

Welcome and Scene Setting: Jeremy Baker, ITF

New Zealand Qualifications Forum, 4 December 2009

It my great pleasure to welcome you all to the very first New Zealand Qualifications Forum.

We have been delighted by the positive response to the idea of this Forum from across the education sector and beyond, and it is wonderful to see so many of you here today.

The Industry Training Federation (ITF) had been hearing messages at various meetings and conferences (including our own) that industry and educators wanted somewhere where they could discuss qualifications issues. Based on how quickly the registrations for the Forum went, clearly that demand was real.

For the last six years, the ITF has hosted the New Zealand Vocational Education and Training Research Forum, which has grown from 30 delegates in its first year to over 200 in 2009. We hope the New Zealand Qualifications Forum similarly becomes a regular event on the education and skills calendar. The turnout to this initial event is very encouraging.

I am also happy to advise that next year our Federation intends to host further topic-specific events on such things as labour market analysis and the interface between the schooling and tertiary sector, with a particular focus on vocational education and training pathways.

By way of scene setting, I want to explore the notion of pathways and careers, something we talk about a lot in education and in industry.

We talk about an education system that supports multiple pathways.

We talk about some pathways being valued more than others.

We talk about some pathways being funded at higher rates than others.

In the world of workplace learning and industry training we talk about the skills our industries require, how well our standards and qualifications reflect the needs of our industries, and how to get best use out the skills developed by trainees.

Depending on where you come from, you may use different words to describe these concepts.

But no matter if you are from a school, a polytechnic, an Industry Training Organisation, or a university – or whether you are a tutor or teacher or HOD or a standard setter or a qualifications writer or qualifications evaluator or a course approver or moderator – we are all in the business of developing and recognising skills and knowledge.

We do this with the expectation that what we do will improve the individuals' chances of success, in their lives and in their work.

The thing about pathways is they lead to destinations, and at least part of the job of educators is to make sure those destinations are worth the journey.

Qualifications are a proxy for learning and achievement. They recognise competencies, capabilities, skills and knowledge. They can both structure what and how people learn, and help define what people know how to do.

They are (or at least – should be) the milestones that map out the coherency of the education system, and can help define career structures and pathways.

Professor Martyn Sloman – a visiting professor at several UK and Commonwealth universities – was in New Zealand earlier this year as an Erksine Fellow at the University of Canterbury. Professor Sloman has lectured in 19 countries in five continents on, and is one of the UK's leading

voices on training and e-learning. His bottom-line in respect of qualifications is that “value is in the eye of the end user” – and he’s absolutely right.

At the end of the day, if students, or trainees, or parents, or employers, or entry officers, or recruitment companies, or industry regulators, or the public do not value our qualifications then we have simply wasted everyone’s time and money. The extent to which any qualification works is the extent to which the “piece of paper” is recognised and respected. Some of us rely on the reputation of our institutions, while other of us rely on the power of NZQA’s logo.

So in our discussions today, I want us to keep central one idea – no-one puts themselves through the qualifications mill for nothing. Students and trainees expect a return on the investment they make in themselves. Every learner or student or trainee, young or old, part-time or full-time, is on a different learning journey, and a potential or actual career journey.

How can we work together in new and innovative ways to make sure people get the very best value out of the qualifications they’ve gained?

I want to consider three things in helping us to answer that question:

- Context;
- Competition; and
- Collaboration.

Context

Specifically, I want to put New Zealand in context.

I think the important thing here is that New Zealand is **tiny**.

Sydney is bigger than us. 4,399,722 people live in Sydney, compared to 4,342,173 here.

It's a cliché, but we live in a globalised world, and there is a globalised marketplace for skills and knowledge. That respect and recognition of qualifications matters now more than ever. The Bologna and Copenhagen processes, the Lisbon Recognition Convention, the European Qualifications Framework – at all levels of education, across the globe, we see efforts aimed at improving portability and recognition of qualifications across states and nations, at all levels up to and including advanced technical and higher education.

Since the European Commission's adoption of a European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning in 2008, all member countries have either been referencing their Frameworks to an eight level EQF, or developing a new Framework compatible with it.

Finland, for instance, is often held up as a paragon education system internationally in both the schooling and tertiary sectors. It has recently completed its new Qualifications Framework. Finland has 358 vocational qualifications, on top of just 52 at upper secondary level, for a population of 5.3 million citizens.

In the United Kingdom there are 1,342 National Vocational Qualifications, 2,042 vocationally related qualifications and 2,445 Generic QCF qualifications for a population of 61 million people.

Our Register, at last official count, had **5,937 certificates and diplomas**.

Looking at the emerging economies, in May this year India announced it would establish a national vocational qualifications framework because it too recognises the need for portability and recognition. As near as anyone can count, India has 385 million economically active citizens, and its government has recognised that a Framework of qualifications is the best way to formally recognize the skills and competencies of its learners and workers.

China's push in higher education is nothing short of staggering. Its 2008 enrolment target was 5.9 million, split almost equally between higher and advanced vocational learning. That included 59,000 PhD's and 390,000 enrolments at masters level. That's more Masters and PhD students enrolled in a single year than the total number of students in all our tertiary providers.

