come across as neutral and non-judgemental because years of working in a competitive environment can cause distrust between providers. I wanted to assure the managers of my interviewees that the research would not be used against them.

Diary of Events

Appendix K outlines a diary of events that demonstrates how I went about contacting the providers, selecting the participants and carrying out the field- work. This was a useful process for me as I could contribute to the diary at various key stages of the journey. As I neared the end of my writing up stage it was rewarding to look back and see where I had come from.

Ethical Concerns

Initially I thought there might be some ethical concerns as I was interviewing students who were enrolled in the same institute that I taught in. Also there was potential to uncover information about students or tutors that could be used against them. However I soon realised that this was considered low risk as they were not my students and there was no perceived risk to their programme of study. I did complete the full application to the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC) which I actually found to be very helpful as it clarified for me what I was doing and why.

I then completed the Notification of Low Risk Research/Evaluation involving Human Participants and forwarded that to the Massey University Human Ethics Committee. Some weeks later I received approval to proceed with my research.

Method of Approach

For this research project I chose to carry out individual interviews and three focused group conversations made up of between three and seven participants in each group. Two of the groups were made up of students who knew each other. The other group brought together three people from different classes.

The rationale behind choosing individual interviews and focused group conversations was to observe what new information would emerge when I brought students together after I had met with them individually. Also I thought that the interviews would raise further questions that could be explored by the larger group. The individual interviews gave me an opportunity to link with the participant and hear a little about their learning journey which would not be possible in the focused group conversation. I chose to carry out structured interviews with the questions written down so that I could stay on track. I had thought carefully about what information I wanted so that I wouldn't be distracted too far off the topic by interviewees who might enjoy a chance for a one-on-one chat. Although the questions were written down in the order that I thought would make the most sense I found that it wasn't quite that simple in practice.

The goal of combining two data-gathering methods (triangulation) was to strengthen the research project and examine issues around unit standard assessment from different angles.

Selection of Participants

After gaining approval from each of the tertiary providers I was given permission to talk to the targeted groups of foundation learners and to invite them to take part in my research. I explained to the students my interest in carrying out the research and why I

needed some participants. The first PTE that I went to had warmed the students up to my coming and the response was very positive. I left information and data sheets with them. The response was good with eight students agreeing to take part in the individual interviews.

The second PTE again allowed me to talk to a group of three classes combined and see if anyone would be interested. This proved more difficult and I didn't get a very enthusiastic response. Three students volunteered and a fourth student said she would do it if I didn't get enough.

The foundation skills polytechnic students were all quite enthusiastic and many filled in the data sheet and showed interest. They were mainly young school leavers. I also approached a more mature group of students studying a computer programme at NZQA level 3. Three of them were keen to be interviewed. I then met with another group of fifteen foundation learners at another campus of the same ITP. They were interested in what I was doing but in the end not one volunteered to take part. The fact that it was end of the term probably had something to do with it.

I ended up with a good mix of young and older students, and a range of gender (although not as many males as I would have liked) and ethnic backgrounds. Figure 3 shows the breakdown in age, ethnic background, gender and type of institute interviewee was studying in.

Figure 3: Participants' ethnicity, gender and age

Participant	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Institute
1	F	15-20	NZEur	PTE
2	F	15-20	Kiwi	IT
3	M	15-20	NZEur	PTE
4	F	15-20	NZEur	ITP
5	M	15-20	NZEur	ITP
6	F	15-20	Fijian	ITP
7	F	15-20	NZMaori	ITP
8	F	15-20	Tongan	PTE
9	F	15-20	NZEur	PTE
10	F	15-20	NZEur	PTE
11	F	21-30	NZEur	PTE
12	F	21-30	NZMaori	PTE
13	F	31-40	NZEur	PTE
14	M	31-40	NZEur	PTE
15	F	31-40	NZMaori	PTE
16	F	41-50	NZMaori	PTE
17	F	41-50	NZ Eur	PTE
18	F	51-65	NZEur	ITP
19	F	51-65	NZEur	ITP

Participants

The nineteen students ranged in age from 15 through to 60. There were four male and 15 female. Of those 12 were NZ Pakeha, four NZ Maori, two Pasifika students and one student who wished to be identified as a kiwi. Those over 30 years of age included two Maori and five European. Those under 30 included seven European, three Maori, one Fijian, one Tongan and one "Kiwi.' Eight were studying at an ITP and eleven were studying at a PTE. Nine students were in the 15-20 age group, the other ten were between 20 and 60. The younger students were more familiar with unit standards and had experienced them at school. The older students were up skilling and were less familiar with the assessment method.

The participants that were interviewed were all students enrolled in a range of nationally recognised programmes. Those programmes were Certificate in Employment Skills

(level 1), Certificate in Tourism and Travel (level 2), Certificate in Computing (level 2 and 3), Business Administration and Computing (level 3) and Hairdressing and Personal Presentation (level 2). The students were attending as Youth Trainees, Training Opportunities or zero fee students. They were early school leavers and mature learners with low qualifications although one mature student had previously attended university. However she had not completed the first year. Another mature student on a level 3 computing programme had started a Diploma in Business but had decided to withdraw from that in order to upgrade her computer skills at level 3.

These students were attending full time programmes at three tertiary institutes all situated in the same region. The two PTEs are small organisations with approximately 30-50 students, depending on the time of the year and the number of programmes running. Classes are small (around 10) and the environment is friendly and informal. The ITP in the study is a satellite campus with approximately 160 EFTS. Although more structured and offering a wider range of programmes it too is student-friendly with small classes.

The Interviews

I developed a range of questions to ask (refer Appendix E). These were designed to find out what students already knew about unit standards, how they were finding the use of them and whether they felt that assessment impacted on their learning in any way. I also wanted to see if the learners' experiences matched some of the findings in the literature review.

The interviews were done in private. In all cases they were carried out in the institute where the student was studying. This proved to be the easiest option as the students seemed reluctant to meet with me outside course time e.g. in the lunch hour. They had other commitments or in some cases just forgot that they had agreed to meet with me! I used a tape recorder with a built in microphone.

I found that, in general, the participants were keen to talk about their experiences. Some of the younger students didn't have much to say in comparison to the older students who were more in tune with their feelings and more articulate.

A couple of the questions resulted in unexpected responses and that was a bit of a surprise. In order to keep the flow happening and not to appear too rigid by sticking exactly to the interview questions I allowed 'the dance' to unfold and so the interviews ended up semi-structured. The questions became a useful framework with a resulting flow on depending on the answer I received.

Focused Group Conversations

For the focused group conversations I wanted to explore further what some of the interviewees had said in the interviews. I was particularly interested in expanding on some of the answers that had implied that unit standards were 'easy'. I also wanted to know what they liked and didn't like about units. I put together a loose list of questions (refer Appendix F) that would guide my facilitation and give me something to bring the conversation back to. In fact I found that the groups were not as talkative as I would have liked and my questions were needed to prompt and stimulate discussion. This was in direct contrast to the focus group conversations I had carried out with teaching staff in 2001. It had been no problem getting teachers to talk.

When it came time to carry out the focused group conversations some of the students were no longer with the organisation so I ended up with a slightly different mix of students (less than I thought I was going to have). I phoned all the students who had agreed to take part, but some were now in jobs or had left the course for personal reasons. One student had had a baby but returned for the focused group conversation with her baby.

The first focused group conversation was with the PTE1 group. I ended up with five participants. We used a spare empty room at the PTE1. This was private and I set it up with refreshments. I had developed some basic group ground rules, which emphasised

respect and confidentiality (refer Appendix G). It was an interesting process with the dynamics of the group really affecting who spoke and when. I detected some resistance toward one group member and the odd 'sigh' when certain individuals spoke. This added another dimension to the discussion (the dance!) that I hadn't expected.

The second group was the younger students at the institute of technology. They were 15-18 year olds. There were seven in total. They took it seriously and had some interesting things to say about their experiences, in particular comparing with secondary school. Two new students asked if they could join this group; they were new members of the class and therefore had not taken part in the individual interviews. I explained the research to them and got them to fill in the participants' consent forms. The third group was the three mature women students studying computer skills at level 3. They talked quite openly and at times disagreed with each other. This dialogue was more like what I had been expecting to happen.

Data Analysis Techniques

Once I had completed my individual interviews, I began the process of transcribing. This was a useful thing to do as I listened over and over to the tapes as I typed them up. It gave me a chance to hear again how the words were said and to begin to interpret their meaning. I went through the interview notes question by question, noting similarities and differences. Students were identified as belonging to PTE1, PTE2 and ITP. I began to look for threads that were recurring. These were coded into different sets of reasons that participants gave for each of their answers. I transferred each heading on to separate sheets of paper, circling key words as they appeared. As key themes emerged these were displayed on another set of paper sheets. This had a strong visual impact where key words or phrases highlighted similar responses. I chose not to use qualitative software although this was discussed with my supervisor. My reason for that decision was based on the small numbers of participants in the research.

This process is similar to grounded theory which:

> "involves the coding of the interview transcript- and/or other data

> collected- in terms of key concepts, which are mainly developed during the work itself. Coding may be carried out by individual researchers, alone, comparatively or together. Grounded theory also builds upon a cyclical or spiral perception of the research process, with concept development, data collection and data analysis taking place in close conjunction, and feeding into each other" (Blaxter et al., 1998, p. 189).

I also played the tapes over and over, listening for the intent, the telling phrase, the silence, and the gaps. "Tape recorded interviews, like texts and tapes of naturally occurring interaction allow you to return to your data in their original format often as you wish" (Silverman, 2000, p.126). Key themes were emerging such as: liking being assessed when they were ready; units were easy; the positives about being assessed straight after learning a topic; the difficult language of the assessments and the importance of the role of the tutor in explaining what is required. This was the 'dance', the way the words came out, the lightness, the feelings, the rapid response or the delayed and considered pondering. At the same time I began to consider each of the participants' background details, such as age, gender, previous schooling history. Along with the themes that were taking shape, I was also interested in the 'stories' or narratives that were emerging. What was I hearing that was different from my own perspective? Within this foundation learning context what was I hearing about assessment, about learning and about what worked for these learners? "As the research process unfolds, winding on and around itself, a clearer identification and understanding of the concepts of relevance is reached" (Blaxter et al., 1998, p. 189).

Summary

Qualitative research best matched my interest in a people-based approach. This approach allowed me to gain the confidence of the interviewees and to hear their account of how it was. I had confidence in my own ability to slip into the 'learner's world,' to listen to their responses, to observe and record their interviews and focused group conversations.

Limitations

Limitations were the small number of students in the sample and the fact that it was carried out in one region. Only three providers were involved and therefore results cannot be generalised across the sector.

Other limitations were mostly related to the pressures of time and trying to fit in best with students so as to cause the least disruption to their classes and private lives. I lost a few participants after the first round of individual interviews and they were replaced with a few new members in the focused group conversations. This meant extra paper work making sure that these students understood what the research was about and that they agreed to all the conditions. My own lack of experience in using tape recording equipment caused some problems early on as I encountered loud static noises (feedback) during the first focused group conversation recording. It had been suggested to me to try and carry out the interviews away from the learning institute so that students would feel less intimidated. This however proved too time consuming to organise (and students were resistant to it) so when I was offered small rooms within the organisations, I gratefully accepted.

As this was a small sample of learners I chose not to analyse using software, choosing instead to compare and contrast from the printed transcribed samples. This may have limited my results.

Other limitations were more to do with my own lack of experience in formulating the research questions. In retrospect, I felt I could have tightened up the questions and focused more specifically on aspects of units such as the prescriptive nature, or the opportunity for resits. I'd like to have explored further the area of whether students felt that they were learning how to learn and being encouraged to think. Instead I left the questions wide open and allowed the words to come out the way the students wanted to say them. I found that the students talked more in the one on one interviews than in the focused group conversations. They didn't seem to have the skills to take the conversation to another level; they needed the facilitator to keep on initiating the discussion. I found

that quite disappointing initially, but later realised there was plenty to analyse, even the silences.

The findings were fuelled by other research that became available as I was analysing the data. The limitation, however, was that most of the public discussion was around NCEA and secondary school students rather than the tertiary environment. The number of participants and the small number of males and other ethnic groups was another limitation. Also the study was carried out in one region thereby results may have had a regional flavour and further research using a wider cross section of participants might result in different findings.

