

Stakeholder Influences on Assessment Methodology

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Abstract

This is a Work-in-Progress paper backgrounding a research activity currently being undertaken in New Zealand establishing the requirements for assessment from various stakeholders and comparing to educational philosophies. Part of the initial study investigates the requirements of human resource practitioners, who are registered members of the Institute of Personnel Managers (IPM), when recruiting for management positions. The study contrasts qualifications obtained as certification under the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) unit standards and degrees obtained through universities.

This reinforced the tension between the need to provide education at degree level, with aims to develop autonomous decision makers, and the NZQA level 7 which assesses observable competencies in the skills to perform required managerial functions. The research attempts to identify the stakeholders in education including industry, education and training providers, professional associations, and the individual students. There are future plans to extend investigations from New Zealand into Australasian and global requirements. This paper will review earlier philosophical debates between providing education and training and examine works alerting educationalists to the danger of increasingly assessing for diplomas of specific abilities. This and the current concerns still emphasising contrasting concepts of teaching between technocratic-reductionist and professional-contextualist based philosophies will be incorporated into research and the requirements of various stakeholders will be examined.

A paper has been presented at the recent ANZAM Conference [Warren, 1997] with a request for interested parties to share information and experiences of the application of competency-based standards within a qualification framework and to share experiences of other frameworks. The next stage of this research is outlined with the preparation and use of questionnaires for identified primary stakeholders.

Keywords

Management Education; Education; Training; Curriculum; Assessment; Stakeholder; Philosophy

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Stakeholder Influences on Assessment Methodology

Introduction

This report covers progress of an ongoing study which will continue for at least one more year. There has been an examination of the philosophical underpinnings, papers have been developed, presented and published, questionnaire research projects completed and future research designed.

The purpose of this report is not the intention of providing a solution to the dichotomy between delivering education or training and it is not intended as a critique of any stakeholders, but is offered as an investigation into the provision of appropriate blends of services to accommodate the requirements of the various stakeholders.

Overall Status

There have been research activities into the requirements of industry when recruiting candidates for management roles, and into the development and application of assessment methods for NZQA HR standards at levels 5-7. Previous activities have included literature searches and presentation of papers, establishing methodologies to review effectiveness for various stakeholders [Warren, 1989] and examinations into purposes of education [Warren, 1996] and the paradox of the stakeholder concept [Warren, 1997].

Background

In New Zealand, prior to the release of a Government Green Paper, the Ministry of Education commented [Ministry of Education 1997a]:

“Much of the debate that is going on about the Framework is a debate between educationalists over the best way of assessing the skills and abilities of our young people. Debates of that nature will always be present in our society. They are philosophically based and contrast different views of the world.

“But at the end of the day the qualifications system that we decide upon is not there to serve the people who are active in the debate. It is there to serve the future generations of New Zealanders, and we owe it to all young New Zealanders to put in place a system of qualifications that is durable and creditable.” [Ministry of Education, 1996, p.7]

This illustrates the nature of the problems being investigated in this study as to the best way to assess skills and abilities of students. There is an underlying philosophical difference as to the nature and purpose of education that is reflected in the method of both teaching and assessing. For management education there are questions of who determines the content of the programme, what is to be assessed and how it is to be assessed. These, in turn, will influence the method or educational process used (such as self-discovery, rote, research) and method of delivery of the programme content (cbt, teacher, on-line). There are also questions of the ethical underpinning in assessment arising from the individual needs for personal development.

All is affected by the current requirements of industry and the allocation of funding and a possible tension between industry, the person, responsiveness of the delivery agent and other timing aspects.

Stakeholders

A definition of stakeholders, originally intended for application to organisation analysis but since generalised for the analysis when providing products or services, was stated by Freeman [Freeman, 1984]:

“A stakeholder ... is by definition any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation’s objectives.” [p.46]

The concept of stakeholders has been applied to the provision of education in a recent document [NZ Qualifications Authority, 1997] which has defined stakeholders as:

“Key stakeholders are those individuals and groups, both inside and outside an organisation, which have some direct interest in that organisation and its behaviour, actions, products or services. Key stakeholders will include owners, shareholders, suppliers, customers, special interest groups, statutory agencies and other regulatory bodies outside an organisation, and managers, employees, other human resources, employees organisations and other employee representatives within an organisation.”