Competition

Let's also face the fact that there is competition between various parts of our system. There is competition for students and resources. There is competition for skill employees, both within New Zealand and internationally.

Competition itself is not a bad thing, when it drives efficiency and quality. But the evidence is that – in the case of qualification in New Zealand – it hasn't. Funding rates and rules, policy settings, unconnected approval processes and marketing practices have led us to re-create qualifications in our own image, sometimes over and over again. The "not invented here" syndrome often seems to apply in terms of qualifications.

There are 263 certificates in English for Speakers of other Languages. There are 74 Hairdressing Certificates. There are 73 Business Management qualifications. These are particularly bad examples, but the issue goes on down the line.

First of all, think about the cost to our sectors (and the taxpayer) of developing and maintaining all those qualifications. It has been estimated that each qualification costs at least \$100,000 to develop. That means we have spent potentially **\$593 million** developing diplomas and certificates in the last decade or so. All sectors seem to agree that the process of getting a new qualification to market is slow and resource intensive, and not done lightly – so how did we end up with 6,000 of them?

Let's think about those end users again. The prospective employer looking at one of 58 Sports Coaching qualifications and wondering what it contains. The

learner with a brand new Tourism certificate (and a brand new student loan) that happens to be one of 96 such certificates we've seen fit to develop and register.

In much of this, we seem to have confused two different markets – which have quite different imperatives. I'm talking here about the 'education market' on the one hand, and the labour market on the other. Both rely on signals – but sometimes these signals are in conflict. Those operating within the education sector – be they schools or tertiary education organisations – are often seeking to differentiate their offering. But then the labour market has to try to make sense of the products of those differentiated offerings – and that is often no easy matter.

Competition has its place – but well functioning markets rely on clear information and signals. There is a reason each country has only one currency. Qualifications are a key means of exchange in the labour market – but in New Zealand we seem to think that it's a good idea to have multiple 'currencies' in qualifications.

Finally, it's worth remembering that almost all of the qualifications we are talking about have been quality assured by government agencies, and receive government funding. From the point of view of students, trainees and employees, this means they have a legitimate expectation that the qualifications on offer are fit for purpose, and mean what they say.

But if we have upwards of 70 or 80 qualifications all supposedly 'of quality', how does this help students and employers? Can these qualifications really carry out their function of providing clear learning and career pathways? Are we doing the best thing by learners? Is it any wonder that they and employers are confused?

Collaboration

But the news isn't all bad, and there is good reason to be optimistic. And it's the good stuff that we want to focus on here today. Our own work into High Performance in ITOs has shown the level and quality of collaboration on qualifications development is increasing between ITOs, tertiary providers and schools, and is seen as increasingly important.

In tougher times we need to find ways to do things better, and our sense is that the drive for collaboration and innovation is growing in strength across all our sectors. I think the presentations you will see today will clearly demonstrate some of the possibilities.

There are some amazing things happening in and across all our sectors, particularly at the crossroads of some of those education pathways – between ITOs and schools, schools and polytechnics, workplaces and polytechnics, industries and universities.

Keeping more of our young people engaged in education and on pathways to success is clearly an urgent priority for New Zealand, and there are lots of new policies – how can we make sure those new initiatives like Trades Academies build on the very best that is happening.

I also think NZQA, along with the Ministry of Education and TEC, deserves some congratulation for undertaking the present targeted review of certificates and diplomas. Those of you from the schools sector will particularly know that NZQA has had its fair share of brickbats over the last few years, and I think the straightforward manner in which NZQA have approached this review, and the issues it has raised, is a sign it is a stronger organisation.

I think we can agree that after 17 years it's about time there was a proper review. New Zealand was once a world-leader on qualifications, indeed we can take at least partial credit for inventing the sort of Framework approach now being adopted overseas in droves.

The ultimate aim of the review – to create a unified New Zealand Qualifications Framework – makes a whole lot of sense, given New Zealand's size and the way things are heading overseas. We need a user-friendly, and fit-for-purpose, and *single* system for Qualifications in New Zealand.

Conclusions

I want express my thanks – and that of the ITF – to our presenters and panelists today, whose commitment to the concept of the Forum has been very much appreciated. I hope you will agree that the programme gives a good range of perspectives on qualifications issues.

But the real power of today is not the programme, but the delegate list. I think just about every part of the tertiary sector is represented in the room along with people from schools, unions, industry, consultants, researchers, and government agencies. That's a rare thing, and we intend to ensure that there is ample time for discussion from participatns, and we want to hear from you. Each of the sessions has a set of possible discussion questions, but of course you will also have other issues you want to raise, and we encourage you to do so through out the day – and beyond.

In that regard, I'm very pleased to be able to announce that our colleagues at Ako Aotearoa have established an online community for the New Zealand Qualifications Forum, so the conversation does not have to end here today. We will send out information about the online community to you all after the forum. We will be placing a record of the day on that online location, and hope to keep in touch with you in the future.

As I said at the outset we plan to do this again next year. We want to make sure this sort of event works for you, those are interested in and work with qualifications. Therefore, our final session today is dedicated to gathering your ideas about the sorts of things that future events like this should address.

Once again – many thanks for taking the time to join us today. I trust you will enjoy it, find it stimulating, and that it will be useful in your ongoing work to improve New Zealand's qualifications.

Enjoy the day.