Given the reforms of the last 16 years I was surprised by the lack of research into the impact of unit standards on foundation learners. The most comprehensive literature was provided by NZQA or the Skill NZ reports which had an obvious bias.

My lack of experience in designing research questions was also a limitation. As I completed my field work and started analysing I had a renewed interest in the political arena behind the reforms and this prompted further reading which strengthened and added to my argument.

The next chapter describes the Findings. It takes the results of the research, the interviews and focus groups and presents the data in a series of themes.

CHAPTER 5

Findings

This chapter presents all the findings that emerged from the field work carried out. The findings sit within the political and social contexts that were highlighted in the first three chapters. The chapter describes the participants and the programmes that they are enrolled in. It investigates their feelings about assessment and then links that to their attitudes toward unit standards.

Their thoughts about unit standards are analysed and divided into themes. Key quotations are included to illustrate further what the interviewees were saying and to use their words. This is their 'dance' made visible by the use of their words.

The data that was gathered allowed the students to express themselves and to talk about their experiences. I was impressed by the students' openness and willingness to share with me their thoughts and experiences. At the same time I was disappointed in the limited discussion and interaction in two of the focused group conversations.

Feelings about Assessment

What were their feelings about assessment? When these students talked about their previous school experience the majority expressed fear and anxiety about being tested.

> "When I was first with the course I am doing now it was at first quite scary, but as the year is going on, it's getting, the assignments and that, a lot easier. I think I'm getting used to it. I think I let it beat me up" (PTE1 mature student).

They had not performed well in exams or tests and some of this 'old feeling' was still there. They still carried some of that apprehension into their tertiary course and this made them feel a bit nervous and at first they felt a bit of a 'sense of panic.' However this was now changing to more of a feeling of 'quite comfortable really', and 'don't really mind it.'

"Quite scary. Just very apprehensive about any tests, 'cause I don't do very well in tests anyway" (PTE1 mature student).

"Quite nerve wracking because coming back into education after having been out of it for so long (since 1965)" (PTE1 mature student).

The majority now felt 'okay' about it and even said that they found assessments helpful. They said it showed them whether they had learned or not. One student said it was quite 'normal' doing the assessments, just like ordinary class work. Another student remembered, from her past experience, feeling that assessments might make you think that you were at the bottom of the class. This was in direct contrast to what she was experiencing on her current programme. Five of the participants now felt that they really didn't mind being tested, and that it was a lot easier than when they were at school. Twelve participants said that they still felt a bit of a panic and some anxiety and stress, but it was getting easier.

"The first couple of assessments I felt nervous and I was imagining it was going to be really hard but it's not hard at all and I actually enjoy doing them" (PTE2 mature student).

In general this group of students did not like being assessed but saw some merits in getting through assessments as they led to a qualification. There was an interesting tension between the anxiety of tests and the actual experience of not minding them. Six interviewees said that assessments showed other people where you were and also showed yourself how you were going.

"It gives you knowledge of what you've learnt.'

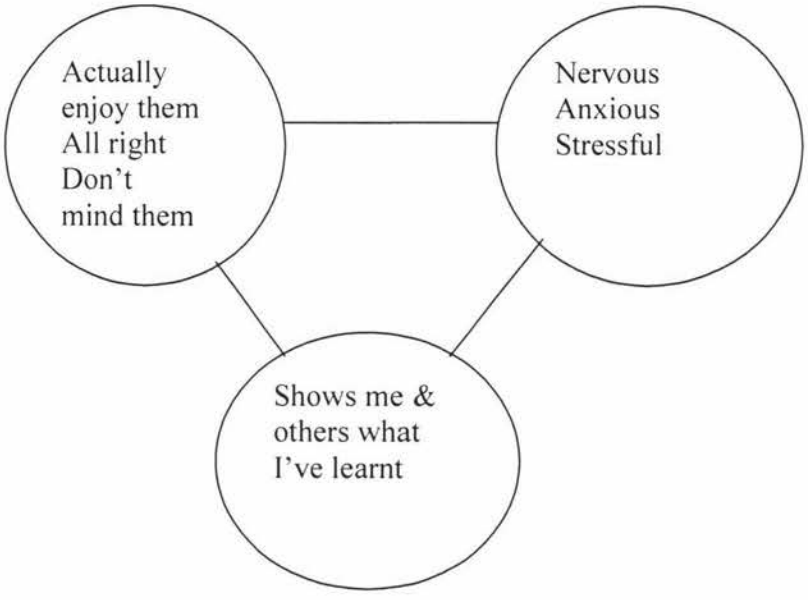
'It teaches you how you are doing" (PTE1 students).

Discussion, during the focused group conversations, on how important they thought assessment was, reiterated that they thought assessment was very important. They thought it was important for employment because the qualification you gained could lead to getting a job. They felt it helped the tutor to see how you were going and to see what was really sinking in. It was also helpful for them as a learner to gauge their own learning and to stay on track.

> "Well, it's a bench mark. It shows us where we are" (ITP focus group).
>
> "Assessment is important for employment 'cause when you gain a unit standard, and from there once you gain a qualification that you're going for. So yeh, assessment is important" (PTE1 focus group).

Figure 4 illustrates the tension students experience when it comes to being assessed. They understood how important assessment was, thought it showed them and others what they have learnt, yet felt some anxiety and nervousness.

Figure 4: Tensions Concerning Assessment



Interviewees understanding of a unit standard

What did they think a unit standard was? What was their understanding? One of the most interesting responses was that a unit standard,

> "is a credit toward your education, like you have a credit on your phone card e.g. $3, like you have 3 credits" (16 year old ITP student).

This response highlighted how this learner saw the connection between a unit (as credits) and everyday language such as the credits you use on a cell phone. For this student the language of unit standards is seen as modern and fitting in with her world.

Overall the responses demonstrated that most of the learners saw unit standards as a type of test that leads to a qualification or a job:

"A test toward a qualification" (ITP student); "a credit on to your cv and a skill to go toward a job" (PTE 2 student)

The idea of a 'credit [illegible] guage (the market model).

"It's what you [illegible] ve this and then they will hire [illegible]

The link between w[illegible] significant for this learner. The respon[illegible] things; that you learn a 'block of wo[illegible] assessment that you had to complete the work for. Once you completed the work (activities) you were ready to do the assessment. One student described it as "like a little internal assessment." Two students stated outright that it was "a qualification." Most students interviewed had some conception that there were levels and that those levels (credits?) added up to a qualification.

"Levels gained in a qualification and adding up to a qualification be it level 2 or 3" (PTE1).

Some of the interviewees had worked out that the course or programme was broken into units and that those units added up to a qualification. One student described each unit as a "different subject so to speak" (PTE2 mature student).

The majority also felt it involved reaching a skill level and then being ticked off to say that you've passed that unit. They were aware that it was important to be ticked or signed off as this indicated completion of the unit.

"A measurement, whether you've achieved up to a certain standard or not. Guidelines are set out and ticked off which bits you can do and if you can do them, you've got that unit standard"(ITP student).

"You get it signed off "(PTE1 student).

They were aware that there were 'guidelines' that had to be worked within.

"A standard that needs to be reached, a criteria that needs to be reached, before we gain a certificate or pass a certain topic we are involved in" (ITP student).

16% of the interviewees didn't know what a unit standard was. These students were relatively new to their programme and because their course had a flexi start they had joined the group without really having an understanding of the type of assessment being used.

Only one student, a mature ITP student, actually criticised the method. The previous year she had completed an introductory Counselling Skills course that had used a different form of assessment. She was particularly critical of the NQF, stating that it annoyed her in some ways, but thought it was excellent for practical skills. She also added that she liked the way the assessment made her think more specifically about the skill she was learning, whereas she felt she was normally the kind of person that brushed over things in a more generic way. Units made her examine what she was actually doing. Again the emphasis is on the 'doing', the skill as opposed to other aspects of learning such as knowledge and attitude.

"NZQA annoys me in some ways, but excellent for example in practical skills. Also I think NZQA has set up a whole culture of people in authority saying 'you've got to do it as well' and not acknowledging experience" (ITP mature student).

Emerging Themes

Units are Easy

A number of themes began to emerge. The words 'easy' and 'easier' were mentioned 30 times by the 19 interviewees who took part in the individual interviews. This was interesting, given that I hadn't prompted it. Some stated that the unit standard assessments were less difficult than they had imagined it was going to be.

> "Easy, really easy, 'cause (tutor) helps me out" (PTE 2 student).
>
> "I don't have a problem with it. I think it's really easy the way it's set out in that you can't really fail. If you misunderstand the first time, you can come back in and do it again, so I think its an excellent way of doing it"(ITP student).
>
> "With a lot of the assessments the answers are there but you just have to put them in the right places so you're not having to actually think of the answers as well as where they are going" (PTE 2 student).

Clarification was sought later, in the focused group conversations, about what they meant by 'easy.' It seemed like it was easy because there wasn't the time pressure and because the tutor was helpful. Also they felt well prepared for it. They had done enough preparatory work to help them succeed.

Learning unit by unit

Interestingly these learners liked their learning broken down into easily 'digested' parts. They liked being assessed unit by unit, being able to learn a topic at a time, be assessed on it and then move on to the next topic. They felt they could cope with the assessment while it was still fresh in their minds. They liked the opportunity to do the units one by one, or unit by unit and the fact that the requirements of the assessment were transparent.

> "With unit standards you do it as you go along. It's a lot easier to cope with" (ITP student).

This was important, actually knowing what would be in the test, rather than being tricked or surprised. In particular they liked learning about the topic first, getting 'all the knowledge' and covering everything that would then be in the assessment. This gave them confidence in knowing that they would do okay. This worked well for these learners and made it easier for them. It was also helpful to be able to resit if necessary soon after results had come out. That gave them opportunity to learn from their mistakes.

They commented on the sense of progression. You learn something, sit the assessment, and then move on to the next thing. One student said;

> "I'm remembering things better because I'm doing it virtually straight after I've learned it" (ITP student).

A PTE student echoed the same sentiment. She said you,

> "learn something and then get assessed for it and then you learn something else and get assessed. Not trying to scramble everything."

This was very important, being able to be assessed soon after the topic had been covered, while it was 'still fresh.' This was also echoed in the sentiment 'doing it as we go along.' Another student said it felt like there wasn't so much that had to be learnt in one go. The chunks of learning were manageable.

Relaxed, informal environment

They also liked the relaxed atmosphere and tutors who explained exactly what was expected of them. The majority of the learners interviewed liked the way the tutors were helpful and able to give them information, which made it easier for them to understand what was expected of them. There were no surprises when it came to the assessment. Being able to have a second chance and learn from mistakes was seen as a good thing.

They felt that working in a friendly relaxed environment was also a plus. Some of the PTE students liked the small friendly room that they were studying in.

"Assessment is like normal work, a relaxed environment"(ITP student).

This student saw unit standards as just part of the normal routine of classroom activities. It was particularly helpful to be able to ask the tutor for assistance along the way, or if an instruction seemed confusing. Some of the students stated that that had not been so possible in the secondary school system where assessment was a more formal process.

Layout of Assessment

The setting out of the assessment was important. A number of students commented on the layout of the assessments. They liked the way they were set out, easy to follow, rather than lots of words crammed onto a page. The setting out of the assessment was key to helping them understand what was expected of them.

Group contribution

They like the fact that ideas were shared in the group. This group effort was particularly useful as ideas could be explored together, and 'everyone had input.' In some cases the assessment had been done together with the group. When clarifying this in the focused group conversation the students explained that they like exploring all the possible answers on a whiteboard, or in a discussion. This then helped them to know they were 'on task' and able to complete the assessment. One student (ITP) complained in her interview about the tutor helping them. She felt she could do the assessment on her own and didn't like to think that others were getting some help.

Assessment when learner is ready (at own pace)

The opportunity to be assessed when they (and the tutor) felt they were ready was seen as very positive. This absence of pressure made them feel less anxious and some of the interviewees compared this with school exams where they had felt they were being

watched or being compared against others and made to feel like they were 'dumb.' One of the biggest positive features came from one of the PTEs where students were assessed as and when they were ready. This took the pressure off and helped the learner to feel the confidence that, 'they can do it!' and that they can't really fail.

They liked being able to do it at their own pace and being able to take their time without any pressure. In some cases they could take as long as they needed to complete the assessment.

