

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

# **IS WORKPLACE ASSESSMENT WORKING?**

A Critical Theory Analysis of the Stated Intentions for NQF Workplace Assessment in NZ; and their Realization in a Case Study in the Ambulance Service.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

**Masters of Education (Adult Education)**

at Massey University, Wellington Campus, Wellington,  
New Zealand.

Penny Hoy-Mack

2003

## ABSTRACT

Workplace Assessment (WPA) of National Qualifications Framework (NQF) competency standards has assumed significance as an alternative pathway for vocational qualifications for the NZ workforce.

The stated intentions of the initiators of workplace assessment of NQF qualifications were multiple, an, at times, uneasy alliance of differing ideologies. These intentions included: an increase in the capability of the workforce, unified qualifications, social well-being and upward mobility for workers, the widening of participation in education, more fair and valid assessment and public choice.

These official narratives for WPA are viewed through a critical theory 'lens', which is then focussed on a case study within the NZ Ambulance Service. The qualitative field work constitutes semi-structured interviews of six workplace assessors and eight candidates employed by Wellington Free Ambulance service.

This research indicates that the intention to increase skill levels was partly realised in the valid and direct assessment of performance offered by WPA. Yet, competition with university qualifications detracted from the unified nature of the NQF; its qualifications were relegated to lower levels of the ambulance service. The intention to provide equitable pathways encountered barriers, particularly for volunteer ambulance officers. Moreover, lessened provider capture has resulted in inconsistencies in assessment practice.

However, the assessors' holistic evidence-gathering methodologies employed an interplay model, integrating atomistic competencies and holistic judgements of ambulance work. This hermeneutic knowledge counters tendencies to reductionist assessment of ambulance work. A further model of workplace assessors' practice is developed showing how the level of closeness or distance between assessors and candidates influences the candidates' confidence and therefore fairness in workplace assessment. Participatory practices and positive closeness favourably affected assessment events.

Costs, particularly the time required for WPA, are partly borne by the ambulance workers, with a resulting intrusive effect into the 'lifeworld' of these workers. The study concludes that WPA is a site where the ongoing contest for emancipation is played out, where workers may challenge the subjectivity of the learning organisation. Yet, candidates saw WPA as a way to meet their personal and career aspirations and valued the rewards attached to the qualifications gained, which offered them protection from the vagaries of the labour market.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to acknowledge and thank Nick Zepke of Massey University for his thought-provoking and steadfast encouragement in the supervision of this thesis.