Using this NZQA definition extends the groups of identified stakeholders in addition to the industry element, and with each having their related minor stakeholder groups. This definition extends the interested parties, when considering tertiary level education and, now, post-level 5 on the NZQA Framework, from academics claiming education should provide worthwhile “activities” to develop rational people [Langford, 1973] to industry elements requiring competency-based training. This is demonstrated by the NZ Employers’ Federation when expressing views on their requirements of education:

“Best practice entails:

- matching training to strategic planning and business goals
- perceiving learning as an investment
- assessing competence against agreed standards
- using technology as a tool for learning
- learning through distance at the learner’s own pace
- moving beyond training to learning as an integral part of working.”

[NZ Employers’ Federation, 1996, p.14]

This statement supports the NZQA approach of having a competency-based system but other stakeholders have expressed concerns over dependence on competency-only assessment. The Association of Polytechnics (APNZ), warning against narrowly defined assessments stated:

“NZQA should recognise that competency-based assessment against particularised overall performance criteria is only one of a range of valid approaches to assessment.

“While entirely appropriate for some vocational and academic skills, there is no evidence that competency-based assessment against particularised performance criteria is the only valid method of assessment. Indeed, there is considerable data to suggest that, unless tasks are closed, it is impossible to define unambiguous standards of competence. Equally, it is recognised that the adoption of any single assessment methodology disadvantages some students ...” [Coolbear, 1997, p.6]

This statement warning that one method of assessment, the competency-based approach supported by industry, may have adverse effects on the student is an example of the stakeholder paradox discussed by Goodpaster [Goodpaster, 1991] where there can be conflicts of both moral and legal duties caused by serving the requirements of one of the stakeholders while disregarding those of others. Some argue that by using competency-based training to develop particular skills the duties towards industry may be fulfilled while failing duties to the individual to provide a broad-based education.

The conflict of duties towards different stakeholders could be developing further as the number of stakeholders in education seems to be expanding from the academic institutions in their traditional role and duty to their students, to include those represented in industry claiming rights to the development of a skilled workforce. The use of a stakeholder analysis can provide a model to compare these conflicting rights and duties that influence the nature of assessment. When discussing stakeholder theory, Beauchamp and Bowie stated:

“Perhaps the most pressing problems for stakeholder theory is to specify in more detail the rights and responsibilities that each stakeholder group has and to suggest how the conflicting rights and responsibilities among the stakeholder groups can be resolved.” [Beauchamp and Bowie, p.55]

These conflicts represent the differing philosophies of the major stakeholders towards education and their views of education as a concept or as a development activity.

Philosophical aspects

The current situation with the introduction of NZQA standards, while universities are still conferring traditional degrees reflects the dichotomy between training and education and the competing objectives of industry training requirements and academia. The differing requirements of stakeholders: industry academic organisations, training providers, industry and employers, government, and the often overlooked students, form the basis of the research activity currently being undertaken comparing the requirements of stakeholders to stated educational philosophies. The context of earlier philosophical debates between education and training and the need for accommodation of global industry is another main concern related to education.

When examining the definition of education a point to be considered is that the practice called education has many different forms in different societies for many ages and those forms may be dependent on the cultural practices of the particular society.

Hinchcliff, 1997 (p.183) reminds us that this is not a new problem:

“More than 2000 years ago Socrates and Plato argued that the purpose of education is two-fold. First, it is for the acquisition of practical and professional skills. Specialised knowledge, facts and figures, techniques, procedures and patterns are essential to our learning process. Knowledge is necessary before we can make responsible decisions. Learning based upon a knowledge of the facts and figures better enables students to engage in process of conceptualising, extrapolating, and theorising about the realities of experience. Grounding our skills and knowledge in the realm of the practical also enables students to avoid irrelevant learning.”

In Western societies, there has been a commonly accepted usage of the term education, and within this a set of accepted activities, but when this use of the term is further examined, its generalisation covers many different practices and situations that confuse attempts to define the meaning. John Kleinig warns of this problem,

“It is a common belief that our concepts represent reality somewhat as a mirror image ... This seriously distorts the matter ... The common-place activities of identification ... involve a selection of features from the total available, in accordance with a range of interest.” [Kleinig, 1982, p.12]

This selection of features based on particular individual interest, including previous experiences and participation in an activity referred to as education, defines that person’s situation at the time and the selected features are reflected in the differing conceptual interpretations (e.g. policies) of stakeholders. This limits the application of the concept of education to certain situations that are within the particular stakeholder’s range of experience and is especially relevant when it relates to those people who have responsibility or power to influence the type of education provided.