> "Teachers lecture and they say you've got an hour to do it. Here you do it at your own pace" (PTE 2 student).
>
> " I always seem to take a bit longer and do extra work. And here we can do it in our own time. She hasn't put pressure on to assess us altogether. We can cruise along at our own pace" (PTE 1 student).

Negatives about Units

When asked what wasn't working well about unit standards the only negative was around the confusing wording (as distinct from layout) of some of the assessments. The words used in the assessment were often different to the ones they had learned and this seemed to 'throw' them and make them lose confidence.

The students in this study all made similar comments which included;

> "When it's a bit of a surprise; some of the wording and how they were set out" (PTE2 young student).
>
> "Being given the answer; sometimes the writing, the questions are worded funny, hard to understand; questions are confusing; sometimes a bit fast" (ITP young student).
>
> "Wording. Just not used to it. Could be more simplistic; sometimes people like me find it difficult to read and understand questions fully; assessment is written different to how you've learned it" (PTE1student).

> "Just doesn't make sense. The way it's laid out, the way they say it" (ITP young student).

These comments from many of the students interviewed emphasised the difficulty they had in interpreting the questions. They had an expectation that the assessment questions would be similar to or the same as the practice worksheets. Sometimes the language used was just too complicated.

Effect on Learning

The participants found it difficult to answer the question about whether unit standards had impacted on their learning. They hadn't ever considered that assessment might be a motivating, (or demotivating), factor so it caused some considered moments as they pondered on whether unit standards had impacted on their learning and in what way. However one student did say that it helped 'push her buttons' so that she could go home and say to her family, 'Oh, I passed another assessment today.' This made her feel good and encouraged her to continue with her course.

Completing the units motivated students to get through the course, or through the year. One student (ITP) said it made you want to learn more. She felt that the assessments helped you to know where you were going and what you still needed to learn. One mature female PTE student said;

> "Well for me if I got a job straight after the course I'd go straight for the job. I'm only doing the training to get a job."

Another male PTE student said;

> "At this stage I couldn't honestly say. I don't know where I'm going myself at the moment."

Another female mature PTE student stated;

> "I always like learning, always done part time courses. I'm really keen to get myself a job through these qualifications if I can if possible, but..."

They liked having a list of units that they were going to study throughout the course and then being able to tick them off as they completed them. This felt satisfying. They felt that unit standards were fair in that they were well prepared for their assessment. They get told what to expect and how to prepare.

Figure 5: Students' Experiences of Unit Standards

Interviewees	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
Find units easy	●				●				●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●		●
Like being assessed straight after/ fresh in mind				●	●	●	●		●		●								
Like doing each unit separately	●	●							●		●		●						
Better than other ways of assessing	●				●		●	●	●			●		●					
Not working well i.e. wording		●	●					●											
Do at own pace		●	●	●	●	●				●	●	●		●	●				

Figure 5 reveals the extent to which participants agreed on certain themes. 11 (58%) of the participants used the word 'easy' or 'easier' to describe unit standard assessments. For many this was linked to the positive relationship with their tutor, the relaxed pace of learning and the opportunity to redo the assessment soon after if they got it wrong. They liked knowing what it was they were being assessed on. Six (32%) respondents stated that they liked being assessed straight after having studied a topic, while it was still fresh. Ten (53%) said they liked being assessed when they were ready, rather than the pressure of doing it at the same time as the rest of the class. Seven (37%) preferred unit standard assessment to any previous assessments that they had experienced.

Assessment Methods

These students were experiencing a variety of assessment methods. They included written tests, role plays, practical demonstrations, posters, team activities, group discussions and oral presentations. They enjoyed this variety. When asked, during the focused group conversation, how they felt about not getting a grade, the responses were interesting. In one focused group conversation two of the students said that they thought the **'C'** that their tutor was giving them was a grade.

> "The (tutor) always writes 'C' for complete and when I first started I thought it was 'C' for a grade and I thought "shit", she keeps giving me 'C's!" (PTE1 student)

They had mixed feelings about getting a grade. Some of them felt that getting a 'Complete' was fine the way it was.

> "Yeh, you know what you have to do, and you set about doing it" (PTE1 student).

They liked everyone being equal and not one student above another. The young students on the ITP Youth Training programme felt that getting grades might make,

> "you feel like you're not doing the work properly 'cause others have got higher grades" (ITP student).

One young man said that he had felt 'stupid' at school and that it was different at the ITP as you could keep it to yourself if you didn't 'complete' the first time. Only one young student felt that she would like to get grades (the same one above who thought 'C' was low). She enjoyed knowing that she could achieve an A. She wasn't motivated by the complete/incomplete result key.

Role of Tutor

Written and verbal feedback from the tutor were seen as important; however in many cases students only received a 'ticked box' or a 'C' for 'Complete.' The comment boxes were seen as a way of getting feedback. The verbal encouragement from their tutor was very important in keeping them motivated and on track. One of the focused group conversations was about a previous tutor that they had had who had not been approachable. They felt this had had a detrimental effect on their learning as they hadn't been able to freely ask him questions.

The tutor was identified as very crucial. It was important to be able to ask the tutor questions. This was commented on as being a bit frightening at first and then when they realised they could do it, it was helpful. They said that sometimes it just helps to get the tutor to rephrase the question. Tutors are good at explaining what words mean. One student explained it as each course having its own language and a tutor's role is to make it easy for the student to learn.

> "At the end of the day it's about having a tutor that's approachable and that can understand you and they know what's going on" (ITP student).
>
> "Yes, if your tutor wasn't approachable and wasn't helpful it would really affect the way you worked. You just wouldn't really be able to learn. Not by yourself. If you had no idea what was going on. The tutors here are really nice" (PTE1 student).
>
> "If we don't like the tutor we wouldn't listen and we wouldn't learn anything" (PTE1 student).
>
> "Very important especially if we don't understand how it's written" (ITP student).

Summary

This chapter presents the results of the individual interviews carried out with 19 foundation learners studying at three learning institutes. It highlights the key findings as presented by the interviewees. It also presents the findings from the three focused group

conversations. Key themes emerging are that units are easy, that learners like being able to be assessed topic by topic (formative), the importance of the role of the tutor, having a relaxed informal learning environment, the ability to learn at students own pace, the pathway from unit standards to employment, and the need for the assessments to be transparent and explained clearly.

Chapter 6 discusses these findings and compares them with the literature that has been reviewed.

CHAPTER 6

Discussion

An Evaluation of Foundation Learners' Experiences of Unit Standards

As outlined in the introduction, this study sought to find out how foundation learners felt about assessment, what role it played in their learning and whether they saw it as important or not. It then went on to explore their understanding of unit standards and to see how they were finding them. Finally it investigated whether they found unit standards helpful for them as learners. Had there been an impact on their learning? If so, in what way?

A review of the literature showed that less academically able secondary school students (Priestley, 1997), liked the way unit standards helped them achieve a qualification. The Skill NZ Report (1999) into longer term outcomes of TOPs students and the research carried out by Terrill (2000) into the PTE approach to the NQF were two other studies that influenced this research. I was also mindful of the work carried out by Wolf (1995) on competency based assessment, the chapter by Radnor et al. (in Hargreaves and Reynolds, 1989) on the British Certificate of Prevocational Education and the work carried out by O'Neill et al. (2004) on the reshaping of culture, knowledge and learning.

The first three chapters of this thesis explained the background to the development of unit standards and the place of foundation learning in a tertiary environment. The unit standard approach was explored, with arguments for and against. I looked at the way that industry has pervaded the classroom with most learners clearly keen to learn unit standards because they will lead them to a job. This new language of 'gaining credits' and 'completing units' has become the norm as today's learners take self direction to new levels of autonomy, preferring to learn only that which has credit value and opting to learn in many different settings.

My own experience of having 'lived through' and experienced the reforms that occurred in the tertiary sector was also influential. Questions were developed to evaluate how the target group were reacting to unit standards. Their responses were categorized into a number of themes which were explored in the previous chapter.

What can we learn from all this? How are foundation learners experiencing unit standards? Overall the experience is a positive one, but that positive experience has as much to do with the tutor as it has to do with the method of assessment. The learners like the idea of not being compared with others and having an opportunity to resit their assessment if they don't complete it the first time. However, like the Dr Seuss book, "Green Eggs and Ham", the platter being served up has already been decided. The famous children's book states; "Would you like them here or there? Would you like them in a house? Would you like them with a mouse?"(Seuss, 1960, pp.15, 19). Similarly unit standards are being offered in an ever increasing range of settings but the offering is one which sits within a prescribed national framework. Most of these learners are not aware of the wider political and economic agenda that is behind unit standards. They do not question the units that are available for them to study. They only know that the experience is a positive one. "I like Green Eggs and Ham, I do, I like them Sam I am" (p. 59). These students like units; they are finding them easy.

This discussion chapter will analyse the findings at various levels. First it will focus on the experience of the foundation learners in this study. After reflecting on their experience it will take a step back and look beyond the 'dance floor' to the wider 'community' within which this experience is taking place. The focus will be on the political and educational consequences of allowing a national curricular, strongly influenced by industry, to take precedence. What is the impact on our most vulnerable learners, those at the foundation levels of tertiary education?

Appealing Features

There are features of the unit standard environment that really appeal to learners. They are:

- learning a topic and then being assessed on it while it was still fresh
- doing it at their own pace and being assessed when ready
- opportunity for a resit
- being clear about what the assessment is about
- friendly tutors who explain clearly what is expected and who help when needed
- the relaxed atmosphere
- that it can lead to a qualification and or job
- being able to work through it as a group (group learning and assessment)
- learning unit by unit
- that unit standards are easy

These characteristics mirror some of the research that has been done on the effects of assessment on motivation. According to Gipps (1995) studies have shown that students with high self-efficacy make more use of deep learning strategies, remain 'on task' even in the face of failure and are encouraged by clear goals and criteria. In contrast the effect of competition on motivation (central to a norm-referenced approach) can lead to severe discouragement for students who have not succeeded academically. It puts them in competition with their peers and segregates students into higher and lower achieving groups. This does not encourage intrinsic motivation.

> "It also tends to encourage students to attribute success and failure to ability, rather than effort, which is especially harmful for low achieving students" (Gipps,1995, p. 41).

The students in this study were pleased that they were not in an environment that made them feel 'stupid.' They liked everyone in the class being equal. There was also an opportunity to help each other through group interaction and sharing of ideas. Being assessed in an ongoing fashion was motivating for them.

Many of the participants in this research said that the unit standards are helping them gain qualifications and have a better chance of finding a job. They feel motivated by the fact that they can learn and gain credits. For some, previous academic experiences have been negative and they have felt like "dummies." In contrast, the unit standard learning environment, in private training establishments in particular, gave them an opportunity to learn at their own pace, rather than be compared with others. They can take their time and be assessed when they are ready, rather than have the teacher or institute breathing down their neck.

Market-led Model

The students sense that the units would lead them to a job or a qualification mirror the sentiments of critics such as Singh-Morris (1997), who saw the NQF as being based on a marketised conception of education. These students talk about the units leading them to employment. They understand unit standards to be a qualification of sorts leading to employment. This industry focus highlights the success of the proponents of unit standards who saw the Framework as encompassing the skills and knowledge needed for employment and living in today's fast changing world (NZQA, 1992).

The Framework has introduced a new language into the curriculum and this language is now being used by students and tutors alike. Words such as 'deliver', 'packages', and 'buy in' conjure up market influences. These students are on a pathway to employment and they see a direct link between the qualification they are gaining and the workforce. Codd (1997) states that the new language of learning is having a "powerful effect on the educational practices and organisational cultures of our institutions of higher education. One of the strongest messages of the economic rationalism of the past ten years is that language can be a strategic instrument of social change" (p. 136). This research highlights the ease with which these learners are now using the 'new' language. Given that the majority of these students are enrolled in a TEC funded programme it's not too surprising that there is a focus on outcomes such as employment as that is one of the results that has to be reported on.

Ability to Succeed

Similar to Priestley's (1997) study these students believe that they can achieve a qualification; this type of assessment makes that possibility a reality. They like sitting the assessment while the topic is still fresh on their minds. This is the same response that NZQA (2005) got when carrying out a survey with 279 year 11, 12 and 13 students. The respondees also stated that they liked sitting the assessment straight after learning the unit. Internal assessments are seen as easier smaller chunks, able to be completed along the way rather than a huge assessment at the end of the year. For the participants in this study there is less chance that they will get 'muddled.' Some students said that the assessments were like normal class work. They didn't see them as daunting. Only one student wished that there were grades.