Thanks also to Fran Hunia for her helpful suggestions made on the final draft.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	II
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	IV
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .....	VIII
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .....	VIII
<b>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 SETTING THE SCENE FOR WORKPLACE ASSESSMENT .....	1
1.2 PERSONAL INTEREST .....	3
1.3 PILOT STUDY .....	4
1.4 THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....	6
<i>Research Question One:</i> .....	6
<i>Research Question Two:</i> .....	6
<i>Research Question Three:</i> .....	7
<i>Research Question Four:</i> .....	7
1.5 BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON AMBULANCE VOCATIONAL TRAINING .....	7
1.6 JUSTIFICATION FOR THE RESEARCH PROJECT .....	9
<b>CHAPTER TWO: WHAT WERE THE STATED INTENTIONS FOR WORKPLACE ASSESSMENT? A LITERATURE SURVEY.....</b>	<b>11</b>
2.1 THE ESTABLISHMENT AND GROWTH OF THE NQF .....	11
<i>The Initial Establishment of the NQF</i> .....	11
<i>An Uneasy Ideological Coalition Underpinning the NQF</i> .....	12
<i>Influences from New Right Thinking and Business</i> .....	13
<i>Influences: Social Justice &amp; Wider Participation in Vocational Education</i> .....	14
<i>Responses to the NQF: the Historical Ebb and Flow</i> .....	16
2.2 THE NATURE OF THE NQF: RESEARCH AND DEBATE .....	17
<i>Criticisms of the Behaviourist Theoretical Basis of Competencies</i> .....	17
<i>Extent of Learner Involvement</i> .....	19
<i>Responses from Educational Traditionalists</i> .....	20
<i>Critical Responses to the Dominance of Public Choice and Centralised Accountability</i> .....	21
<i>A Cluster of Research: Comparing Intentions and Experience of the NQF</i> .....	22
2.3 WORKPLACE ASSESSMENT: DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS.....	23
<i>Purposes of WPA: NQF in the Workplace</i> .....	23
<i>Theoretical Origins of WPA</i> .....	25
<i>Education and Learning Theory</i> .....	25
<i>The Learning Organisation and Total Quality Management Theories</i> .....	26
<i>Provider Capture and Public Choice</i> .....	27
<i>Role and Methodology of Assessors</i> .....	27
<i>Prescriptions for Practice</i> .....	29
2.4 WORKPLACE ASSESSMENT: DEBATE & CRITIQUE .....	30
<i>Atomistic versus Holistic Assessment</i> .....	31
<i>The Volume and Costs of Workplace Assessment</i> .....	33
<i>Workplace-specific versus National Standards</i> .....	34
<i>Assessor Judgement and Consistency</i> .....	35
2.5: SO WHAT WERE THE STATED INTENTIONS? .....	36
<b>CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE ANALYSIS OF NQF WORKPLACE ASSESSMENT. ....</b>	<b>38</b>
3.1 CRITICAL THEORY AS A THEORETICAL LENS TO VIEW WORKPLACE ASSESSMENT .....	38
<i>Official Narratives for the NQF and Workplace Assessment</i> .....	39
3.2 CONSTRUCTING THE LENS: A CRITICAL THEORY OUTLINE .....	42

<i>Theories of Hegemony and Domination</i> .....	42
<i>Struggle, Counternarratives and Workplace Assessment</i> .....	45
<i>The Potential of Critical Theory: Unmasking Reality</i> .....	47
<i>Postmodern Critique</i> .....	48
3.3 USING THE LENS: ISSUES FOR INVESTIGATION OF COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION.....	51
<i>Competencies as Behaviourism</i> .....	52
<i>Vested Power Interests</i> .....	54
<i>Worker Support for Workplace Learning</i> .....	56
3.4: FOCUSSING THE LENS: ISSUES FOR FIELD WORK ON WORKPLACE ASSESSMENT.....	57
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS</b> .....	<b>60</b>
4.1 METHODOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY.....	60
<i>Methodology and Methods</i> .....	62
<i>Contrasting Qualitative and Quantitative Research Methods</i> .....	62
<i>Considering Symbolic Interactionism and Grounded Theory</i> .....	64
<i>The Selection of Qualitative Interviews</i> .....	65
<i>Ethical Considerations</i> .....	66
<i>Reliability</i> .....	68
<i>Validity</i> .....	69
4.2 A DESCRIPTION OF METHODS IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS.....	70
<i>Selecting and refining the research problem</i> .....	70
<i>Sampling</i> .....	71
<i>The Interviews</i> .....	73
<i>Coding</i> .....	75
<i>The Use of Computer-aided Coding and Collation of data</i> .....	76
<i>Bridging Analysis: NVivo Node Coding Reports, Coding Stripes and Attributes</i> .....	77
4.3 PRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH DATA.....	78
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS OF THE INTERVIEWS</b> .....	<b>81</b>
5.1 THE VALUE OF NQF QUALIFICATIONS AND MOTIVATIONS FOR INVOLVEMENT.....	81
<i>Value and Motivations for Candidates</i> .....	81
<i>The value of the NQF role for Assessors</i> .....	84
5.2 THE ASSESSMENT OF KNOWLEDGE AND CRITICAL REASONING: HOW IT IS BEST DONE.....	86
<i>How knowledge was assessed</i> .....	87
<i>Competing with other Qualifications</i> .....	89
5.3 ASSESSOR JUDGMENTS: OBJECTIVITY AND THE NATURE OF EVIDENCE.....	91
<i>Objectivity and Fairness</i> .....	91
<i>The Nature of Evidence</i> .....	92
<i>Judgement: Holistic and Atomistic</i> .....	96
5.4 THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ASSESSORS AND CANDIDATES.....	98
<i>Distance as Difference, Closeness as Sameness</i> .....	99
<i>Perceptions of Closeness</i> .....	100
<i>Negative Closeness or Distance</i> .....	102
5.5 CONSISTENCY: ASSESSORS AND ASSESSMENTS.....	103
<i>Double and Triple Crewing of Ambulance Vehicles</i> .....	104
<i>A National Standard?</i> .....	106
<i>Variations in Assessment Practice</i> .....	107
5.6 ORGANISATIONAL FACTORS, THE COSTS AND VOLUME OF WORKPLACE ASSESSMENT.....	109
5.7 CONCLUSION: BRIDGING THE PROJECT AND ITS MEANING.....	113
<b>CHAPTER SIX: CRITICAL INTERPRETION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS</b> .....	<b>115</b>
6.1: THE SEDUCTIVE APPEAL OF THE NQF.....	117
<i>Consumer Choice and Provider Capture</i> .....	118
<i>Benefits to workers and more equitable learning</i> .....	120
6.2 COUNTERNARRATIVES FROM THE RESEARCH.....	123
<i>Costs Absorption</i> .....	123
<i>Intrusion into the Lifeworld</i> .....	126
6.3 THE UNIFYING FRAMEWORK VERSUS A CONTESTED SITE?.....	127