Illustrating the length of time this point has been debated, Langford writing 25 years ago suggests,

“It is primarily the phrase ‘to become educated’ which requires elucidation rather than the word education itself: ‘education’ is the name of a practical activity, the unity of which depends on the overall purpose and that purpose is that somebody should become educated.” [Langford and O’Connor, 1973, p.6]

Although the purpose of education is that the person receiving it should become educated, it does not state the nature of the education but suggests that if there is a method of defining when the person subject to the process has become educated, the activity previously engaged in or the type of development of the person is sufficient to state that education has been achieved. This is a problem facing those providing management education in New Zealand: whether to attempt to educate or to provide a set of skills or competencies to undertake certain management activities.

These differences are expressed between the view of Kleinig, who refers to a conceptual definition for education, and that of Langford [Langford, 1973] who refers to the activity of education. This raises the question whether education is a universal concept or an activity. If it is a concept then many activities may be involved within that concept, while if education is an activity then it is constrained within the activity itself. Langford defines activities as

“Actions ... undertaken with the intention of achieving a more or less immediate end ... Activities themselves have an overall purpose which provides the principles of their identity and to which the individual actions, which are their parts, contribute.”
[Langford, 1973, p.117]

Unit standard methodologies could be seen to invoke this through a component-based competency assessment. According to Langford these are the actions which form the activity of education, which is the means to the end of the activity referred to as education. If this definition is accepted then education is just a selection of actions over a given time which forms the activity of education. This can be prescribed and then observed, and would make defining what is education simple, for example demonstrating competencies defined in unit standards, for if certain prescribed actions have been observed accruing then the person is educated. But this still begs the question as to what activities with the contributing actions are needed in order to achieve education. R.S. Peters, writing against education being regarded as just an activity, said

“Education does not name an activity rather it lays down criteria to which activities and processes must conform to be accepted as educational activities or processes.”
[Peters, 1966, p.122]

Education, whether as an activity or as a concept where activities must conform to some criteria, still must have some identifiable feature. Langford believes that

“To become educated is to learn to be a person.” [Langford, 1973, p.16]

but later amended this statement, contending that

“To become educated is to learn to be a rational person.” [Langford, 1973, p.31]

His amendment to “rational person” expresses a quality that can be identified in a person who has gone through an activity contributing to becoming educated. Meanwhile Peters examined the effects of the activities of education on the person:

“Activities of some sort, of course, are usually involved in educating people. They have a principle of unity in that they contribute to the state of mind of an educated person with its criteria of exhibiting knowledge and understanding and being of value.” [Peters, 1973, p.137]

When devising education programmes that are relevant for future managers who may operate in a global business their development requires breadth of knowledge as well as specific competencies.

The problem when assessing to meet the defined outputs of unit standards is that this cannot necessarily be assessed by the manner of showing knowledge and an understanding of situations and topics. Education as an activity contributes to the development of a person with knowledge and understanding, wherein the person exhibits these qualities by behaving as a rational person.

This discussion returns us to the continuing dichotomy between some stakeholders where there are those who favour a broad-based educational programme, which many would consider to be provided by obtaining a university degree, and others who require confirmed competency in certain skills sets.

Considering these differences John Codd explains that

“the universities have argued that unit standards are incompatible with the notion of excellence and would have a disruptive effect on the coherence and integrity of university degrees.” This is because the fragmentation of knowledge required to framework “measurable behaviours” is “at the expense of creative problem-solving and higher level cognitive capabilities” [Codd, 1996, p.10].