Some of the issues arising out of this is that students who learn small 'chunks' might have a tendency to memorise and surface learn in order to pass the unit. There could also be a loss of integration with the wider subject being studied. This could occur where both learner and tutor are focused on the unit only rather than the context within which it might sit. The limitations of this approach is that the learner is not encouraged to think or question or understand the bigger picture, only that bit which is going to be assessed. This is sometimes referred to as the reductionist approach. Zepke (2003) suggests that "Such renditions of learning are firmly planted in the plot of instrumental/operational knowledge" (Zepke, 2003, p. 202).

Units are Easy

The fact that so many of the respondents mentioned that they found units easy is worthy of further investigation. They find them easy because they get help from their tutor, they are assessed when they feel ready and sometimes they complete the unit as a group. Their fear of assessment has been allayed somewhat as they discover that units are a bit like 'normal work.'

Terrill (2000) also found that the students from the PTEs in her study perceived that units were easy. She thought that perhaps this was because of "careful course planning by

their tutors designed to build student confidence" (p. 195). Smaller classes and tutor assistance are helping these students get through the units. These students had previously feared assessment but were now finding it 'quite easy'. The encouragement from their tutor and the increase in their own self-confidence were contributing factors. This matches Priestley's 1997 study that unit standards appealed to disadvantaged students as it made them feel that qualifications were accessible. They also liked being able to resit the assessment and this had been identified by Crooks (1988) as a positive feature of competency-based assessment. An area for further investigation would be how much help are learners getting in order to pass the unit?

Lack of Grades

The majority of students in this study preferred not to have grades. This supports Terrill's (2001) findings in which the PTE tutors with industry backgrounds felt that the focus was on whether the learner reached the standard required rather than developed levels of achievement in relation to others (as in norm-referenced assessment). Previously many of these students had failed or received low grades, and that had left them with a negative feeling. Standards-based assessment appealed because the learner did not feel like they were being compared to others. This was especially true of those learners who were studying in a self-directed fashion at an individual pace. Only they and the tutor needed to know if they had met the specified criteria or not. One of the young ITP males liked the fact that only he and the tutor needed to know whether he had 'passed' or not.

Narrowing of Curriculum

Codd's (1995) concern that the Framework would lead to a narrowing of the curriculum into lots of specific learning outcomes and therefore a narrowing of content and assessment does seem to be warranted. The learners in this study were tending to learn units; they were learning what needed to be known in order to comfortably pass the test. They wanted to know what it was that they needed to know in order to complete the unit. Goh's (2005) criticism that they might not know or understand what they are doing and may simply do it by rote is less easy to analyse. In favour of his criticism is the fact that

many of these learners got distracted by the actual assessment being different from what they had learned. They had a linear approach to their learning and expected that the assessment would look similar to what they had been practising.

In opposition to this view of Goh's is the fact that these students were being given opportunities to practise before they sat their assessments and the opportunity for them to learn in groups seemed to help their understanding of the units. However if units had to be completed within certain time frames then the learning was more likely to be shallow. Many of these interviewees valued the opportunity to learn at their own pace. This took the pressure off them.

The curriculum is also being narrowed to a unit by unit level as providers offer a flexi entry exit environment. Tutors are working with learners who have come into the programme at different times and sometimes at different levels. Students are therefore working through exercises at their own pace and then sitting the unit assessment when they are ready. This can be very challenging for a tutor who might wish to teach a topic when the members of the class are at different stages of the curriculum. According to Crooks (1988) however, this is an ideal situation because the learning is individualised and the competitiveness is reduced.

Learning Units

Roberts (1997) was concerned about breaking learning down into units which would then mean that we lost sight of the big picture. He saw this as a simplistic model of learning as it assumes that learners only learn what is explicitly taught. This concern has become a reality with most of these learners in this study learning unit by unit. These interviewees argued that they liked this approach; they found it less confusing as they weren't trying to learn too many different things at once. 'Adam' and 'Karen', who are TO tutors (in Bensemann, 2001) see units as the

> "flavour of the moment and there's good things about it, but there's a down side-it's not a very holistic way of teaching with set performance

> criteria. It narrows, it forces you....a lot of our outcomes are meant to be unit focused" (p. 139).

They felt that there was a tendency to teach within the constraints of the unit prescription rather than considering the holistic needs of the learner. This was similar to comments made by teaching staff in Barrer's (2001) study and reinforced by the learners in this study.

One of the dangers in seeing learning as a series of units that have to be completed is that not only do tutors fall into the trap of teaching to the unit, but the learners themselves think of learning as 'getting through the units.' This makes learning seem easy as all the material is made available to guide the learner down the 'right' pathway toward a qualification which will then lead to a job. It does raise the question as to who decided that this was the 'right' pathway (whose agenda?). What also seems to be missing is the dynamic of a varied and multi faceted approach. Providers in this study are concentrating on getting their learners through unit standards to give them the skills to enter the workforce or a particular chosen vocation. These learners found it difficult to comment on the effect that units had on their learning. They had never really thought about possible impacts that unit standards might have on their learning. They could see the pathway ahead but couldn't conceptualise the immediate impact. Where was the spontaneity of learning for learning's sake? The tutors play an important role in creating the environment that encourages and helps these learners to get through the unit standards. They can also play an important role in helping them learn how to learn.

Transparency of Unit Standards

Unit standards are a form of competency based assessment which appeal to reformists who see units as opening up opportunities for a wider range of learners to succeed and gain qualifications. The transparency of the units, the chance for a resit are all seen as individualising the learning and lessening the competitiveness between learners (Crooks, 1995). His sentiments were reflected in the experience of these interviewees who like knowing what they are being assessed against and like being assessed when they are

ready. This was a strong point made by the participants, particularly from the students of one of the PTEs where the learners in a level 2 computing class were working individually through the unit standards.

This is similar to what Priestley (1997) and Terrill (2000) discovered. Unit standards helped students to know what was expected of them in their subject area. They liked this transparency. Terrill felt this could be explained by the fact that these students tend to have a close relationship with their tutor who 'spells' things out for them. That matches the findings in this study; learners liked knowing what was going to be in the assessment and felt they could ask their tutor to explain if necessary, and that was really important. The study by Torrance (2004) in the UK of post 16year olds also emphasised the advantage for less confident learners of having clear and explicit learning objectives.

Importance of Tutor

It is my belief, that it's the unique relationship between the learner and the teacher, which shapes the learning and helps motivate the student to continue down their own learning pathway. The findings reinforce that view. Learners spoke of the importance of the tutor being approachable and able to explain what things mean. They liked tutors who can put words into a simpler language. This matches the findings of Bensemann's 2001 study of TO tutors which found that it was important to "establish a positive adult learning environment" (Bensemann, 2001, p. 157). It was also important for tutors to be open as people and to share their own learning journey. The students in this study generally felt supported and liked by their tutors and this was making a difference.

Cooperative Learning

Crooks (1988, 1995) argues that we should encourage cooperative learning approaches, which reduces the burden of failure on individual students. Performance feedback should also emphasise skills achieved, rather than comparing with others. This matches the comments from some of the interviewees that they like learning the units and completing some of the assessment tasks as a group. Leach (2003) talks about group assessment going hand in hand with group work and discussion strategies. If we are encouraging

students to work in groups then we should explore ways that they can be assessed in groups. This view is in opposition to the Western view that learning should be individualistic and that we should be careful that less able individuals are awarded qualifications they have not earned. At this foundation level being able to brainstorm the possible answers together as a group was seen as highly desirable. It had a positive effect on their learning and helped them understand better what was expected. This in turn has the potential to motivate them on to higher learning, particularly in an environment where they might feel supported.

Feedback

The interviewees also appreciated getting feedback from their tutors concerning their progress. Surprisingly the students in this study were not receiving much written feedback except for the ticked boxes and the 'C' for complete. There is potential for these students to feel even more motivated with more explicit feedback from tutors (Nixon, 2006; Zepke et al., 2005; Torrance, 2004). The fact that they were gaining credits toward a qualification was seen as very positive. This also matched Priestley's (1997) findings that lower level achievers in secondary schools liked the way unit standards gave them a chance to achieve a qualification. There could be opportunity to take learning to another level by identifying specific learning needs of each learner and setting in place learning pathways in addition to the units being worked through. The emphasis on units as the only pathway has reduced the opportunity for other successes to be celebrated and perhaps for other avenues to be explored?

Crooks (1995) emphasises how students can be motivated by assessment and one of the ways is through feedback. Tutors need to learn the skills of giving constructive feedback that helps the learner identify what they are doing well and what needs further explanation. "Be specific about what can be improved. Invite learners to be specific in their self-assessments and in the feedback they give each other. Check that learners understand what they must do to improve and then provide the opportunity to do so (Nugent, 2003, p. 83).

Knowledge vs Skill Acquisition

The study by Radnor et al. (in Hargreaves and Reynolds, 1989) is of interest in this discussion as they have highlighted how the Certificate in Prevocational Education (CPVE) was integrated into the British secondary school system as an alternative to the academic programme. The emphasis was on integrating the world of work into the school curriculum. "Academic knowledge, for its own sake, is not encouraged" (p. 108). There was a shift from knowledge to skills, from strong boundaries to weak boundaries between subjects and there was a change in the pedagogical approach. New concepts emerged such as negotiated, active, and experiential learning. According to Radnor et al., this shift in the balance of power put the learner more in control. Students were encouraged to be more involved in decisions about their own learning. Assessment changed from exams to records of achievement. From a language of grades and marks it became one of abilities, skills and attitudes.

This is similar to what the interviewees in this study are experiencing. They also complete credits that are recorded on a National Record of Achievement. They are being put in the 'driver's seat' and can choose or negotiate when they will be assessed. The focus on meeting individual needs is reflected in the way that many of the students are choosing or being encouraged to work at their own pace. Similarly they are not being encouraged to study academic knowledge; the focus is on skill acquisition. According to Findsen (2003, p. 187), using some of Codd's (1997) ideas,

> "there is a political struggle between two opposing views of teaching. Those who accept the reforms he labels as 'technocratic-reductionist' with respect to their view of teaching. From this perspective, teaching is treated as producing specific learning outcomes in an administrative context of 'efficient management' where the teacher is viewed as a 'skilled technician' .....On the other hand, from a 'professional contextualist' perspective, the goal of teaching is to produce a person with diverse human capabilities in an administrative context of professional leadership' where the teacher is seen as a 'reflective practioner.'"

Tutors working within the unit standard environment are constrained by the nit-picky (reductionist) nature of the specific performance criteria. It can be easy to fall in to the trap of teaching the units. Tutors, even against their wishes (Barrer, 2001), are becoming more like 'skilled technicians' as they teach and assess units, rather than encourage and foster the broad range of human capabilities. There needs to be a shift away from units as the main focus of courses. Unit standards are assessments not curriculum.

Knowledge of units

In general, the question that I asked, about what they thought a unit standard was, was answered from a narrow perspective. They did not understand or compare with other modes of assessment. Students were familiar with unit standard workbooks and had experienced working through a unit standard, but the wider picture of where the units fitted in the big scheme of things was more difficult for them to answer. They had accepted this form of assessment as working for them and were not really interested in thinking of other alternatives. Those older students, that could remember their school experience, did say that they thought it was a better method and that they were having a more positive experience. This group of learners lack the understanding at a deeper level of the reforms that have occurred over the last 15 years (O'Neill et al., 2004).

Comparisons between PTE and ITPs

There seems to be a difference in the way unit standards are offered in PTEs compared to ITPs. In general ITPs have incorporated unit standards into their courses and programmes. They offer national qualifications, the same as PTEs but students are completing 'courses' or modules as opposed to units. The PTEs that I visited offered national qualifications but there was more flexibility for students to study unit by unit and at a slower pace. One PTE allowed students to work individually at their own pace through a selection of unit standards that lead to the required national qualification. This was stressed as important by Crooks (1988) who praised individual learning as helping create a less competitive environment and thereby focusing more on student's progress

and learning. Flexible entry/exit meant that new students could come into the programme at any time. Similarly the other PTE allowed students to be assessed as and when they were ready, although there were times when students were assessed as a group.