6.4	HOLISTIC AND ATOMISTIC: INTERPRETIVE ASSESSMENT KNOWLEDGE .....	130
6.5	HOW THE ASSESSORS MAKE THEIR DECISIONS: THE INTENDED PRESCRIPTIONS FOR PRACTICE AND THE RESEARCH FINDINGS .....	132
	<i>Direct Evidence</i> .....	133
	<i>Valid Evidence</i> .....	133
	<i>Sufficient Evidence</i> .....	134
	<i>How the Assessors Make their Decisions: Claims of Objectivity and Truth</i> .....	135
6.6	RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ASSESSORS AND CANDIDATES: DISTANCE AND CLOSENESS .....	136
	<i>Positive Closeness</i> .....	137
6.7	CONCLUSIONS: STATED INTENTIONS AND AMBULANCE WORKPLACE ASSESSMENTS .....	140
	<i>Developing the Skill Level of the Workforce</i> .....	140
	<i>An Equitable Alternative Pathway</i> .....	140
	<i>Weakening Provider Capture</i> .....	141
	<i>Assessment Practice</i> .....	141
	<i>Emancipation for Workers</i> .....	142
<b>CHAPTER SEVEN RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS .....</b>		<b>143</b>
7.1	LIMITS OF THE RESEARCH .....	143
7.2	VALIDITY OF WORKPLACE ASSESSMENT .....	143
7.3	INTEGRATING ATOMISTIC AND HOLISTIC APPROACHES: HERMENEUTIC KNOWLEDGE.....	144
7.4	FRAGMENTATION AND INCONSISTENCY .....	144
7.5	PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES AND POSITIVE CLOSENESS.....	145
7.6	THE INTERESTS OF WORKERS .....	145
	<i>Appendix One: Request for Interview Letter</i> .....	146
	<i>Appendix One: Request for Interview Letter</i> .....	147
	<i>Appendix Two: Information Brochure</i> .....	149
	<i>Appendix Three: Consent Form</i> .....	151
	<i>Appendix Four: Interview Schedule One</i> .....	152
	<i>Appendix Five Interview Schedule Two</i> .....	153
	<i>Appendix Six: List of Coding Nodes</i> .....	156
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>		<b>158</b>



## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure One:	Table Showing Relationships between Candidate Attributes.....	100
Figure Two	A Continuum Model of the Relationship between ‘Distance’ & ‘Closeness’ and Factors in the Assessment.....	138
Figure Three	A Model Showing Negative Closeness and Degree of Candidate Confidence.....	139