He also depicts this as a crisis and as a struggle between two philosophies of education [Codd, 1995, p.127]. This he summarised in the following table:

CONTRASTING CONCEPTIONS OF TEACHING

	TECHNOCRATIC- REDUCTIONIST	PROFESSIONAL- CONTEXTUALIST
Role Model	Skilled technician	Reflective practitioner
Criterion of good practice	Competence	Integrity
Pedagogical aim	To produce the attainment of specific learning outcomes	To enable the development of diverse human capabilities
Administrative context	Efficient management (hierarchical)	Professional leadership (collaborative)
Type of motivation	Extrinsic	Intrinsic
Form of accountability	Contractual compliance	Professional commitment

There is a value within education itself which is intrinsic to the person becoming educated and so there is a worthwhileness within the activity of education when the change for the better has been obtained. This is sometimes stated [Peters, 1973] that as well as these intrinsic benefits there are changes which are also observable as benefits. It has been viewed by some that a purpose of the education process is so that the pupil can be assessed as an educated person and that this can be perceived as an intrinsic benefit to their life by the person themselves. The type of education provided and the underpinning philosophies remains a problem for all in education but especially for those who teach across the range of skill development to degree levels. Stakeholders for these activities can be identified from those groups in the NZQA definition together with their requirements as well as the possible conflicting duty (Goodpaster's paradox) to each individual student. In order to meet the obligations to all of the stakeholders, the nature and method of assessment has to be constructed in a manner fulfilling needs based on both the skills and knowledge and with sufficient philosophic and academic rigour.

Coolbear recommends:

“... the use of a range of assessment methods within any programme of study. The combination used must recognise that different students have different preferred learning styles. Assessment instruments should also be appropriate to the particular types of abilities (e.g. practical, analytical, creative, integrative) being fostered in any component of a course or programme.” [Coolbear, 1997, p.6]

This paper outlines some of the research activities that aim to contribute understanding towards achieving the mix of assessment and teaching approaches that will best satisfy the requirements of stakeholders while overcoming the stakeholder paradox of duties towards the student.

Background research

When comparing the requirements for a business degree with an Employment Relations major to the NZQA unit standard level 7 (degree level) intended for HR practitioners or prospective practitioners, the differences between an education process and an activity are demonstrated. The Open Polytechnic's Bachelor of Business degree with an Employment Relations major requires the student to obtain passes in eighteen courses of which ten will be core, six will be for the major, and two elective. This ensures that the student will have some education exposure to general management, accounting practice, law and computing as well as special topics related to Employment Relations. For example, in a third year degree paper, Strategic Human Resource Management [Collins and Warren, 1995], the learning element for module 5 is stated as:

“Consider strategic human resource management and the challenges facing it from an international perspective.”

with completed activities listed as:

- “Examined justifications for the practice of strategic human resource management for organisations.
- Reviewed the possible future roles for strategic human resource management.
- Considered global challenges facing strategic human resource management.”

This requires the student to consider theoretical and practical applications related to a management topic.

The contrast to the above was apparent while involved with the development of the Human Resource Management Unit Standards between February and September 1997. These standards of NZQA are at levels 5, 6 and 7 on the Framework with 25 standards, based on human resource practices, which segment the activities and require demonstrable outcomes. For example:

“0001	Develop human resources management strategies and policies	Level 7
0010	Develop and maintain plans and processes for the release of human resources	Level 5
0024	Develop and maintain policies and processes for negotiation and consultation	Level 6”

[NZQA, 1997a]

In a further activity undertaken at the request of the NZ Qualifications Authority, guides to assist the assessment methodologies for these standards were devised. For example, the first standard was partially described:

STANDARD TITLE:	<i>Develop human resources management strategies and policies</i>
STANDARD NUMBER:	<i>R0001</i>
ELEMENTS COVERED IN THIS ACTIVITY:	<i>1, 2, 3, 4</i>

[NZQA, 1997b]

This is the first of the twenty-five units and has four elements which are the demonstration of competencies to be assessed. These elements are very detailed and the assessor has to ensure the details in the performance criteria (and the specified ranges where included) are complied with before

competency can be considered achieved. The guide developed for assessors has every element detailed with the performance criteria and ranges, and supporting evidence:

Performance criteria	Evidence required	How much evidence is enough? How good does it need to be?
3.2 The development of strategies and policies is based on data drawn from information sources, consultations with stakeholders, current good practice, and the organisation's vision, values, strategies and plans.	Documentation of the development of strategies and policies	The development is based on data drawn from information sources, consultations with stakeholders, current good practice, and the organisation's vision, values, strategies and plans.