The ITP offered more flexibility in the level one programme as students were being enrolled throughout the year, so although there was group work, some students were able to work away at their own pace. The level three programmes however were more controlled and the week was broken up into timetabled topic areas. For example a student could be learning word processing in the morning and then studying communication in the afternoon. This contrasted markedly with one of the PTEs involved in the research which allowed students to work through in a unit by unit approach. For example the students in a computer learning environment at one PTE were all working through different packages of self paced unit standard material. These were available in boxes in the classroom and learners were working individually on different learning material based on each unit.

Field notes gave me another insight worthy of mentioning. The tutors at the PTEs were happy to discuss informally with me their enthusiasm for unit standards. They felt they were really good and that they gave students a greater opportunity to succeed and complete qualifications. They cited their own negative experiences as learners and how they preferred unit standards themselves rather than the more traditional forms of assessment. They were very positive about the results. In contrast Terrill (2000) found that the tutors with a secondary or polytechnic background expressed concerns about the inability of the unit standards-based assessment, with its provision for reassessment, to perform the same selection and ranking purposes as norm-referenced assessment. These findings are similar to those which I observed during the field work stage; PTE tutors were generally more enthusiastic about unit standards than ITP tutors. They saw them as strongly motivating for this group of learners, giving people a chance to succeed, where previously they may have struggled.

Wording of Unit Standards

The main negative surrounding unit standards are around the wording and language used in the assessments. This compares positively with Terrell's (2000) findings. Her study of several PTEs in the Auckland area uncovered that many of the learners found the unit standards confusing. She recommended that the "writers of unit standards need to pay careful attention to vocabulary and sentence structure....Ideally, students would not need extensive explanations by teachers in order to understand unit standard requirements" (p. 202). Terrill noted that tutors, in all three PTEs that she studied, had expressed problems with the wording and vocabulary of unit standards. They had found that they needed to explain to their students exactly what was expected of them during the assessment. This was similar to the experience of these students. The tutor plays a key role in interpreting the requirements of the unit and putting it into user friendly language. Unit standards were never meant to be the assessment itself. It was always meant to be that providers designed the assessment making sure the elements had been demonstrated to the required standard. It could be that some providers are not translating the unit into user friendly language.

Summary

The experience of these learners matches the intent of the framework reformists. They are having a positive experience and feeling that unit standards are leading to a qualification and employment. At a deeper level there is a lack of understanding of the relevance of unit standards and their place in education today. They weren't able to critique the impact that units had had on their learning; they could however comment on the way the acquisition of credits had been a motivating influence.

Chapter seven offers some recommendations to foundation educators.

CHAPTER 7

Recommendations

There are a number of key recommendations that could prove helpful to educators working with foundation learners in a tertiary institute. These recommendations will also be useful to the government departments and agencies that are working in the area of foundation learning, from policy makers, through to tertiary providers.

The key role of teacher remains paramount. The professionalism of teachers should be recognised and the intent of serving the needs of their group of learners should be prioritised and supported. Foundation learners have the least power to bring about or influence change. They are very accepting of modes of delivery and methods of assessment. Therefore it is important that teachers empower foundation learners and give them more than 'skill acquisition.' They should also equip them with the knowledge and values that will help them live a full and balanced life.

The following recommendations may help with that process.

1. Explain to all foundation learners what unit standards are. Let them know that there are different types of assessment and unit standards are just one way of being assessed. Encourage some discussion on this. Students should understand that this is an assessment method. Explore and use other methods of assessment as well. If these learners are to be encouraged to move on to higher level learning they need to understand that they will encounter different assessment methods. Teach a topic rather than a 'unit'.

2. Establish a positive and relaxed learning environment. Employ experienced and qualified tutors who can engage the learners and who are good communicators. Tutors should encourage students to ask questions; encourage deep learning (as opposed to surface, reductionist learning); create an environment where curiosity and lateral thinking is encouraged. ITPs, with their tendency to have more classroom based contexts, can

learn from the PTE learning environment where learners and tutors are more closely connected and the learning space is more informal.

3. Find opportunities for group interaction, sharing and exploring of the topic together. Encourage relationships between learners. Schedule times when the whole class can come together to discuss and evaluate something that has been learnt previously.

4. Consider a topic by topic, sequential approach to teaching. Avoid muddling foundation learners with too many different topics at a time. Be wary of the broader constraints of completing the 'programme' within a certain time frame. Foundation learners need to feel that they have time to learn at their own pace.

5. Unit standards have acquired a tick box mentality. Reinforce the 'tick box' and 'C' for 'complete' by providing more explicit feedback, both verbal and written, about what the learner is doing well and suggestions for improvement. Do this on a regular basis. Students who are not receiving grades need to hear and see what they are doing well and what areas they need to improve on. Teaching staff may need professional guidance in giving constructive feedback.

6. Write unit standard assessments in a user-friendly language. Any obscurity in the formal unit wording should be avoided and replaced with suitable and appropriate wording that is better understood by foundation learners. Moderation should be looking to see that assessments that are in written form clearly articulate what is expected and if possible allow a longer time frame for completion.

7. Further research could be done into investigating the value of collaborative methods and group assessment for foundation learners. Self assessment encourages learners to evaluate and critique their own work and to become more independent. Group assessment at this level gives these learners confidence that they are on the right track.

8. In order to progress academically students need to be encouraged to question, critique and reflect on what they are learning and where it is taking them. Educational institutes need to make time for this to happen. Create opportunities to look at the 'big picture' and raise awareness that unit standards are only one part of the jigsaw puzzle.

9. As the government works toward building up the knowledge and skill level of all New Zealanders, as per the development of the learning progression papers, the new emerging foundation qualification will need to balance industry goals with educational aspirations. Effort needs to be made to encourage the development of cognitive and affective skills which will give foundation learners a greater chance of surviving the demands of the 21st century.

Future research could:

1. Examine foundation learner experiences using a larger sample across regions (similar to the research being carried out in secondary schools).

2. Investigate whether foundation learners are being constrained by the NZQA credit environment.

3. Investigate the degree to which tutors are 'helping' learners complete their credits at the foundation level.

4. Explore the use of collaborative and group assessment at the foundation level.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

References

Alfred, D. (1987). Albert Mansbridge. In P. Jarvis. (ed). *Twentieth Century Thinkers in Adult Education.* London: Croom Helm.

Anderson, G. (1990). *Fundamental Educational Research.* Bristol: The Falmer Press.

Apple, M. W. (2001). *Educating the "Right" Way.* New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

Arnold, S. (1997). One size doesn't fit all: what needs to be done to the National Qualifications Framework. *New Zealand Education Review.* May 14, p. 10.

Barker, A. (1995). Standards-based assessment: the vision and broader factors. In R. Peddie & B. Tuck (Eds.). *Setting the Standards: the Assessment of Competence in National Qualifications* (pp15-29). Palmerston North: The Dunmore Press.

Barrer, A. (2001). *Unit Standards. Diamond Necklace or Dog Collar?* Massey University Research Project, Unpublished.

Barry, A. (1984). *Aspects of Employment Training Programmes for Disadvantage Youth: A Comparative Approach (thesis).* Hamilton: Department Sociology, University of Waikato.

Baskett, P. (1998). Building on Skills for Tomorrow's Workforce. *NZ Herald.* 2 Sept: A: 13; 24cm. Publications Ltd.

Beckford, N. (ed). 1995. Institutional Learning Programmes and Unit Standards. *Learn.* The magazine for training professionals. April: 4:24.

Benseman, J. (2001). *Making Learning Happen.* A research project sponsored by Skill New Zealand-Pukenga Aotearoa. Auckland, The University of Auckland.

Benseman, J., Sutton, A., and Lander, J. (2005). *Foundation Learning Project. Working in the light of evidence, as well as aspiration. A literature review of the best available evidence about effective adult literacy, numeracy and language teaching*. Phase 5 Report. Prepared for Ministry of Education. Auckland: The University of Auckland & Auckland UniServices Ltd.

Biggs, J. (2003). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University (2nd ed.).* The Society for Research into Higher Education. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Billinghurst, J. (1997). NZQA Policy Questionable. *The Daily News.* 29 March 1997, Edition; 6 Taranaki Newspapers.

Blaxter, L., Hughes, C., and Tight, M., (1998). *How to Research.* Buckingham: Open University Press.

Bogden, R.and Biklen, S. (1992). *Qualitative Research for Education.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Bredo, E. and Feinberg, W. (eds.) (1982). *Knowledge and Values in Social and Educational Research.* Philadelphia: Temple.

Bruner, J. (1966). *Toward a Theory of Instruction.* Cambridge Mass., Harvard Press.

Burke, J. W. (ed.) (1989). *Competency Based Education and Training.* Lewis: Falmer Press.

Callahan, R. E. (1962). *Education and the Cult of Efficiency.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Callender, C. (1992). *Will NVQs Work?* Evidence from the Construction Industry. IMS Report No. 228. University of Sussex: Employment Department/ Institute of Manpower Studies.

Candy, P.C. (1997). In Usher, R., Bryant, I., and Johnson, R. *Adult Education and the Postmodern Challenge: Learning Beyond the Limits.* London: Routledge.

Carr, W. and Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming Critical: Knowing Through Action Research.* Rev. ed. Geelong: Deakin University Press.

Carr, M., McGee, C., Jones, H., McKinley, E., Bell, B., Barr, H., and Simpson, T. (1999). *Strategic Research Initiative Literature Review. The Effects of Curricula and Assessment on Pedagogical Approaches and on Educational Outcomes.* Report to the Ministry of Education. University of Waikato.

Chamberlain, J. (1996). Framed! Has NZQA Hoodwinked a Nation? *North and South Magazine* Sep 1996; 126:112-122.

Codd, J., McAlpine, D., & Poskitt, J. (1995). Assessment Policies in New Zealand; Educational Reform or Political Agenda? In Peddie, R. and Tuck, B.(eds). *Setting the Standards.* Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, pp.32-54.

Codd, J.A. (1995, December). *NZQA and the Politics of Centralism.* Paper presented at

the Annual Conference of the NZ Association for Research in Education, Massey University: Palmerston North.

Codd, J. (1996). Higher Education and the Qualifications Framework. A question of Standards. *Delta Research,* 48(1) 57-66.

Codd, J. (1997). Knowledge, Qualifications and Higher Education: A Critical View. In M. Olssen & K. Mathews. (Eds.), *Education Policy in New Zealand: the 1990s and Beyond.* Palmerston North:n The Dunmore Press.

Collins, M. (1991). In Jarvis, J., Holford, J. and Griffin, C. *The Theory and Practice of Learning.* London: Kogan Page.

Cook, C., Cullen, J., Lawton, N., Little, S., Reid, M., and Ufton, K. (1997). 'Working within the New Zealand Qualifications Framework. Unit Standards: At what cost to education?' *Connections: A Journal for Teachers of Adults.* June 46: 60-71.

Creech, W. (1997). A Future Qualifications Policy for New Zealand: A Plan for the National Qualifications Framework. New Zealand Governments Green Paper.

Crooks, T.J. (1988). 'The Impact of Classroom Evaluation Practices on Students.' *Review of Educational Research,* 58,4.

Crooks, T.J. (1995). In Gipps, C.V. (1995). *Beyond Testing. Toward a theory of Educational Assessment.* The Falmer Press.

Dale, R. and Robertson, S. (1997). In Olssen, M. & Mathews, K. (eds). *Education Policy in New Zealand: the 1990s and beyond.* Palmerston North: The Dunmore Press.

Denzin, N.K. (1978). *The Research Act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods.* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (2003). *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Department of Education. (1986). *Learning and Achieving: second report of the Committee of Inquiry into Curriculum, Assessment and Qualifications in forms 5-7.* Wellington: Government Printer.

Department of Education. (1989). *Assessment for better learning: A Public Discussion Document*, Wellington, NZ, Government Printer.

Department of Labour. (1984). *Studies of Employment and Training Programmes.* Urban Research Associates.

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and Education,* New York: MacMillan.

Ellen, N. (1997). Unit Standards Receive Tick. *The Dominion.* 24 Feb 1997. Edition 2:13 Wellington Newspapers.

English, B. (2006). Students Continue to Pay for $15 million CPIT Scam. Wed. 15 March. 4.21pm Press release: New Zealand National Party.

Entwhistle, N., Skinner, D., Entwhistle, D., and Orr, S. (2000). Conceptions and Beliefs about 'good teaching': an Integration of Contrasting Research Areas. *Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia.* Vol. 19. No.1. pp5-26.

