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# **'Defending the High Ground'**

## **The transformation of the discipline of history into a senior secondary school subject in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century: A New Zealand curriculum debate**

**A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the  
degree Doctor of Philosophy in Education  
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One might characterise the curriculum reform ... as a sort of tidal wave. Everywhere the waves created turbulence and activity but they only engulfed a few small islands; more substantial landmasses were hardly touched at all [and]...the high ground remained completely untouched.

Ivor F. Goodson (1994, 17)

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the development of the New Zealand secondary school history curriculum in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and is a case study of the transformation of an academic discipline into a senior secondary school subject. It is concerned with the nature of state control in the development of the history curriculum at this level as well as the extent to which dominant elites within the history teaching community influenced the process. This thesis provides a historical perspective on recent developments in the history curriculum (2005-2008) and argues New Zealand stands apart from international trends in regards to history education. Internationally, curriculum developers have typically prioritised a narrative of the nation-state but in New Zealand the history teaching community has, by and large, been reluctant to engage with a national past and chosen to prioritise English history. Also in the international arena the history curriculum is shaped by government agencies but in New Zealand in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, a minority of historians and teachers had a disproportionate influence over the process. They eschewed attempts to liberalise the subject by the Department of Education (and thereby reflect contemporary developments in the parent discipline) and shaped the curriculum to reflect their own professional interests.

This thesis puts forward a hypothesis that seeks to explain the nature of continuity and change in the senior history curriculum in the late 20th century with a view to illuminating the origins of recent debates in the history teaching community. It argues that it is the examination prescriptions that dictate what is taught at this level and that there are three key criteria that must be met if a senior curriculum initiative is to be successfully introduced, or an existing area of historical knowledge is to be retained. Firstly, it is necessary that the decision-making elite share a consensus that a particular body of historical knowledge is of higher status than any alternative. Secondly, a successful initiative must reflect the existing scholarly constraints and boundaries of the parent discipline. Finally, advocates of a particular area of knowledge must be able to establish alliances with major stakeholders in a subject community who are sympathetic to their cause. The role of dominant individuals in this process was paramount in the 1980s as Department of Education curriculum committees at this time operated on the ethos of 'consultation', with little explicit philosophical direction and no authentic evaluation. This model is examined by considering the examples of women's history (that was successfully embedded in the 1989 curriculum), Māori history (that was not) and 16th and 17th century English history (that has dominated the history curriculum in New Zealand for over 30 years).

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## Glossary

- CDD**            **Curriculum Development Division (Department of Education):**  
This division was made up of a number of subject specialists (including history) who had responsibility for maintaining and developing their subject.
- DMIE**            **Division of Māori and Island Education (Department of Education)**  
This division was responsible for issues and initiatives concerned with Māori and Pasifika education.
- NHCC**            **National History Curriculum Committee**  
The Committee was known as both the National History Curriculum Committee (NHCC) and the National History Syllabus Committee (NHSC). The former was more widely favoured in official documents and is used in this thesis.
- NZHTA**           **New Zealand History Teachers Association**  
The national body to represent New Zealand history teachers, NZHTA was established in 1994.
- NZHA**            **New Zealand Historical Association**  
NZHA is the national body that represents historians and is affiliated with history researchers and teachers working outside the academy (including NZHTA).
- PPTA**            The secondary school teachers' union, The New Zealand Post Primary Teachers Association, had curriculum panels in all senior subjects and was closely involved with curriculum design and implementation in the 1980s.
- Prescription** The content that is prescribed for an examination.

- SC**                    **School Certificate:**  
SC was under the auspices of the Department of Education and was a summative examination offered for the first time at the end of three years secondary education (Year 11/Form 5). Students' results were scaled and it served as an exit qualification for those who were not destined for tertiary study, as well as a benchmark for those students going on to the senior school.
- 6FC/SFC**            **Sixth Form Certificate:**  
6FC was one of two qualifications offered in Year 12/Form 6. It was internally assessed and in 1986, when UE was disestablished, it became the principal qualification offered at this level.
- UE**                    **University Entrance:**  
UE was offered after 4 years of secondary education (Year 12/Form 6) and was the minimum requirement for entry into university. Most students who passed were accredited and only 5% of the total 6<sup>th</sup> Form cohort passed by sitting the formal examination. In 1986 UE was disestablished and the University Bursaries Examination became the requirement for entry to university.
- UB**                    **University Bursaries**  
Commonly known as Bursaries, students entered this examination at the conclusion of five years' secondary education. UB was a high status qualification that carried some monetary awards for high achievers.
- UEB**                  **University Entrance Board**  
Dominated by subject specialists from the universities (with assistance by teachers), the UEB was responsible for setting and marking UE, UB and US.
- US**                    **University Scholarship**  
When the NHCC was meeting, US was a separate, highly academic examination that was offered at the end of Year 13/Form 7.