[Unit R0001 Element 3.2, NZQA, 1997b]

When reviewing these Standards, the amount of work for both student and assessor, and effort in assessment is considered to be high and it is also considered unlikely by NZQA and IPM representatives that any one person would complete all of the 25 Units. A further concern was whether people not employed in an HR position could be assessed on these Standards as some require long-term work and evaluation within an organisation. The problem with these Standards is that they are stated to be intended for people working in an HR role, have HR responsibilities in their role, or intend in the future to take up a position in HR management. This latter group poses a problem for assessment since they require some form of simulated work and organisation conditions but such simulations cannot be adequately assessed over an extended period. The conditions for these Unit Standards are stated:

“CONDITIONS:

From a placement in industry, or current business employment situation, or in a simulated work situation.

If in industry, signoff from organisation management is required.” [NZQA, 1997b]

Issues have also been raised regarding the assessor for these Standards as, if the candidate's workplace is used for the assessment, then their manager may be required to confirm competencies while those using simulated conditions will be assessed by a academic or trainer. Problems of equity, prejudiced or preferential treatment for employees, and possible lack of overall consistency in

the application of standards may occur. This also places high levels of responsibility upon the NZQA moderator who is charged for overseeing these matters.

This problem was not confined to the HR Standards: while participating in NZQA workshops for management and first line manager standards, the same situations were encountered (June-July 1997).

During the period between September and December 1997 in a small scale open-ended direct interviewing research activity:

- seventeen members of the NZ Institute of Personnel Management (IPM) were interviewed;
- all seventeen stated they were HR practitioners, educators or consultants.

When questioned about entry requirements for recruitment into an HR position a majority stated a need for a good, well-rounded first degree, not necessarily in management, was their first criterion for recruitment. Three were willing to take training/NZQA qualifications for junior members of an HR department; 12 expressed interest in obtaining the NZQA HR standards for themselves using their professional experiences and signoff for their level of competency from their managers, directors or peers. Of six who claimed to recruit graduates into their organisations all wanted “a good degree” — preferably first or second — with good communication abilities, evidence of problem-solving skills and willingness to undertake company training.

The reason given was the recruit who demonstrates good academic performance could receive training either from IPM or in-house in order to become an HR practitioner.

As a follow-up, five local offices of international companies were questioned about their graduate recruitment programmes: three stated two levels of recruitment — one as potential for development and grooming into senior management, one as recruits into technical or operational roles. The criteria for potential senior managers was a “good degree” (or two), broad-based with good communication skills in all cases; for the technical levels, companies were more concerned with technically-focused qualifications. The other two organisations were unable or unwilling to state their approach.

This background research has indicated that there are differing stakeholder requirements for education or training in the field of management education. The nature of the assessments, whether for particular competencies or a broader exposure to subjects, have been identified as an issue. There is still; the ongoing

philosophical debate related to obligations towards the various stockholders and to the precise nature of the education concept or activity. Other indicators show that, at different times in the career of an individual and for the organisation's requirements, both education and training are required. The next phase of the research is to investigate when and how these are required.

Description of scope and goals

This research is not intended to solve a 2000 year-old problem of the need to provide education or training but intends to review from the perspective of the main stakeholders which type of provision is needed and at what times. This will be reflected by the assessment methodology that will ensure for those stakeholders the attainment of the necessary level of technical skills and a sufficiently developed breadth of knowledge to fully utilise them.

The overall aims are to conduct a pilot study in a HR context to determine for stakeholders in HR education/training what they require the outputs to be. There is a need for two comparisons: one for the internal NZ situation; with increasing globalisation, the other will be starting to consider the similarities or differences outside NZ, initially in Australia and U.K. It is expected to be able to define or create a model of dimensions as a basis of comparison in an international context.

The key objectives are:

- to compare for significant variations in views between different stakeholders
- to examine whether required assessment of programmes is effective for the purpose stated
- to identify and state ethical issues.

Questionnaire and research methods

It is intended to continue with the development of background papers from investigations or the research of others including delivery organisations and with references to related ethical underpinnings.

There will be the commencement of a programme to confirm stakeholders in tertiary education with the scope of the pilot being related to HR and management, and to devise a survey questionnaire on the purposes of education intended to meet their requirements. This will necessitate the interviewing of stakeholders to establish and confirm required coverage and analysis of questionnaire and research responses.

Reporting

Over the next period the planned minimum reporting is that there will be

- two full reports presented to international conferences,
- articles are planned for submission to journals on development of this research — *Business Ethics Quarterly*, *Assessment in Education*, and
- a full research report submitted to the Open Polytechnic by December 1998.

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