Findsen, B. (2003). In Zepke, N., Nugent, D and Leach, L.(eds). *Reflection to Transformation. A Self-Help Book for Teachers.* Dunmore Press.

Fitzsimons, P., & Peters, M. (1994). Human Capital Theory and the Industry Training Strategy in *New Zealand Education Policy.* 9(3), 245-266.

Flannery, D. D. (1994). "Changing Dominant Understandings of Adults as learners." in E. Hayes and S.A.J. Colin (eds.) *Confronting Racism and Sexism,* New Directions for Adults and Continuing Education, no.61.San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* New York: Herder and Herder.

Freire, P. (1971). To the Coordinator of a Culture Circle. *Convergence.* 4(1), 61-62.

Freire, P. (1994). *Pedagogy of Hope. Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* New York: The Continuum Publishing Company.

Gill, R. (1989). *Inventory of Labour Market Measures 1970-1989.* Department of Labour

Gipps, C.V. (1995). *Beyond Testing. Toward a theory of educational assessment.* The Falmer Press.

Goh, D. (2005). NCEA-Bane or Boon? In www.education.auckland.ac.nz/doclibrary/acepapers/Issue15/ACE_paper_7_Issue_15.doc_ retrieved 7 May 2006

Goodwill, G. (1999). The Impact of Unit Standards on Assessment and Workload in a Polytechnic Centre. *New Zealand Journal of Applied Computing and*

Information Technology. Vol 3. no.1; 31-34.

Grace, A.P. (2001). Using Queer Cultural studies To Transgress Adult Educational Space. In V. Sheard, & P.A. Sissel. (eds). *Making Space: Merging Theory and Practice in Adult Education.* Westport, Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey.

Hall, A. (1996). National Qualifications Framework in 1996 and Beyond. A Call for Reflection on the Nature of Outcomes-Based Education. *New Zealand Annual Review of Education,* 6, 156-166.

Hall, A. and Keown, P. (1996). The Cost of compliance: Unit Standards for Teacher Education in the light of Recent Experience in Secondary Schools. *Waikato Journal of Education,* 2, 127-143.

Hall, C. (2000). Reliability, Validity and Manageability? *New Zealand Education Review, July 21.*

Hargreaves, A. & Reynolds, D. (eds.) (1989). *Education Policies: Controversies and Critiques.* The Falmer Press.

Hawke, G. R. (1988). *Report of the Working Group on Post Compulsory Education and Training*, prepared for the Cabinet Social Equity Committee. Wellington: Government Printer.

Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture, Consequences, Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions, and Organizations across Nations.* Thousand Oaks CA: Sage Publications.

Hood, D. (1998). *Our Secondary Schools don't work anymore: Why and how New Zealand schooling must change for the 21st Century.* Auckland: Profile Books.

Irwin, M. (1994). *Curriculum, Assessment and Qualifications. An Evaluation of current reforms.* NZ Business Roundtable for the Education Forum.

Irwin, M., Elley, W., & Hall, C. (1995). *Unit Standards in the National Qualifications Framework.* Education Forum, Auckland, May.

Jarvis, J. (ed.) (1987). *Twentieth Century Thinkers in Adult Education.* London: Croom Helm.

Jarvis, P., Holford, A., and Griffin, C. (1998). *The Theory and Practice of Learning.* London: Stylus Publishing Inc.

Joblin, D. (1987). Cited in Alfred, D., Albert Mansbridge. In P. Jarvis, (ed). *Twentieth Century Thinkers in Adult Education.* London: Croom Helm.

Kelly, D. (1996). Education is too important to be messed around by ideas like these. *The Press,* 24 May: p11.

Kemmis, S. (1990). *The Action Research Reader.* (rev.ed). Geelong, Vic: Deakin University Press.

Kemmis, S. (1992). Qualitative Research and its public *Paper given to Economic and Social Research Council Conference,* Liverpool.

Kilgore, D.W. (2001). Critical and Postmodern Perspectives on Adult Learning. In S.B. Merriam. (ed).*The New Update on Adult Learning Theory.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Knowles, M. (1972). *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy vs Pedagogy.* New York: Association Press.

Lather, P. (1991). Research as Praxis. *Havard Educational Review.* 56(3): 257-277.

Leach, L. (2000). *Self-directed Learning: Theory and Practice*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Technology, Sydney.

Leach, L. (2003). In Zepke, N., Nugent, D. & Leach, L. (eds). *Reflection to Transformation. A Self Help Book for Teachers.* Palmerston North: Dunmore Press.

Learning for Life. *QA News.* Issue 34

Lee, G. and Hill, D. 'A Question of Relevance.' *Education Review.* Vol 11 No 32 August 18, 2006.

Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry.* London: Sage.

Lythe, D. (1995). *Internationalisation of Small and Medium Enterprises and Human Resource Development- a Progress Report on the New Zealand Experience.* Wellington: NZQA.

Lythe, D. (1998). *NZQA Education and Training in New Zealand-Towards a National Credit Accumulation and Transfer System.* Wellington: NZQA.

Marlborough Express, July 13, 2006.

Mason, J. (1997). *Qualitative Researching.* Sage Publications Ltd.

McIntyre, J. (1993). 'Research Paradigms and Adult Education.' *Studies in Continuing Education,* Vol. 15, No. 2.

McIntyre, J. (1996). 'Issues for Adult Education Researchers.' *Study Guide Research*

Perspectives and Paradigms. University of Technology Sydney, School of Education.

McKenzie, D. (1997). The Cult of Efficiency and Miseducation: Issues of Assessment in New Zealand Schools. In M. Olssen and K. Mathews, (Eds.), *Education Policy in New Zealand: the 1990s and Beyond.* Palmerston North: The Dunmore Press.

Merriam, S. & Caffarella, R. (1999). *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide.* (2nd ed). San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers.

Metze, J. (1984). *Learning and Teaching: He Tikanga Maori.* The Royal Society of New Zealand. Wellington.

Ministry of Education. (1989). *Learning for Life: Two.* Wellington: Author.

Ministry of Education. (1993). *Education for the 21st Century.* Wellington: Author.

Ministry of Education. (1997). The Green Paper. Wellington, Author.

Ministry of Education. (2001). *More than Words. The New Zealand adult literacy Strategy.* Wellington: Ministry of Education.

Ministry of Education. (2002). *Tertiary Education Strategy 2002-2007.* Wellington: Ministry of Education.

Ministry of Education. (2002). Te Aro Whakamua. Building Futures. The final report on the review of Training Opportunities and Youth Training.

Ministry of Education. (2003a). *The Adult ESOL Strategy.* Wellington: Ministry of Education.

Ministry of Education. (2003b). *Statement of Tertiary Education Priorities 2003/2004.* Wellington: Ministry of Education.

Ministry of Education. (2004). Tertiary Education Strategy Monitoring Report http://wiki.tertiary.govt.nz/~TESMon/MonitoringReport2004/ImplementationofFoundationEducationPolicy. Last modified 30 March 2005 5pm

Ministry of Education. (2005). *Key Competencies in Tertiary Education: Developing a New Zealand Framework Discussion Document.* Wellington.

Ministry of Education. (2006). The Foundation Learning Progressions Paper.

Ministry of Education. (2006a). The Impact of the NCEA on Student Motivation.

Morgan, D.L. (1997). *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research.* Second Edition. Sage

Publications, Inc.

New Zealand National Party. Press Release, tuesday 30 November, 2.29pm. http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PA0411/500634.htm retrieved 9 July 2006.

New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (1990). *Towards a National Qualifications Framework: General Principles and Directions.* Wellington: Author.

New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (1991a). *Designing the Framework.* Wellington: Author.

New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (1991b). *An Introduction to the Framework.* Wellington: Author.

New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (1992). *Consultation Package.* Wellington: Author.

New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (1994). *Policy Statement on Assessment within the Framework.* Wellington: New Zealand. Government Printer.

New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (1996a). *Learning and Assessment: A Guide to Assessment for the National Qualifications Framework- for Consultation and Comment.* Wellington: Author.

New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (1996b). *The NQF Quick Guide.* Wellington: Author.

New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (1998a). *National Qualifications Framework Statistics Update.* Wellington: Author.

New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (1998b). *Company Use: The National Qualifications Framework and the Workplace.* Wellington: Author.

New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (2000b). *National Qualifications Framework Statistics: Third 1999/2000 Quarterly Report.* Wellington: Author NZQA. (2002) *National Qualifications Framework Statistics*: quarterly report July to September 2002, unpublished Report, New Zealand Qualifications Authority.

New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (2005). *Best Practice Principles for the Assessment of Unit Standards.* Wellington: Author.

New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (2005). *Foundation Learning QA Consultation Document.* Wellington: Author.

www.nzqa.govt.nz/for-providers.**foundation**/docs/flqu-consultation.pdf retrieved 10/06/06.

New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (2006). *Survey of NCEA students.* Wellington: Author.

New Zealand Qualifications Authority. (2006a) www.nzqa.ac.nz retrieved 23/09/06

Nixon, M. (2006). 'Faster Approval of New Courses Needed.' *New Zealand Education Review.* April Vol 11, No. 14, 13-19.

Nixon, M. (2006a). 'Unit Standards may gain Merit and Excellence.' *New Zealand Education Review.* 7 July, Vol.11, No. 26.

Nixon, M. (2006b). 'Qualification Motivation.' *New Zealand Education Review* 14 July. Vol.11. No. 27

Nugent, D. (2004). Teaching for Learning. In Zepke, N., Nugent, D. and Leach, L. *Reflection to Transformation. A Self-Help Book for Teachers*. Dunmore Press.

Olssen, M., and Mathews, K. M. (eds.) (1997). *Education Policy in New Zealand: the 1990s and Beyond.* The Dunmore Press Ltd.

O'Neill, A., Clark, J. & Openshaw, R. (eds).(2004). *Reshaping Culture, Knowledge and Learning? Policy and Content in the New Zealand Curriculum Framework.* Palmerston North, Dunmore Press.

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). (2000). *Literacy in the Information age: Final Report of the International Adult Literacy Survey.* Statistics Canada: Downloaded from http://www.statcan.ca/english/freepub/89-566-XIE/about.htm Retrieved 10/06/06

Peddie, R. and Tuck, B. (eds). (1995). *Setting the Standards. The Assessment of Competence in National Qualifications.* Palmerston North:The Dunmore Press.

Peters, M. and Marshall, J. (1996). *Individualism and Community: Education and Social Policy in the Postmodern Condition.* London: The Falmer Press.

Peters, M. and Marshall, J. (2004). In O'Neill, A., Clark, J. and Openshaw, R. (eds). (2004). *Reshaping Culture, Knowledge and Learning?* Palmerston North: The Dunmore Press.

Philips, D. (2003). Lessons from New Zealand's National Qualifications Framework in

Journal of Education and Work, Vol. 16, No. 3, September 2003.

Philips, D. (2000). Curriculum and Assessment Policy in NZ: 10years of reforms. *NZ Educational Review,* 52, 143-193.

Priestley, M. (1997). A critical comparison of the English and New Zealand National Curriculum Models. Unpublished Masters Dissertation, University of Leeds School of Education.

Probine, M., & Fargher, F. (1987). *The Management, Funding and Organisation of Continuing Education and Training: Report of a Ministerial Working Party.* Wellington: Government Printer.

QA News. Lennox, B. (ed). August (2000). 'Ten Years On. A Framework Stocktake'. *QA News.* Issue 34. New Zealand Qualifications Authority. Wellington.

Reason, P. and Rowan, J. (eds). (1990). *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Roberts, P. (1997). A Critique of the NZQA Policy Reforms. In M. Olssen & K. Mathews, (eds.). *Education Policy in New Zealand: the 1990s and beyond.* The Dunmore Press.

Sargent, J. (1999). 'Giving Standards a Meaning.' *NZ Educational Review.* 9 July No.4 (10):7

Seuss, Dr. (1960). *Green Eggs and Ham.* HarperCollins Publisher.

Sherman, R. and Webb, R. (eds). (1998). *Qualitative Research in Education: Forms and Methods.* Lewes: Falmer Press.

Shor, I. (1993). Education is Politics: Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy. In McLaren P. & Leonard, P. (eds). (1993). *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter.* London: Routledge.

Singh-Morris, A. (1997). A Response to the Green Paper in *Access: Critical Perspectives on Cultural and Policy Studies in Education.* 16 (2), 65-73.

Silverman, D. (2000). *Doing Qualitative Research. A Practical Handbook.* Sage.

Skill New Zealand. (July, 1999). *Training Opportunities Research into Longer Term Outcomes. Summary and Case Studies.* AC Nielson for Skill NZ.

Skill New Zealand (2000). *Building a Future for Young People.* Wellington.

Smithers, A. (1997).What's Wrong with Unit Standards? *The Daily News.* Edition 1:6

Taranaki Newspapers Ltd.

Snook, I. (1995). Democracy and Education in a Monetrist Society. In *Educational Philosophy and Theory.* 27(1), 55-68.

Snook, I. (1996). Reflecting on the Rules of Enterprise, *Education Review,* 10 July.

Strachan, J. (2001). In Assessment in Change: Some Reflections on the Local and Independent background to the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA). *New Zealand Educational Review.* No.52, pp 143-153.

Sutton, A., Lander, J., & Benseman, J. (2003). *Foundation Learning in Aotearoa/New Zealand: mapping the nature and extent of provision.* Auckland: The University of Auckland & Auckland Uniservices Ltd.

Tennant, M. (1986). An Evaluation of Knowles 'theory of adult learning'. *International Journal of Life-long Education,* 5, 113-122.

Terrell, J. (2000). *The National Qualifications Framework in Private Training Establishments: A Patch of Evaluation in the Seamless System.* A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of MEd Admin at Massey University.

Torrance, H. (2004). *Do Summative Assessment and Testing have a positive or negative effect on post-16 learners?* Manchester. Metro: Learning and Skills Research Centre.

Waters, S. N. (1996). *The Vision for the National Qualifications Framework.* Wellington: NZQA.

Welton, M. (1987). Vivisecting the Nightingale: Reflections on Adult Education as an Object of Study. *Studies in the Education of Adults,* 19(1), 46-48.

Wolf, A. (1995). *Competence-based Assessment.* Open University Press.

Zepke, N. (1997). Student Centred Learning, Knowledge and the New Zealand Qualifications Framework. *NZ Journal of Adult Learning.* Issue 25 (2): 82-96.

Zepke, N., Nugent, D. & Leach, L. (eds). (2003). *Reflection to Transformation. A Self-Help Book for Teachers.* Dunmore Press.

Zepke, N. (2003). Teaching and Learning in the Global Village, in Zepke, N., Leach, L., & Leach, L. (eds). *Reflection to Transformation. A Self-Help Book for Teachers.* Palmerston North: Dunmore Press.

Zepke, N., Leach, L., Brandon, J., Chapman, J., Neutze, G., Rawlins P., and Scott, A. (2005). *Standards-Based Assessment in the Senior Secondary School. A Research Synthesis.* Massey University College of Education. NZQA http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/news/featuresandspeeches/docs/stds-based-assess-litreview.pdf retrieved 12 September 2006.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Letter of Approach to Provider Manager

4 April 2005

Dear XXXXX

This year I have enrolled in my Masters of Education (Adult Education) thesis through Massey University and I have decided to do some research in the area of unit standard assessment. I have an interest in this area as I have observed the process of integrating unit standards into programmes right from the beginning back in 1990! Several years ago I did a small research project within XXXXX investigating how teaching staff were finding the new 'units.' This led me to want to explore the area further by focusing on how students were experiencing it.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how foundation students are finding unit standard assessment. My definition of foundation students are those who are studying at levels 1-3 on the National Qualifications Framework and enrolled in a full time course. They may be Training Opportunities students but not necessarily. I am carrying out the field work with three different training providers.

I would like permission to carry out individual interviews and a focus group discussion with a group of six students studying at the XXXXXXXXXX. I thought that a good way to identify students would be to have the opportunity to talk to target group classes explaining my research and then invite them to put their names forward if they are willing to participate. From that list I would select six students representing a range of ages and gender balance.

The identity of the XXXXXXXXXXX would be kept confidential and a pseudonym would be used when writing up the thesis.

Please find enclosed a copy of an information sheet and consent form that outlines roles and responsibilities of myself as the researcher. It also states the name of my supervisor and clarifies what will happen to the data once the research is completed. Please fill in the consent form and return it to me by the end of May in the enclosed stamped envelope.

If you have any further questions don't hesitate to get in touch with me. I hope you will agree to allow students from the XXXXXXXXX to take part in this research.

Yours sincerely

Appendix B

Personal Data Sheet

Research Project
Anne Barrer
[redacted]

Participant Personal Data Sheet

Name:

Address:

Contact phone number:

Email:

Age: (Circle) 15-20, 21-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-65

Ethnicity: (Circle) NZ Maori, NZ European, Pasifika,
Other ( )

Thank you for your interest in my research project.

Appendix C

Consent Forms

Unit Standards and Foundation Learners

Participant Consent Form

This consent form will be held for a period of five years

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree/do not agree to the interview being audio taped.

I agree/do not agree to the Focus Group conversation being audio taped.

I agree to not disclose anything discussed in the Focus Group

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature: ..... **Date:** .....

Full Name – printed .....

Appendix D

Information Sheets

Information Sheet (for participants)

Unit Standards and Foundation Learners

Kia ora

My name is Anne Barrer and I am carrying out some research on unit standards. I have been interested in this area for the last 15 years ever since the New Zealand Qualifications Authority introduced this new form of assessment.

The way I plan to do this research is to invite 18 students from three different tertiary providers to take part in a short interview in which I will ask a few questions around the topic. This will be carried out privately with a tape recorder taping the interview so I can concentrate on what you are saying, rather than having to write everything down. Secondly you will meet with me and five other students from your institute and we will have a conversation about unit standards. This will take about 40 minutes. It will also be recorded. I think that six participants will be a good number for a discussion as it gives everyone a chance to contribute.

What happens after this is that the tapes are typed up into print form. You will then be able to look at the script and agree that it is accurate. I hope that you will then agree to allow me to use that information in my research project. These tapes and notes are kept for five years and then destroyed.

If I select you to take part in my research I will get in touch with you to negotiate a suitable date, time and venue to carry out the interview and focus group. You will also be able to contact me or my supervisor, at any stage if you have any concerns or questions.

The qualification I am completing is the Masters of Education (Adult Education) through Massey University.

Information Sheet (for Provider Manager)

Unit Standards and Foundation Learners

Kia ora

My name is Anne Barrer and I am interested in carrying out some research in the area of assessment. I am particularly interested in finding out students' views.

My research project is aimed at finding out how foundation learners in a tertiary environment are experiencing unit standard assessment. Over the last 15 years unit standards have replaced other forms of assessment in many foundation programmes offered at polytechnics and private training institutes. Whilst there has been some focus on how teachers and organisations incorporated units into the design of their courses, there has been little evidence of research into the effect on learners. My project aims to focus on the experience of the student who is participating in a foundation programme that assesses at level 1-3 on the National Qualifications Framework.

This is a qualitative research project involving participants from three different tertiary learning institutes. This research is the thesis topic for my Masters of Education (Adult Education) which I am completing through Massey University.

My contact details are:
Anne Barrer
Programme Coordinator
[redacted]

My Supervisor's details are:
Linda Leach
College of Education
Massey University, Wellington
L.J.Leach@massey.ac.nz
ph 04 801 5799ext 6947

1. Participant Recruitment

Recruitment for the project will be by invitation. I plan to approach three tertiary institutes and invite them to take part. Once approval is gained to proceed I would then like to meet with target group classes, briefly outline my project and invite interested students to take part. From that pool I plan to select six students from each institute, looking for gender balance and a range of ages from 16 -55years. I have decided on 18 participants as I believe that number will be sufficient to gain a range of diverse opinions without making the results unwieldy. Each focus group will have six participants which is a good number for a taped group conversation.

2. Project Procedures

Dates and times will be negotiated with selected participants. I will carry out the individual interviews first and then procede with the focus group conversations. For both methods I will use an audio tape recorder to guarantee careful and accurate recording of answers. This data will be analysed and transcribed into print form for use in my research report. Participants will get to see their transcribed notes and approve them for use. Tapes and transcribed notes will be kept for five years (in the Archives room at NMIT) and then disposed of.

3. Participant Involvement

Once selected to take part participants will be informed in writing of dates and times of interview and focus group meetings. The interview should take no longer than 20 minutes and the focus group conversation will take a further 45 minutes maximum. The interview and focus group will take place at a venue agreed upon between participant and researcher.

4. Participants' Rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- *decline to answer any particular question*
- *withdraw from the study after the initial interview*
- *ask any questions about the study at anytime during participation*
- *provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher*
- *be given access to a summary of the project funding when it is concluded*

I also understand that I have the right to ask for the audio tape to be turned off during the interview. You may contact the researcher or supervisor if you have any questions about the progress.

5. Compulsory Statements

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher named above is responsible for the ethical conduct of the research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher, please contact Professor Silvia Rumball, Assistant to the vice chancellor (Ethics and equity), telephone 06350 5249, email humanethicspn@massey.ac.nz

My contact details are:

Anne Barrer

[redacted]

My Supervisor's details are:

Linda Leach

College of Education

[redacted]

ph 04801 5799 ext 6947

The following statements outline your rights as a participant in my research.

6. Participant's Rights

You don't have to accept this invitation. If you decide to take part, you have the right to:

- *not answer any of the questions I ask you*
- *leave the study after the first interview*
- *ask any questions about the study at anytime*
- *give information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher*
- *be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded*

You can also ask for the audio tape to be turned off at any stage during the interview. You may contact me or the supervisor if you have any questions about how things are going.

Name: *Date:*

Signature:

Appendix E

Interview Questions

Unit Standards and Foundation Learners

Interview Questions

Name:_____ Date:_____

1. How do you feel about being assessed/ tested?

2. Tell me about your experiences of assessment at (name of institute)? What is your understanding of it?

3. What do you think a unit standard is?

4. How are you finding the assessment process on your current course? (ie the way you are assessed)

5. What is working well for you about the way you are being assessed at the moment?

6. Is there anything not working so well about the way you are being assessed? If not, why not? How could it be improved?

7. How does your current experience of unit standard assessment compare to previous experiences of other types of assessment?

8. What effect does assessment have on your learning? Can you give any examples?

Thank you for your time.

Appendix F

Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Questions

Ground rules (see separate sheet on ground rules)

1. How important do you think assessment is?
2. What things do you consider when you know you are going to be assessed?
3. Some of you said in your interviews that unit standard assessment is 'easy.' What do you mean by that?
4. Are unit standard assessments fair? What has been your experience?
5. How often do you get verbal or written feedback re how you are going with your assessments? How important is that for you?
6. Some of you have said that you are assessed when you are ready or when your tutor thinks you are ready? How well does that system work?
7. Some of you identified that the wording in the assessments can be confusing. What do you need to make the wording less confusing?
8. Do you feel that unit standards cover the topics that you are studying fully enough?
9. Unit standard assessments are usually marked as Pass or Not Passed or Complete and Incomplete. What do you like about passed/ not passed? What don't you like about passed/not passed? What would you like/not like about being graded?
10. How important is the tutor in helping you complete your unit standards?
11. How many of you are thinking about going on to further learning?
12. What are the various methods that are used to assess you? How do you find that?
13. Would you do a course with this provider that doesn't have unit standards in it? Would it matter to you?

Appendix G

Focus Group Ground Rules

FOCUS GROUP GROUND RULES

This focus group discussion is designed to help me find out how you are experiencing unit standards in the current course you are on or that you have recently completed.

- Respect others contributions. Allow opportunity for all group members to speak.
- What you think and feel about the topic may change as the discussion progresses. That's ok.
- You may agree or disagree with others in the group. Don't worry about that. Just make sure you have your say and try to be clear and specific about what you are saying. You may want to include examples.
- No putdowns, no gossip.
- Relax and enjoy

Appendix H

Confidentiality Form

[Print on Massey University departmental letterhead]
[Logo, name and address of Department/School/Institute/Section]

Unit Standards and Foundation Learners

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

I ..... (Full Name - printed)

agree to keep confidential all information concerning the project

Unit Standards and Foundation Learners .....

I will not retain or copy any information involving the project.

Signature: ..... **Date:** .....

Appendix I

Authority for Release of Tapes

Unit Standards and Foundation Learners

Authority for the release of tape transcripts.

This form will be held for a period of five years.

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript of the interviews conducted with me.

I agree that the edited transcript and extracts from this may be used by the researcher, Anne Barrer, in reports and publications arising from the research.

Signature		Date	
Full name printed			

Appendix J

Best Practice

BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES FOR THE ASSESSMENT OF UNIT STANDARDS

INTRODUCTION

NZQA is committed to identifying and promoting best assessment policy and practice in relation to unit standards.

We encourage all assessors of unit standards to use this document as a resource and reference.

PRINCIPLES OF BEST PRACTICE ASSESSMENT

PRINCIPLE 1: ASSESSMENT DESIGN

Best practice assessment will occur when the assessor focuses on elements, and gives due consideration to all performance criteria within the unit standard(s).

PRINCIPLE 2: ASSESSMENT DECISIONS

Best practice assessment will occur when the assessor judges, overall, that the candidate has provided sufficient evidence that the outcomes, identified in the elements, have been met.

CONCEPTS UNDERPINNING PRINCIPLES

PRINCIPLE 1: ASSESSMENT DESIGN

1.1 Unit standards are statements of what a person knows and/or can do, expressed as outcomes.
1.2 The element(s) identify the outcomes against which the candidate is assessed.
1.3 Performance criteria do not express outcomes. They indicate the minimum[1] evidence to consider when making a judgement as to whether the candidate has achieved the outcomes of the element and, therefore, the standard. Sufficiency of evidence should be described in the assessment schedule.
1.4 Assessment(s), and the basis for making assessment decisions, must be designed to be consistent with the unit standard.

[1] See Question & Answers

1.5 Assessment(s) should be designed to focus on the wholeness of performance against the outcomes identified in the elements. Assessment(s) designed for individual performance criteria may lead to over-assessment.
1.6 Assessment of related or similar learning outcomes should be integrated, where possible.
1.7 Assessment(s) must be designed to ensure that the candidate has adequate opportunity to meet the requirements of the unit standard.
1.8 Assessment(s) must include an assessment schedule clearly showing the evidence the candidate is expected to provide, and the basis on which assessment decisions are to be made.

Principle 2: Assessment Decisions

2.1 Performance criteria are critical guidelines to the type of evidence that must be collected to make a judgement about performance.
2.2 In making an assessment decision, sufficient evidence must be provided so that the assessor is confident that the candidate can do what the standard requires. This evidence can be drawn from a range of sources, eg set tasks, naturally occurring evidence, recognition of prior learning (RPL) and current competency (RCC). The key question must always be, "Is the assessor confident the candidate knows or can currently do what is required by the standard(s) being assessed?"
2.3 Assessment decisions based on consideration of only some of the performance criteria will lead to assessment that is not at the national standard.
2.4 Assessment decisions will be consistent with, and at, the national standard when they are based solely on the requirements of the standard.
2.5 The use of exemplars, discussions with other assessors and moderation processes assist assessors in making consistent judgements whether there is sufficient evidence of competence.
2.6 Over-assessment[2] leads to frustration for candidates, assessors and trainers.

[2] See Questions & Answers

Appendix K

Diary of Research Journey

Dates Notes	Reflection	
24 May 2005 Introductory letter and information sheet	Information sheet for provider and for participants. Massey letterhead.	Realised the importance of getting this part right!
10 June 2005 Phoned provider managers	Posted out letter of approach	Positive response and enthusiasm for my research idea.
20 June Meeting with manager of PTE1 (over coffee)	Discussion re the research and how they could help	Arranged for me to come and talk to students.
27 June 2005 Meet with two classes from PTE1	Explain to students what research is about. Ask if they might like to be participants.	Left students with a personal data form to fill in if they want to be involved. Some were keen!
29 June 2005 Return to PTE1. Speak to another class. Invite participation. Meet with teaching staff at PTE2	Pick up 8 forms filled in from previous group. They show lots of interest in the topic	Felt really pleased with the enthusiasm from this group of students. Wished that I was planning to interview the staff!
4 July 2005 10.30am visit PTE2 as arranged. Lots of students away sick, so agree to return in a week.		Beginning to realise that this part of the research may take a long time.
6 July 2005 Met with the students at ITP second campus.	Left the forms. Went back at 3pm. Not one filled in!	Disappointment!
11 July 2005 Phone PTE2 and PTE1 re appropriate time to visit.	School holidays and flu causing problems.	Can't find my tape recorder which I had lent to an ESOL tutor. Eventually go and buy a cheapie from The Warehouse. Practise interview questions with my husband.
19 July 2005 PTE1 Interviews	Individual interviews with 5 students 9.30-12.15. Really enjoyed this process.	After each interview check out quality of recording. First interview very difficult to hear.
July 25 PTE1 Interviews	11.30 'Mary' interview 1pm 'Ros' interview	Went well.
27 July PTE2	Talked to all students gathered in one class. Felt that I had hooked them in to my research but only got 4 signed up.	These PTE students not so keen

ITP	Talked to a foundation class of mainly young people.	Excellent response
28 July	Interview 'Ann' PTE1	Good response
1 August	Interview 4 ITP students All quite young. Interviewed at ITP in a small office.	Problems with two students only being on the course a week. Little experience. Wondered whether I should have stipulated that students be on course for 3 months or longer.
2 August 5 August	Speak to ITP mature students Interviews and transcribing	Some interest. Hard work!
11 August	Interview 'Mandy', ITP	'Mandy' gave a new insight. She has experienced other types of assessment as a mature learner.
12 August 23 August	PTE2 Interviews PTE2 Interviews	Students not there! They had forgotten. Success. Interviewed all four!
24 August	Interview 'Sally' ITP	Final individual. Now to think about the focus groups!
31 August	PTE1 Focus group 5 Students including a new born baby! Handed back transcribed individual interviews and got signatures.	Tape recorder and microphone kept making loud feedback noises! I had brought food and drink with me and this was a distraction.
13 September	ITP youth focus group 7 Young students 15-18 yrs.	Interesting! Lots of giggles, asides and txting.
20 September	ITP2nd focus group	Different view points from younger learners. Some thoughtful comments.
26 September		Wondering whether to go back and do focus group with PTE2. Not getting much more information from the discussions. The groups are slow to discuss issues, seem shy. Perhaps it is the tape recorder?
30 September	Telephone contact with Linda, my supervisor.	Emailed Linda and she phoned me. Had a constructive conversation. Helped me decide which direction to go next.
18 October	PTE2	Had students read their transcribed interviews and sign approval forms.
6 November	Have written 6,500 words.	Still the framework stage.
14 November	Exploring the dance metaphor	I can relate to it. Life is like a dance, and so is research.
25 November	Thank you cards sent to the two PTEs	
27 November	Reading David Silverman on qualitative research. Ordered some more readings through Massey	Feel inspired again. Very readable and explained data collecting and analysis in an easy to understand way. ☺

28 November	Word processing some more on unit standards chapter.	Have been offered a new position which will mean less time for my research??
10 January 2006	Reread what I had done so far. Trying to refocus	Big break from study over Xmas and new year. Lots of family turning up. Going to take a big effort to get cranked up again!
17 January	Staying at the bach in the Sounds	Wrote heaps sitting outside under a beach umbrella on a really stunning day! Really tried to get to the essence of what I was writing about.
21 January	Hot Saturday at home.	Began writing up my findings chapters. Thought I would just get started, see what emerged, cut and paste later.
25 January	Monday evening on the computer	Grappling with my 'propositions' after emailing Linda.
29 January	Visit TEC office	Read publications of Skill New Zealand from the last 10 years. Some of it was useful.
12February	Shifted down to the old computer. Hard out writing up!	Realising that this space of my own away from family is good
31 March	Written 17,000 words.	Re writing the literature review chapters. They seem to make more sense now.
11 April	Found a useful text in Olssen and Mathews, "Education Policy in New Zealand the 1990s and beyond."	Reflected on the different ways that we look at 'knowledge.'
21 April	Having to kick Thomas off the computer!	Working hard on the Findings. Sent first 3 chapters off to Linda to look at.
6 May	Working with Linda's feedback. Sloppy referencing needs attention.	Rereading everything. Looking at flow, fixing referencing according to APA.
13 May	Rereading texts on data analysis and discussion	Looking for a breakthrough.
20 May	25, 000 words	celebrate
11 June	Rewriting one of the early lit review chapters	Feels a bit like I'm going backwards in order to go forwards.
26 June	Quite happy with first four chapters	Staying goal oriented
4 July	On leave working on thesis. Middle of winter	Taking a more political line. Getting clearer about my own position.
16 July	Have really got on top of this! Appendices included 35,000 words.	Feeling very attached to my work
29 September	40,000 words! On the home straight!	Enjoying this last stage....

Appendix L

Sample of a unit standard

Unit Standard 8811

level:	**1**
credit:	**3**
final date for comment:	December 2004
expiry date:	December 2005
sub-field:	English
purpose:	People credited with this unit standard are able to plan the research process, and collect information related to the proposal, record the process of collection from sources used, and discuss the relevance of information collected.
entry information:	Open.
accreditation option:	Evaluation of documentation by NZQA.
moderation option:	A centrally established and directed national moderation system has been set up by NZQA.
special notes:	1 This unit standard is derived from the achievement objectives for processing information in *English in the New Zealand Curriculum.* 2 The emphasis of this unit standard is on the process of information gathering, not on the end product of the research. Collected material should be seen only as the validation of the research process having taken place.

3 The quality of the research product may be assessed using Unit 8812, *Produce transactional written text in simple forms,* Unit 8816, *Deliver transactional oral text,* Unit 12417 *Present a static image using verbal and visual features*, and Unit 12418, *Present a moving image using verbal and visual features*. If the research is to be presented for assessment by another unit standard, the research proposal may include an indication of the envisaged final product.

4 *Text* is a piece of spoken, written, or visual communication that constitutes a coherent, identifiable unit, such as a particular novel, speech, poem, poster, play, film, conversation in the sign language of the deaf, or any other language event'. *(English in the New Zealand Curriculum,* page 142).

5 Assessment
While students will gain credit for this specific skill when credited with this unit standard, in practice it will not be assessed in isolation but in the context of a larger area of study.

6 Throughout the research process it is essential that oral, written, and visual sources of information are explored.

7 *English in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Learning Media Wellington, 1996). ISBN 0 478 057261 1, Item No. 94/294.

Elements and Performance Criteria

element 1

Plan the research process.

performance criteria

1.1 Plan defines research intentions in the form of a research proposal.

Range: the proposal must include but is not limited to - research objective (derived from the chosen topic), questions, projected sources (oral, written, visual).

1.2 Planning identifies research methods to be used appropriate to the intention.

Range: select one oral language method such as recording an interview, making notes of a telephone conversation, taping a conversation, listening to a radio or audio recording;
select one visual language method such as viewing a video, using a CD ROM, using the internet;
select two written language methods such as note-taking, designing and administering a questionnaire, designing and carrying out a survey, using a database, using written resources, using a fax machine, using E-mail, writing letters.

element 2

Collect information related to the research proposal, record the process of collection from sources used, and discuss the relevance of information collected.

Range: must include oral, written, and visual language sources.

performance criteria

2.1 Record of collected materials identifies original source for each item.

2.2 Record of collected materials demonstrates the use of a range of oral, visual, and written sources.

2.3 Log records steps taken during process in chronological sequence, and demonstrates use of selected methods to be used.

2.4 Clear, brief written explanation discusses relevance of collected materials to original proposal.

Comments on this unit standard

Please contact the NZQA National Qualifications Services nqs@nzqa.govt.nz if you wish to suggest changes to the content of this unit standard.

Please Note

Providers must be accredited by the Qualifications Authority or a delegated inter-institutional body before they can register credits from assessment against unit standards or deliver courses of study leading to that assessment.

Industry Training Organisations must be accredited by the Qualifications Authority before they can register credits from assessment against unit standards.

Accredited providers and Industry Training Organisations assessing against unit standards must engage with the moderation system that applies to those standards.

Accreditation requirements and an outline of the moderation system that applies to this standard are outlined in the Accreditation and Moderation Action Plan (AMAP). The AMAP also includes useful information about special requirements for providers wishing to develop education and training programmes, such as minimum qualifications for tutors and assessors, and special resource requirements.

This unit standard is covered by AMAP 0226 which can be accessed at http://www.nzqa.govt.nz/framework/search/index.do.